PARENTAL REFLECTIVE FUNCTIONING AND PARENTING PRACTICES AFFECTING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL ASPECTS OF KINDERGARTEN READINESS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Education 2021
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ABSTRACT
Parents and other primary caregivers are the preeminent facilitators of children’s social emotional development, and positive relationships between parents and children, as well as parental involvement, are significant predictors of children’s overall success. The purpose of this study was to address a gap in the literature by exploring (1) parental innate reflective functioning and (2) parenting practices of those with children enrolled in nontraditional or traditional early learning settings. Nontraditional early learning settings utilize a two-generation approach to support and educate children and parents equally, and parents actively participate in the child’s learning. Traditional early learning settings involve children who participate in learning activities in their parents’ absence. Bowlby’s Attachment Theory provided a theoretical foundation for this study, which utilized a non-experimental causal-comparative research design. The sample was comprised of 100 parents or other primary caregivers who had at least one child enrolled in a traditional or nontraditional early learning center. Interval (continuous) data was collected from parents using the (1) Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (PRFQ) and (2) Knowledge of Effective Parenting Practices (KEPS) instruments. Data were analyzed using Welch’s ANOVA, and the results indicated a statistically significant difference between parents’ reflective functioning skills between those with children enrolled in traditional settings versus nontraditional settings. However, the difference in parenting practices of these groups was not statistically significant. The results indicate that parental involvement is significantly related to parental reflective functioning, but not parenting practices. Future research should examine the effects of socioeconomic status and parent education levels on these findings. 

Keywords: Parental reflective functioning, Parenting practices, Kindergarten readiness, Social-emotional development, attachment theory, social learning theory, sociocultural theory
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# Table of Contents

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................. 3

Acknowledgements ...................................................................................................................... 4

Table of Contents .......................................................................................................................... 5

List of Tables ................................................................................................................................. 8

List of Abbreviations ..................................................................................................................... 9

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................. 10

Overview ..................................................................................................................................... 10

Background .................................................................................................................................. 10

Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................................. 13

Problem Statement ....................................................................................................................... 15

Purpose Statement ......................................................................................................................... 16

Significance of the Study ............................................................................................................... 18

Research Questions ...................................................................................................................... 19

Definitions .................................................................................................................................... 20

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW ......................................................................................... 22

Overview ..................................................................................................................................... 22

Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................................. 22

Related Literature ........................................................................................................................ 27

  Parenting Practices Affecting Children’s Social-Emotional Development ..................................... 28

  Parents’ Conceptions of Kindergarten Readiness ....................................................................... 38

  Parental Reflective Functioning .................................................................................................. 40

  Social-Emotional Development and Kindergarten Readiness ..................................................... 42
Chapter Three: Methods

Overview

Design

Research Questions

Hypotheses

Participants and Setting

Instrumentation

Procedures

Data Analysis

Chapter Four: Findings

Overview

Research Questions

Null Hypotheses

Descriptive Statistics

Results

Null Hypothesis One

Null Hypothesis Two

Chapter Five: Conclusions

Overview

Discussion
List of Tables

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics: Instrumentation ............................................................. 67
Table 2: Descriptive Statistics: Type of Early Learning Program – PRFQ ............................... 68
Table 3: Descriptive Statistics: Type of Early Learning Program – KEPS ............................... 68
Table 4: Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances: PRFQ ..................................................... 69
Table 5: Kolmogorov-Smirnov: PRFQ .............................................................................. 70
Table 6: ANOVA: PRFQ .................................................................................................... 70
Table 7: Welch: PRFQ ...................................................................................................... 70
Table 8: Effect Size: Eta-Squared – PRFQ ....................................................................... 71
Table 9: Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances: KEPS ...................................................... 72
Table 10: Kolmogorov-Smirnov: KEPS .......................................................................... 72
Table 11: ANOVA: KEPS ................................................................................................ 73
Table 12: Welch: KEPS .................................................................................................. 73
Table 13: Effect Size: Eta-Squared – KEPS ..................................................................... 74
List of Abbreviations

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)

Knowledge of Effective Parenting Scale (KEPS)

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (PRFQ)

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

According to Gol-Guven (2018), positive relationships between parents and their children are vitally essential to children’s overall success and achievement. There is a lack of research addressing the correlation between parenting practices and parental reflective functioning and parents’ level of involvement in their child’s early learning experiences, which affects children’s kindergarten readiness in the social-emotional domain of development. This study attempted to address this gap in the literature by examining (1) parental reflective functioning and (2) parenting practices of those with children enrolled in different types of early learning settings—non-traditional and traditional. In this study, the non-traditional early learning programs utilized a two-generation approach to provide support and education to parents and children equally. These programs promote family engagement by providing opportunities for parents to be active participants in their children’s daily learning activities. A traditional early learning program is defined as a program where children participate in learning activities in their parents’ absence. This chapter outlines (1) the background of the problem and corresponding research, (2) the problem statement, (3) the purpose statement, (4) the significance of this study, (5) the research question, (6) and the pertinent definitions for understanding the terms used within this study.

Background

There is a significant correlation between parenting practices and children’s social-emotional development (Gol-Guven, 2018). Additionally, parental involvement in children’s education has been positively associated with the children’s overall level of success and achievement (Sharkins et al., 2017). The literature also notes the positive association between parents’ relationships with their children and their children’s development (Sharkins et al., 2017). Parents who form nurturing attachments with their children are more likely to promote
learning and the acquisition of social skills necessary for long-term academic and life success (Breiner et al., 2016). Parental reflective functioning also has significance on children’s development as it has been noted that parents who have higher reflective functioning abilities form stronger relationships with their children (Rutherford et al., 2017). In consideration of the significance of parenting practices and parental reflective functioning on their children’s growth and development, it is essential to examine the ways in which these components can be prioritized and strengthened.

Parents and other primary caregivers are the preeminent source for facilitating children’s social and emotional development (Denham et al., 2014). Additionally, research has shown that parent involvement in their children’s education is essential for their success (Dunst et al., 2014). Positive relationships between parents and their children also contribute significantly to their children’s overall achievement. Specifically, children who have developed a positive relationship with their parents, or other primary caregivers, are more likely to develop a high self-concept, thereby leading to greater motivation to learn and attain higher levels of academic achievement (Searle et al., 2013).

Anthony et al. (2014) examined parent knowledge through parent training and education programs. However, the primary focus of such studies has been parents’ knowledge of academic factors, such as early literacy and language development. One study examined the effects of parent training and education regarding dialogic reading strategies on children’s literacy development (Brannon & Dauksas, 2014). Parent education and training programs are effective at promoting children’s academic outcomes; however, there is a lack of research regarding parental reflective functioning and parenting practices affecting the essential social-emotional aspects of children’s development. As research has indicated that social-emotional development
is one of the strongest predictors of children’s success in kindergarten and beyond, it is essential to examine the historical, conceptual, and theoretical frameworks of social-emotional development relative to kindergarten readiness and parenting factors affecting children’s development (Denham et al., 2014).

Historically, children’s level of readiness for kindergarten has been determined by their cognitive and language development as well as their academic performance (Russell et al., 2016). Children have traditionally participated in academic tests and screenings to determine their levels of kindergarten readiness prior to entering school for the first time (Russell et al., 2016). It was once thought that children who scored high on these academic tests were ready for the challenges associated with kindergarten, thus increasing their likelihood of achieving immediate and long-term success (Little et al., 2016).

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, the practices and expectations of early childhood education experienced significant changes (Little et al., 2016). This can be attributed to the development and implementation of several legislative acts, which attempted to address the achievement gap among the nation’s children, particularly in the areas of literacy and mathematics. An additional result has been an increased focus on academics (Adler-Greene, 2019). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 marked the beginning of a vast increase in standards, objectives, and accountability for children’s learning in kindergarten and beyond (Hustedt et al., 2018). One result of NCLB was the increased emphasis on academics in kindergarten (Essex, 2016). A plethora of literature suggests that “kindergarten has become the new first grade” (Hustedt et al., 2018, p. 52). NCLB did not mandate assessments at the preschool or kindergarten level; however, it led to discussions regarding assessing young children to determine the quality of early learning programs and equity of educational
opportunities (Hustedt et al., 2018). The Race to the Top initiatives (RTTT), which began in 2010, prioritized appropriating federal funds to expand state-funded preschool programs (Little et al., 2016). RTTT initiated assessments to determine children’s level of kindergarten readiness (Essex, 2016). A conflict continues between implementing developmentally appropriate practice versus the implied need for more structured teaching practices even though assessments are designed to be formative and ongoing at the early childhood level (Hustedt et al., 2018).

Conceptually, kindergarten readiness is defined as the factors that determine a child’s preparedness to succeed in school (Hustedt et al., 2018). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, n.d.) provided input into the concept of school readiness. This organization emphasized the need for schools to be ready to serve all children by meeting their varied and unique learning needs. In addition to the use of kindergarten readiness assessments, state policies use children’s chronological age to determine kindergarten readiness (Hustedt et al., 2018). Kindergarten readiness domains include language, literacy, and mathematics benchmarks (Little et al., 2016). However, state early learning standards incorporate social-emotional development with cognitive, language, and physical development (Hustedt et al., 2018). Parents of elementary school children also indicate that the development of solid work habits, positive attitudes toward learning, and the ability to follow directions are essential for their children’s long-term achievement (Grace & Brandt, 2006).

**Theoretical Framework**

Bowlby’s (1956) attachment theory provided the theoretical foundation of this study. Other related theoretical frameworks, such as Bandura’s (1988) social learning theory and Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory are also relevant to this study. Attachment theory espouses that children who experience loving and nurturing relationships with their parents and
caregivers will develop a strong attachment to the primary people in their lives (Bowlby, 1956). This attachment leads to the development of a high self-concept, which facilitates children’s ability to explore and learn with confidence (O’Connor et al., 2013). Bandura’s social learning theory posits that the real-life experiences of children help to shape children’s behavior and perceptions of their world (Schunk, 2016). A key component of social learning theory is the idea that children’s behaviors are developed from modeling and imitating the behaviors of those around them, including parents and other significant caregivers (O’Connor et al., 2013).

Vygotsky espoused that children learn from their social interactions with parents and other significant people in their lives (Panhwar et al., 2016). Children’s ability to regulate their emotions and develop positive relationships with others is enhanced through meaningful engagement with adults (Panhwar et al., 2016). Vygotsky also noted the importance of adult support as children engage in positive learning experiences, learn strategies for problem solving, and gain new skills and behaviors (Sharkins et al., 2017).

Though the implementation of legislative acts has increased the focus on academic factors of kindergarten readiness, current research has indicated that social-emotional developmental factors and self-regulation skills are strong predictors of children’s success in kindergarten and beyond (Russell et al., 2016). The work of Russell et al. (2016) provides a framework for defining kindergarten readiness, a term that is used in the literature interchangeably with school readiness, as it relates to the development of the whole child. The relationship between children and their parents, as well as other primary caregivers, is a critical component of children’s social-emotional development (Denham et al., 2014). However, there is currently a lack of research regarding parental reflective functioning and parenting practices that
influence the social-emotional developmental factors of their children and the ways in which parents can facilitate their children’s development of social-emotional competence.

**Problem Statement**

Children’s social-emotional development is significantly influenced by parenting styles and reflective practices (Schultheis et al., 2019; Segrin & Flora, 2019). Responsive and sensitive parents and other primary caregivers form positive attachments with their children, which leads to the development of social-emotional competence of children (Tinajero et al., 2016). This social-emotional competence is essential for children’s immediate and long-term success (Segrin & Flora, 2019). Additionally, children’s ability to handle challenges and stress is largely shaped by their family experiences in the early years (Whittington & McInnes, 2017). Parents facilitate their children’s readiness to learn by encouraging children to express their emotions in a positive manner, follow directions, and regulate behaviors (Puccioni, 2015). Parents who use problem-solving strategies and offer encouragement as they help their children cope with negative emotions are able to support their children’s development of essential social-emotional skills (Tinajero et al., 2016). Through effective parenting practices, parents also promote children’s abilities to use increasingly complex vocabulary to communicate their needs and attempts to verbally resolve conflicts, which are key components of social-emotional competence (Puccioni, 2015). Additionally, much of children’s social-emotional development is established in the early years, specifically from birth to age five, and shaped at home by parents and other significant caregivers (Puccioni, 2015).

The literature addresses the effects of parental reflective functioning on child outcomes (Adkins et al., 2018; Cooke et al., 2017). Studies also reveal a relationship between parenting practices and children’s social-emotional development (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Breiner et
al., 2015; Dunst et al., 2014). However, a gap exists regarding the intersection of both constructs—parental reflective functioning and parenting practices. Furthermore, the literature does not address the parental reflective functioning and parenting practices of parents whose children are enrolled in different types of early learning programs. Parents and other primary caregivers play a critical role in children’s social and emotional development; however, if these adults do not possess effective parenting skills or high levels of reflective functioning, they may not be able to provide adequate support for the children’s social-emotional development (Segrin & Flora, 2019). Burkhart et al. (2017) examined the mentalizing aspect of parental reflective functioning and emphasized the need for additional research in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of parental reflective functioning and attachment, which could be used to inform the development of interventions for parents. The problem is that there is a lack of research that examines parental reflective functioning and parenting practices that affect children’s social-emotional kindergarten readiness skills. Additional research is necessary for determining gaps in parents’ reflective functioning abilities and practices for the purpose of facilitating parents’ ability to promote the social-emotional development of their children (Adkins et al., 2018; Schultheis et al., 2019).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this non-experimental, causal-comparative quantitative study was to address a gap in the literature by exploring (1) parental reflective functioning and (2) parenting practices of students entering kindergarten. The author examined the effect of pre-kindergarten settings, non-traditional and traditional, on these findings. The non-traditional programs chosen use the two-generation approach, which focuses on providing support and education for parents and children equally (Harding et al., 2017). One non-traditional program is located at a regional
learning center in a middle Atlantic state and is grant-funded by the Maryland State Department of Education, representing a partnership between Frostburg State University and the University System of Maryland Hagerstown. The primary mission of this early learning center is to provide parents and children with educational programs designed to promote kindergarten readiness. These programs are for children two to four years of age and have been developed to help families support their children’s learning. This early learning center is considered to be non-traditional as it utilizes a two-generation approach by having parents bring their children and remain on site as they actively participate in the daily learning activities.

The other non-traditional program in this study was a Head Start program located in a middle Atlantic state. Head Start is the largest federally funded early childhood compensatory program in the United States and serves nearly one million low-income children and families (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016). Head Start programs place a significant emphasis on parent involvement. The Code of Federal Regulations of the Head Start programs stipulates that parents must be included in all aspects of the program (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016). Additionally, Head Start programs are required to provide services to families that aim to improve parents’ knowledge, skills, and understanding of their child’s education and development (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016). The non-traditional pre-kindergarten programs were chosen for this study to provide the researcher with data that compares reflective functioning skills and parenting practices of parents who actively participate in their children’s learning activities with the reflective functioning skills and parenting practices of parents who do not actively participate in their children’s learning in a traditional early learning center.

The basis for the inquiry of this study was the understanding that parental involvement is essential for children’s success. An additional predictor of children’s success is their social-
emotional development. This study sought to identify gaps in parents’ reflective functioning skills and parenting practices that might affect the social-emotional aspects of kindergarten readiness. Such knowledge could inform the development of training programs to increase parents’ effectiveness at promoting the social-emotional development of their children.

The independent variable was the type of early learning program, which was defined as traditional or non-traditional. The dependent variables included parental reflective functioning and parenting practices that affected their children’s social-emotional aspects of kindergarten readiness. The sample \( n = 100 \) was comprised of parents or other primary caregivers with whom the children live, who had at least one child enrolled in a non-traditional or traditional early learning program in the southeastern United States.

**Significance of the Study**

A significant factor of children’s preparedness for kindergarten is parents’ level of knowledge and access to resources for supporting their children’s learning and development (Manigo & Allison, 2017). Research has indicated that parental reflective functioning and effective parenting practices for supporting the social-emotional development of children have a profound effect on children’s ability to achieve academic success (Peterson et al., 2018; Rostad & Whitacre, 2016; Sanders, 2019). The results of this study revealed limitations in parents’ ability to reflect and engage in parenting practices that affect their children’s social-emotional development as it relates to kindergarten readiness; therefore, it indicates a need for parent training and education. As gaps are revealed, this study could be used to inform the development of parent training programs designed to provide parents with the knowledge and skills necessary for supporting this essential facet of their children’s development.
The importance of this dissertation is well supported by research. Training and education for parents is effective at increasing children’s outcomes, particularly regarding literacy (Anthony et al., 2014; Brannon & Dauksas, 2014; Casbergue, 2017; Hatcher et al., 2012). One study involved training parents in using dialogic reading strategies to increase children’s literacy development (Anthony et al., 2014); the author found that the literacy scores of the children whose parents participated in the training program improved. Considering these findings, it is conceivable that utilizing the results of the present study to develop parent training programs will increase children’s level of social-emotional development, particularly upon entering kindergarten. Teachers believe that non-academic kindergarten readiness skills are of utmost priority; therefore, this would have implications on teachers in addition to children entering kindergarten (Connors-Burrow et al., 2017; Hustedt et al., 2018; Miller & Kehl, 2019).

Overall, this dissertation was designed to contribute to the field of early childhood education by providing additional means for supporting kindergarten readiness initiatives. Early learning centers, preschools, Head Start programs, and other early childhood education facilities could use the information from this study to provide parents with the skills and knowledge necessary for supporting their children’s development and facilitating their readiness for kindergarten. As numerous researchers agree, social-emotional kindergarten readiness skills are essential for children’s success not only in kindergarten, but in all educational endeavors (Allbright et al., 2019; Brotherson et al., 2015; Duncan et al., 2018; Hustedt et al., 2018).

**Research Questions**

The research questions for this study were as follows:

**RQ1:** Is there a difference between parents’ reflective functioning skills of pre-kindergarten students that are learning in a traditional setting and non-traditional setting?
RQ2: Is there a difference between parenting practices of pre-kindergarten students that are learning in a traditional setting and non-traditional setting?

Definitions

1. *Assessment* – The evaluation of knowledge or skills regarding a particular subject or topic (Hustedt et al., 2018).

2. *Attachment theory* - The idea that children who experience loving and nurturing relationships with their parents and caregivers will develop a strong attachment to the primary people in their lives; thus, leading to the development of a strong sense of self-worth (Bowlby, 1956).

3. *Developmentally appropriate practice* – A perspective of teachers, parents, and other caregivers as they facilitate children’s cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development using a combination of theory and best practice (NAEYC, n.d.)

4. *Early childhood education* – Term used to describe educational programs designed for preschool-aged children prior to their entrance to kindergarten (Puccioni, 2015).

5. *Kindergarten readiness* – Used interchangeably with school readiness; refers to the extent to which children’s cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development indicate a preparedness for success in kindergarten (Hustedt et al., 2018).

6. *Mentalizing* – Also known as reflective functioning; describes parents’ ability to empathize with and understand the viewpoint of their children (Luyten et al., 2017).

7. *NAEYC* – National Association for the Education of Young Children. This organization is dedicated to supporting the needs, rights, and overall well-being of all children with an emphasis on developmentally appropriate educational practices (NAEYC, n.d.).
8. **NCLB** – The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 was enacted to address the ways in which America’s students were falling behind other countries in academic achievement and involved an increase in educational objectives, standards, and accountability (Essex, 2016).

9. **Non-traditional early learning program** – A program that utilizes a two-generation approach to provide care and education for children and families equally (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016).

10. **Pre-kindergarten learning setting** – A program that provides children with developmentally appropriate learning opportunities for the purpose of preparing them for kindergarten in all domains of development (NAEYC, n.d.).

11. **Social-emotional competence** – One’s ability to recognize and respond appropriately to one’s own emotions and the emotions of others (Wood, 2015).

12. **Social learning theory** – Children’s real-life experiences serve to shape their behavior and perceptions of the world (Bandura, 1988).

13. **Traditional early learning program** – A type of early learning program in which parents drop off their children and teachers and caregivers provide care and educational experiences for the children (Puccioni, 2015).
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter provides an overview of (1) the theoretical framework for understanding child development and parent-child relationships, (2) related literature on parenting practices, training, and education, (3) parental reflective functioning, and (4) social-emotional kindergarten readiness factors. This review addresses a gap in the research and adds to the existing body of knowledge with respect to parents’ reflective functioning and parenting practices affecting the essential social-emotional skills necessary for kindergarten readiness. Bowlby’s (1956) attachment theory is the theoretical foundation of this study. Other related theoretical frameworks, such as Bandura’s (1988) social learning theory and Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, are also relevant to this study and discussed below.

Theoretical Framework

Basing research on a theoretical framework is essential for understanding the ways in which certain constructs in a study relate to each other (Gall et al., 2007). Additionally, the theoretical framework provided a foundation upon which this dissertation, particularly the research question and null hypotheses, were developed (Gall et al., 2007). This literature review examines theories that relate to parent and child relationships with Bowlby’s (1956) attachment theory providing the theoretical foundation for this study. Additional theories involving children’s growth, learning, and development, such as Bandura’s (1988) social learning theory and Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, are also relevant to the study.

The preeminent theoretical framework for this dissertation is Bowlby’s (1956) attachment theory. It acknowledges the significance of relationships between parents and their children and the influence that parents have on their children’s development (O’Connor et al., 2013). Attachment theory espouses that children who experience loving and nurturing relationships with
their parents and caregivers will develop strong attachments to the primary people in their lives (O’Connor et al., 2013). Children recognize that these adults are responsive to their needs; thus, leading to their acknowledgment that they are loved and the subsequent development of a strong sense of self-worth (O’Connor et al., 2013).

Attachment begins in the very early stages of infancy and continues to develop as the infant grows and develops (O’Connor et al., 2013). The attachment system is a mechanism that, when activated, ensures that infants seek out an adult who will provide protection and care in dangerous or challenging situations (Lai & Carr, 2018). The goal of attachment behavior is to cultivate a sense of security that enables individuals to develop improved coping mechanisms to manage stressful situations more effectively (Lai & Carr, 2018). Children develop confidence and display a more positive state of mental well-being as they acquire the ability to cope with stressors (O’Connor et al., 2013).

Attachment theory identifies three attachment styles: secure, insecure-anxious, and insecure-avoidant (Lai & Carr, 2018). Children who receive warm and consistent responses from parents and other adults in times of distress identify with the secure attachment style. These children develop a “secure internal working model of the self and others” and feel free to explore their world with confidence (O’Connor et al., 2013, p. 359). In contrast, when parents and other adults in children’s lives fail to meet the needs of their children consistently, children identify with the insecure-anxious style or the insecure-avoidant style (Lai & Carr, 2018). The lack of experience with warm, loving, and responsive relationships with parents and other significant adults leads to children’s inability to form strong attachments. Subsequently, they do not possess sufficient levels of confidence necessary for learning and embracing challenges that contribute to cognitive and social-emotional growth (Matias et al., 2014). This directly relates to
the concept of kindergarten readiness, as a significant element of being prepared for kindergarten is children’s ability to learn through exploration and confidently face challenges associated with acquiring new knowledge (Hover, 2015). Additionally, children who have developed strong attachments with the significant adults in their lives and thus have a greater sense of security are more likely to develop positive relationships with others while successfully regulating emotions and behaviors (O’Connor et al., 2013). Therefore, the literature suggests that a strong attachment between parents and their children is necessary for positive child outcomes (Matias et al., 2014).

Bandura’s (1988) social learning theory is also significant to this study. This theory is based on the idea that a substantial amount of children’s learning takes place in a social environment, and children learn skills, beliefs, attitudes, and rules by observing others (Schunk, 2016). Social learning theory posits that children’s real-life experiences help to shape their behavior and perceptions of their world (O’Connor et al., 2013). A key component of social learning theory is the concept that children’s behaviors are developed from modeling and imitating the behaviors of those around them (O’Connor et al., 2013).

Specifically, if parents demonstrate self-efficacy and hold high expectations for their children’s academic achievement, their children are more likely to model these behaviors. Ultimately, this could lead to higher levels of academic achievement (Froiland et al., 2012). Another facet of Bandura’s ideals regarding modeling purports that people are more likely to imitate observed behaviors if they are portrayed as vital. Thus, it can be concluded that children are more likely to model their parents’ behaviors if they perceive these behaviors as important (Froiland et al., 2012). This is of particular significance with regard to learning. When parents place an emphasis on the importance of attending school and learning, or when they engage in
educational endeavors themselves, their children perceive education as important and are more likely to imitate these behaviors (Froiland et al., 2012).

As children observe the behaviors of individuals in their environment, particularly parents and other significant caregivers, they innately use the process of modeling to acquire new skills (Schunk, 2016). However, it is essential for children to have frequent opportunities to practice these skills in order to develop competence (Bandura, 1988). Guided practice is an effective strategy for children as they use modeling and imitation to develop competencies (Bandura, 1988). Guided practice techniques involve providing children with the vocabulary to use for expressing needs and solving problems among peers and providing ample opportunities for practicing these skills (Bandura, 1988). Bandura’s theory is supported in the literature as numerous studies have indicated the significance of children acquiring knowledge and skills through the imitation of observed behaviors (Froiland et al., 2012).

As part of their social-emotional development, children learn strategies for solving problems, interacting with others, and managing their emotions from watching and imitating the behaviors of others (O’Connor et al., 2013). For very young children, the most significant source of these experiences is their parents and other caregivers (Sanders, 2019). It is also crucial for parents and other caregivers to model appropriate and effective problem-solving and communication skills for children to learn appropriate means of interacting with others (Sanders, 2019). Social learning theory signifies the importance of addressing children’s severe behavioral concerns by working with parents to alter parenting strategies (Sanders, 2019). A significant component of kindergarten readiness is social and emotional competence (Montes et al., 2012). Therefore, it is essential to children’s development for parents and caregivers to understand the
importance of modeling effective communication strategies and skills for regulating emotions (Montes et al., 2012).

Much of what is known and understood about children’s learning, growth, and development has been derived from the theoretical works of Lev Vygotsky (Schunk, 2016). Vygotsky (1978) developed sociocultural theory, which posits that children learn from social interactions and cultural influences in their environment (Panhwar et al., 2016). These interactions lead to greater levels of in-depth mental functioning as children engage with parents and other significant people within their environment (Panhwar et al., 2016). Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the effect of adult-child interactions on children’s emotional connections and language development (Sharkins et al., 2017). As children engage in meaningful interactions with significant adults in their lives, their use of language and vocabulary expands and their ability to regulate emotions vastly improves (Panhwar et al., 2016). Additionally, Vygotsky (1978) recognized the ways in which adult-child interactions facilitate children’s ability to engage in symbolic and creative play, which are essential components of early learning (Sharkins et al., 2017).

Vygotsky’s (1978) theory focuses on the idea that children learn from the sociocultural aspects of their environment, in addition to the innate ability of children to construct their own learning from within (Schunk, 2016). The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a concept that was introduced by Vygotsky to explain the relationship between social and individual learning processes (Schunk, 2016). Identifying the child’s ZPD enables adults to aid children who are not yet capable of carrying out a specific task without support (Panhwar et al., 2016). This assistance is also known as scaffolding (Schunk, 2016). In teaching children new ideas or concepts, adults use scaffolding to provide assistance and support necessary for the children to
master the tasks (Panhwar et al., 2016). Once the children gain sufficient mastery, the scaffold, or assistance, is removed. This enables children to experience success, which leads to confidence in their ability to learn and achieve (Panhwar et al., 2016). It is argued that the ZPD is where optimal learning occurs as students can achieve to their fullest capacity within their individual ZPDs (Panhwar et al., 2016).

Vygotsky’s (1978) theory also applies to the process by which children learn and develop social skills (Denham et al., 2014). As children engage with others in their environment, they develop social-emotional competence by acquiring valuable problem-solving and decision-making skills (Denham et al., 2014). Social-emotional competence refers to the ability to recognize and respond appropriately to one’s emotions and the emotions of others (Wood, 2015). The scaffolding process can be utilized to provide children with the social-emotional support necessary for the eventual development of social-emotional competence (Denham et al., 2014).

Understanding Vygotsky’s (1978) theoretical framework for children’s learning and development within a social context is essential for identifying the social-emotional skills necessary for kindergarten readiness (Ahmed et al., 2016). Many early childhood educators learn about these child development theorists during their educational pursuits; however, many parents do not have knowledge of the theoretical foundations of their children’s learning and development (Ahmed et al., 2016). Considering the significance of the theoretical frameworks affecting children’s learning, parents should have the opportunity to acquire knowledge of the most significant theories.

**Related Literature**

Many researchers have examined parent involvement relating to their children’s educational outcomes. Additionally, many studies on the significance of parent education and
training on their children’s learning and development are currently available. However, the existing literature is limited to certain academic components of kindergarten readiness, such as literacy or mathematical elements. Statistics indicate that children continue to enter kindergarten without the social-emotional foundations necessary for achievement (Anthony et al., 2014). The level of parent involvement, knowledge, attitudes, and education can greatly impact children’s academic and social outcomes. Such findings would indicate that parents need to be provided with support and resources necessary for facilitating their children’s development and capacity for success. A thorough examination of the literature, which includes nuances of parenting practices and social-emotional kindergarten readiness components, was necessary for the establishment of a solid foundation for this dissertation.

**Parenting Practices Affecting Children’s Social-Emotional Development**

There is a correlation between specific parenting practices and children’s social-emotional developmental outcomes. Parental involvement in their children’s education is one aspect of parenting that has been examined in the literature and suggests an effect on children’s potential to achieve life-long success (Gol-Guven, 2018). Parental involvement in early childhood education is the focus of this literature review, since the early childhood years have been identified as a period of significant cognitive, physical, and emotional growth and development (Sharkins et al., 2017).

The literature also ascertains the effects of the relationship between parents and children on the children’s development. For example, parents who form warm and nurturing attachments with their children are more likely to promote learning and the acquisition of social skills necessary for long-term academic and life success (Breiner et al., 2016). There are specific parenting practices that influence children’s social-emotional development in a positive fashion,
such as being emotionally responsive to children’s needs, establishing clear limits and expectations for behavior and conduct, and talking with children to expand their language skills while helping them verbalize their feelings (Healy et al., 2015).

The effects of parental knowledge, education, and training on children’s social-emotional outcomes are also addressed by the research with evidence purporting the effectiveness of parent education and training on children’s development. Additionally, there is a correlation between parents’ self-efficacy and their children’s development of social-emotional skills and competence (Healy et al., 2015). It is essential to examine parents’ conceptions of kindergarten readiness as they relate to academic and social-emotional readiness facets.

**Parental Involvement in Early Childhood Education**

Parent involvement in early intervention and education is essential for facilitating the learning and development of children (Dunst et al., 2014). Parent involvement includes reinforcing children’s learning at home through home-based learning activities and homework assistance, participating in school-wide events, volunteering in their children’s classrooms, and contributing supplies to their children’s school (Gol-Guven, 2018). An additional example of involvement includes parents’ participation in decision-making practices within their children’s educational institution (Yoder & Lopez, 2013).

Parental involvement has a significant effect on student motivation and achievement (Gol-Guven, 2018). Parental involvement in children’s education has been related to higher levels of academic achievement and the development of social-emotional competencies (Toldson & Lemmons, 2013). Specifically, parental involvement leads to higher grades in reading and science, an increase in standardized testing scores, and less behavioral difficulties (Toldson &
Parental involvement has also been identified as a possible strategy for decreasing the achievement gap among students (Bower & Griffin, 2011).

Parental involvement in early childhood is likely to include reading to children and engaging them in hands-on learning experiences (NAEYC, n.d.). Additionally, parents who are involved in their children’s education at the preschool level are more likely to extend their children’s learning by providing enriching and stimulating experiences (Breiner et al., 2016). These experiences also impact children’s development of desired social-emotional competencies (Breiner et al., 2016). However, Manigo and Allison (2017) note a variance among parents’ decisions to support their children academically and socially at the preschool level.

Parent involvement also has indirect effects on children’s outcomes through improvements in parenting behaviors (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016). As parents develop skills and knowledge to effectively guide children’s behaviors in positive ways, children’s outcomes improve (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016). Head Start was founded on the premise that improving parent behaviors would lead to more positive outcomes for children. The Head Start founders posited that parent involvement was a means to improve parents’ social and cultural capital, thus enhancing children’s outcomes (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016).

Relative to parental involvement, one study examined parent participation with learning experiences in a home-based setting (Dunst et al., 2014). Parent participation led to family capacity-building, which strengthened the families’ abilities to support their children’s social-emotional development. The results of this study reinforced the significance of parents’ active participation in their child’s learning and development (Dunst et al., 2014). Another author looked at the quality of learning experiences as they relate to the quality of parental involvement aspects of their children’s learning (Gol-Guven, 2018). Parents who demonstrated concern for
their child’s educational experiences were more likely to choose an early learning center or preschool based on quality factors. They were also more likely to be involved in their child’s early education (Gol-Guven, 2018). Additionally, parents who established high expectations and modeled effective problem-solving and decision-making skills were more likely to have children achieve lifelong success due to the strength of their social-emotional foundation (Gol-Guven, 2018).

**Parent-Child Relationships**

Understanding the relationship between parents and children is essential when examining the impact that parents have on their children’s social-emotional development. In addition to Bowlby’s work on attachment theory, studies have indicated that children who form strong attachments with their parents and primary caregivers at a young age are more likely to show high levels of engagement in kindergarten (Searle et al., 2013). This engagement leads to higher levels of learning and a greater capacity for developing social-emotional competence (Searle et al., 2013). Maternal sensitivity and the ways in which mothers respond to their children’s needs are significant predictors of children’s outcomes (Vesely et al., 2013). When parents and other caregivers respond promptly to their children’s needs, primarily in infancy, children develop a high level of trust (Vesely et al., 2013). This sense of trust leads to higher levels of security and the development of confidence (Vesely et al., 2013). In contrast, when parents demonstrate deficiencies in their responsiveness or display inconsistencies in their parenting skills, their children are less likely to develop a sense of trust leading to fewer opportunities to develop competence (Sharkins et al., 2017). Additionally, children’s development of a high self-concept is fostered by positive relationships with their parents and leads to the development and strengthening of social-emotional skills (Searle et al., 2013).
Parents who spend time with their children form strong bonds with their children that lead to the development of strong social-emotional skills (Johnson et al., 2012). Subsequently, parents who engage with their children at home are likely to be engaged in their child’s education in a school or early learning setting (Johnson et al., 2012). Understanding the significance of parent-child relationships is critical to recognizing the implication of these relationships on children’s social and emotional development (Johnson et al., 2012; Searle et al., 2013). Children’s socialization is primarily dependent upon parent-child relationships and parental behavior (Backen-Grondahl & Naerde, 2015).

**Parenting Practices that Facilitate Social-Emotional Competence**

Parenting practices are of foremost significance to children’s social-emotional development (Backen-Grondahl & Naerde, 2015). Parenting practices refer to the behaviors that parents display as well as the approaches they utilize in their child-rearing experiences that facilitate their children’s security, confidence, and success (Healy et al., 2015). Studies have identified effective parenting strategies that impact children’s development of social-emotional competence. When parents engage in positive interactions with their children, while responding to their children’s needs promptly and appropriately, their children are more likely to learn self-control, cooperative skills, and how to consider the perspective of others (Breiner et al., 2016). By developing strong relationships with their children, parents promote their children’s social-emotional development and the acquisition of essential social skills, such as cooperation, sharing, and using words to resolve issues with peers (Breiner et al., 2016). These social skills are not only essential for promoting social relationships, they are also predictive of early math and literacy skills (Sharkins et al., 2017).
There is a relationship between the development of executive functioning skills and children’s social-emotional development (Breiner et al., 2016). Executive functions include emotional control, focus, impulse control, attentiveness, and following through with tasks (Gonen et al., 2018). Children’s ability to remain attentive and focus on tasks to completion is necessary for problem-solving, planning, and achieving goals (Gonen et al., 2018). As children develop solid emotional control and impulse control abilities, they are more likely to form positive relationships with others (Gonen et al., 2018). The development of executive functioning skills is necessary for children to develop appropriate coping strategies for dealing with changes in their environment and addressing anxieties and fears. Breiner et al. (2016) clearly identify executive functioning skills as essential to the social-emotional developmental process and evidence indicates that this must be fostered by adults.

Children develop social-emotional competence as parents engage in positive parenting practices, such as responding appropriately to children’s needs, modeling positive relationships and problem-solving strategies, and helping children learn strategies for managing their emotions (Healy et al., 2015). Children need to learn about emotions and learn to distinguish between different types of emotions (Sharkins et al., 2017). Parents who understand and engage in positive parenting practices can help their children identify their emotions and acknowledge to their children that their emotions are acceptable (Sharkins et al., 2017). For children to acquire the optimal acceptance and understanding of their emotions, parents should provide children with strategies for coping with their strong emotions in acceptable ways (Sharkins et al., 2017). Additionally, to reach social-emotional milestones of development, children need supportive and nurturing adults in their lives who will guide their behavior in an appropriate manner (Stepien-Nycz et al., 2015).
An additional parenting practice associated with children’s social-emotional development is creating an environment in which children feel safe in expressing their emotions (Healy et al., 2015). Children often perceive strong emotions, such as sadness or anger, as negative based on the ways in which adults typically respond to these emotions (Sharkins et al., 2017). Children need parents and other caregivers to understand these emotions, acknowledge the emotions, and teach strategies for coping with these emotions in positive and effective ways (Hyson, 2004). Engaging in meaningful conversations with children is essential for expanding children’s vocabulary and increasing their ability to verbalize their feelings (Hyson, 2004).

Setting clear limits and consistently following through with appropriate consequences for testing limits are also essential parenting practices for fostering children’s social emotional development (Healy et al., 2015). When children understand limits and expectations for behavior, they develop a sense of security in knowing what is expected of them (Gestwicki, 2016). Equivalently, when children test limits or demonstrate undesirable behavior, parents need to respond consistently with developmentally appropriate consequences as this will also contribute to their children’s feelings of security and understanding of the expectations (Gestwicki, 2016). Presenting children with opportunities to solve problems through role-play activities or hypothetical scenarios as well as reading books about emotions are additional effective parenting practices for promoting social-emotional competence (NAEYC, n.d.).

**Parental Knowledge, Attitudes, and Self-Efficacy.**

Parental knowledge refers to the facts, information, and skills that parents possess regarding their children’s development, growth, and learning (Breiner et al., 2016). Parents’ understanding of developmental milestones and norms of typically developing children also contributes to their overall parental knowledge (Breiner et al., 2016). Parents who know and
understand child development have more realistic expectations for their children’s behavior (Healy et al., 2015). Additionally, parents who understand their children’s developmental stages are better able to provide for their children’s needs (Healy et al., 2015). Children who have their needs met consistently by warm, caring, and responsive adults are more likely to develop greater levels of social-emotional competence (Miller & Kehl, 2019).

Parent attitudes also impact children’s social-emotional development, according to the research (Breiner et al., 2016). Attitudes refer to viewpoints or perspectives of parenting (Sanders, 2019). Parents often form their views of parenting based on the perspectives and practices of their own parents (Healy et al., 2015). However, many parents today rely on advice from other parents, engage in social media to seek parenting guidance, and read parenting books to acquire necessary parenting knowledge (Breiner et al., 2016). This acquisition of knowledge helps form parents’ attitudes on parenting practices and skills (Breiner et al., 2015). Parents’ perspectives are a culmination of knowledge of parenting and values as well as goals that they have for their children’s development (Sanders, 2019).

Attitudes of parents are also shaped by their level of self-efficacy (Sanders, 2019). There is an association between maternal self-efficacy and children’s development of social-emotional skills (Breiner et al., 2016). Parents, particularly mothers, as outlined in Breiner et al., reported a lack of confidence in their abilities. This lack of confidence leads to deficiencies in self-efficacy, which has an impact on children’s outcomes (Breiner et al., 2016). However, as noted by Jihyun and Jung (2017), as parents develop confidence in their parenting skills, they develop a more positive attitude about parenting, which enables their children’s social-emotional development.
**Parent Education and Training**

The ways in which parents approach their role is often a reflection of the ways in which they were parented (Healy et al., 2015). However, research has suggested that parenting programs aimed at increasing parents’ knowledge and competence are effective and can influence child outcomes (Anthony et al., 2014). The philosophy of Head Start is that parents learn best practices for positive parenting by observing teachers and interacting with children in the classroom setting (Ansari et al., 2016). As parents engage in their children’s learning in the classroom, Head Start teachers model positive and child-centered strategies for effectively guiding young children’s behavior (Ansari et al., 2016). Acquiring knowledge about parenting and child development provides parents with the opportunity to evaluate their current parenting practices (Healy et al., 2015). Additionally, parent training and education gives parents opportunities to learn new ways of guiding and responding to their children (Healy et al., 2015).

Specific to social-emotional development, parents can increase their level of competence by seeking and implementing new strategies for being attuned to their children’s needs and emotionally available to meet these needs (Sanders, 2019). Parent training also provides parents with support to become more nurturing and responsible while creating an emotionally safe environment for their children (Huang et al., 2017). Parents can also learn strategies for developing predictable and consistent routines through parent training programs (Healy et al., 2015).

Current literature provides an abundance of studies measuring the effects of parent education and training that have focused primarily on literacy components of kindergarten readiness. This literature review includes two specific studies (Anthony et al., 2014; Brannon & Dauksas, 2014) aimed at improving the literacy development of children. Literacy development
is a foundational component of kindergarten readiness and is a solid predictor of future of children’s future academic achievement (Hatcher et al., 2012).

One study focused on determining the effects of a Raising a Reader (RAR) program on children’s literacy outcomes. The primary goal of the RAR program was to provide children with high-quality books, child-centered literacy-related experiences, and literacy connections with the local library (Anthony et al., 2014). One component was to educate families on the importance of literacy and how to facilitate literacy development of their children through a Family Nights program (Anthony et al., 2014). During Family Nights, parents were trained to facilitate their children’s literacy development by instructors who modeled strategies for shared reading and role-playing activities (Anthony et al., 2014). The incorporation of Family Nights, in which parents were trained in specific literacy strategies, increased the literacy components of children’s kindergarten readiness (Anthony et al., 2014).

Another study was conducted to determine the effects of dialogic reading on children’s literacy and language skills (Brannon & Dauksas, 2014). Dialogic reading focuses on the conversations between parents and children as the parents read to their children (Brannon & Dauksas, 2014). To engage in dialogic reading, parents do not simply read the book as the children listen. Rather, they ask open-ended questions throughout the book and expand on their children’s comments and ideas (Brannon & Dauksas, 2014). Results of this study indicated that parents who engaged in a training program to increase their knowledge and awareness of dialogic reading were more likely to use dialogic reading strategies than parents who did not participate in the training program (Brannon & Dauksas, 2014). Additionally, children whose parents participated in the dialogic reading training program achieved significantly higher in expressive language and vocabulary awareness (Brannon & Dauksas, 2014). These are two
essential components of literacy development in young children (Anthony et al., 2014). These two studies suggest that training and education programs increase parents’ knowledge and abilities to prepare their children for kindergarten (Anthony et al., 2014; Brannon & Dauksas, 2014).

To identify gaps in the literature relating to parent training and education, it was essential to review the current literature relating to this topic. Studies have outlined the effectiveness of parent training and education programs regarding essential literacy skills. However, there is a gap in the literature about the effectiveness of parent training programs relating to the social-emotional development of their children. Prior to the development of such a training program, it is essential to determine the parents’ existing level of knowledge about social-emotional kindergarten readiness factors.

Throughout the country, states have reported that half of their students are not adequately prepared with the skills necessary for achievement (Anthony et al., 2014). In consideration of the research that has indicated the significance of parent involvement on children’s educational outcomes, it is necessary to provide parents with the resources they need to be actively involved in the development of their child’s foundational skills for kindergarten readiness (Dunst et al., 2014).

**Parents’ Conceptions of Kindergarten Readiness**

Parents’ beliefs and conceptions about their children’s transition to kindergarten impacts the children’s outcomes in this transition (Smith-Adcock et al., 2019). However, studies have varied about parents’ actual beliefs on what constitutes kindergarten readiness, particularly regarding social-emotional development (Hatcher et al., 2012). Preschools, elementary teachers, and parents often differ in their beliefs regarding kindergarten readiness skills (Jarrett & Coba-
Rodriguez, 2019). However, it is the alignment of beliefs among teachers and parents regarding kindergarten readiness that provides for smoother transitions for children entering kindergarten (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2019).

Parents identified being well-rested and physically healthy, the ability to communicate wants and needs, and demonstrating enthusiasm for learning as the most important kindergarten readiness factors (Miller & Kehl, 2019). Additionally, cognitive skills such as the ability to count and know the alphabet were deemed more important for kindergarten readiness by parents than teachers (Miller & Kehl, 2019). Parents’ conceptions of the necessary kindergarten readiness factors play a significant role in how they approach preparing their children for kindergarten (Hatcher et al., 2012). Parents who have a positive conception about school readiness actively prepare their children for school by reading to their children and engaging in learning activities such as reciting the alphabet and counting objects on a regular basis (Smith-Adcock et al., 2019). Upon examining parents’ beliefs about kindergarten readiness, two categories have been identified by researchers (Puccioni, 2015). These beliefs include ideas about children’s development and beliefs about their children’s abilities (Puccioni, 2015). Additionally, research has shown that parents who value achievement and establish high expectations for children’s learning have children who are more likely to achieve greater success (Hatcher et al., 2012).

High expectations being placed on current kindergarten students has increased the level of anxiety among parents whose children are transitioning to kindergarten (Hatcher et al., 2012; Puccioni, 2015). Parents who understand the importance of kindergarten readiness often fear that their children will not be successful or that the expectations will be too high (Hatcher et al.,
However, parent training programs have been instrumental in alleviating parents’ anxiety (Brannon & Dauksas, 2014).

**Parental Reflective Functioning**

Parental reflective functioning refers to parents’ abilities to consider their own and their child’s thoughts, behaviors, and feelings, which helps guide parents’ interactions with their children (Rutherford et al., 2017). Parental reflective functioning is at the root of sensitive caregiving because it increases the parents’ ability to imagine what their children are experiencing and put themselves in their children’s place (Pazzagli et al., 2017). The underlying mental states of children includes their thoughts, desires, intentions, and feelings (Nijssens et al., 2020). Reflective functioning is also known as mentalizing and “refers to an individual’s ability to hold others’ minds in mind” (Luyten et al., 2017, p. 2). Parents’ ability to mentalize allows them to perceive themselves and others in terms of mental states, which is a significant factor in people’s ability to engage in appropriate socialization (Luyten et al., 2017). Additionally, parents are more likely to respond appropriately to their children’s needs and behaviors if they can reflect on and understand the mental states at the root of their children’s behavior (Gordo et al., 2020). Gordo et al. has identified parental reflective functioning as being a key factor of competent parenting.

Parental reflective functioning influences the development of secure attachment relationships with their children, which fosters children’s ability to self-regulate and develop social-emotional skills (Luyten et al., 2017). If parents are more sensitive to their children’s needs and respond in a prompt manner to these needs, it leads to a more secure foundation for their children, particularly in infancy (Pazzagli et al., 2017). In contrast, parents who have difficulty tolerating or making sense of their children’s emotions impact the children’s social-
emotional development as the children do not have the support of primary caregivers with this development (Gordo et al., 2020). Parents with higher levels of parental reflective functioning were more likely to be secure in their role as a parent, and their ability to reflect enhances their children’s attachment relationships (Pazzagli et al., 2017).

The strength of attachment relationships between children and their parents or other primary caregivers directly correlates with children’s emotion regulation and social-emotional development (Schultheis et al., 2019). Parents who have insecure attachments with their infants have lower levels of parental reflective functioning (Nijssens et al., 2020). Additionally, there is a difference in the attachment of mothers and fathers regarding parental reflective function. Maternal attachment insecurity leads to less resilience and diminished capabilities of children to self-regulate (Nijssens et al., 2020). Fathers’ paternal attachment insecurity leads to less social, less timid, and more aggressive behavior in children (Nijssens et al., 2020).

Parental reflective functioning provides a foundation for parents to be able to regulate their emotions as through reflection, they develop an understanding of the ways in which their emotion regulation affects their children (Schultheis et al., 2019). It enables parents to reflect on their own mental experiences while also reflecting on those of their children (Gordo et al., 2020). Parents with a greater capacity for reflective functioning are better prepared to face stressful parenting situations in a more effective way as they experience higher levels of self-perceived parental competence. These areas of competence include the capacity to care for their children while also educating and protecting them (Gordo et al., 2020).

Children learn through observation and often learn to regulate their emotions through observation of their parents or other significant caregivers (Schultheis et al., 2019). Additionally, parents’ reaction to their children’s emotions affect how they continue to express
these emotions. For example, parents who respond negatively to their children’s expression of emotions are teaching their children to avoid negative emotions rather than teaching them ways to express these emotions effectively (Schultheis et al., 2019). As parents engage in reflective functioning, or mentalizing, they gain an understanding of both their own and their child’s emotions, which influences children’s social-emotional development, particularly in the areas of engaging in appropriate social interactions and the development of relationships (Pazzagli et al., 2017).

**Social-Emotional Development and Kindergarten Readiness**

**Self-Regulation and Social-Emotional Development**

A significant component of social-emotional development is self-regulation (Hyson, 2004). As a general definition, “self-regulation refers to the ability to direct or modulate one’s attention, emotion, thoughts and actions in facilitating adaptation and achieving personal goals” (Feng et al., 2016, p. 981). Self-regulation begins to develop in infancy and continues throughout childhood, with the most rapid rate of development occurring during the preschool years (Sharkin et al., 2017). From the ages of 12 months to 18 months, children engage in goal-directed behaviors and respond to requests of peers and adults (Stepien-Nycz et al., 2015). Between the ages of 2 and 3 years, children are first able to demonstrate control of their behavior while in the presence of adults (Stepien-Nycz et al., 2015).

**Self-Regulation and Achievement**

Feng et al. (2016) suggest there are correlations between self-regulation and increased levels of academic achievement, greater social-emotional competence, and reduction in problematic behaviors. Self-regulation is not a single process; rather, it is multifaceted and comprised of both cognitive and emotional factors (Im et al., 2019). The physiological aspects
of self-regulation include heart rate and sleep cycles (Stepien-Nycz et al., 2015). Emotional regulation refers to a child’s reaction to stress and frustration and attentional regulation is defined by attention shifting or attention directing behaviors (Stepien-Nycz, 2015). These aspects, in addition to cognitive regulation as defined by executive functioning, are often observed as a child grows older (Connors-Burrow et al., 2017).

**Self-Control**

Children eventually develop the ability to control their own behavior, which is known as self-control (Stepien-Nycz et al., 2015). Self-control is defined by children’s ability to delay immediate gratification to obtain a preferred result at a later time (Stepien-Nycz et al., 2015). Self-control relates to the cognitive component of self-regulation, which includes working memory (Sharkins et al., 2015). Working memory refers to a child’s ability to develop goals and hold these goals, as well as demands, in their memory (Stepien-Nycz et al., 2015). Self-control and self-regulation skills connect working memory with school readiness (Miller & Kehl, 2019). Preschool boys often have reduced abilities to self-regulate than girls at the preschool stage of development (Miller & Kehl, 2017). Therefore, working memory may be a more prominent indicator for preschool boys (Miller & Kehl, 2017).

**Effortful Control**

The concept of effortful control is a component of self-regulation. Effortful control is associated with self-control as well as executive functioning and inhibitory control (Backen-Grondahl et al., 2015). A child’s capacity for inhibiting a dominant response in lieu of performing a non-dominant response is the definition of inhibitory control (Backen-Grondahl et al., 2015). Asking a peer to play with a toy rather than taking the toy away from a child is an
example of inhibitory control (Sharkins et al., 2015). Effortful control is also associated with the cognitive aspects of self-regulation and often includes working memory (Miller & Kehl, 2017).

**Social-Emotional Competence**

As children develop essential social-emotional skills, including the ability to regulate their emotions and respond to their emotions in appropriate ways, they develop social-emotional competence (Wood, 2015). Social-emotional competence encompasses children’s ability to demonstrate a positive emotional well-being and interact appropriately with teachers and adults (Miller & Kehl, 2019). Social-emotional competence has been identified as one of the most significant aspects of kindergarten readiness (Denham et al., 2014). However, social-emotional competence does not evolve naturally; children’s social-emotional development is dependent upon their environment and the quality of their attachments with parents and other caregivers (Healy et al., 2015). Children’s development of social-emotional competence begins in infancy and continues into the preschool years as children learn to interact appropriately with peers and adults (Schmitt et al., 2018).

There is a significant link between children’s social-emotional competence and their cognitive development, language skills, and mental health (Silverthorn et al., 2017). The development of social-emotional competence in preschool leads to the development of effective relationships with others and facilitates long-term success (Schmitt et al., 2018). In contrast, children who lack social-emotional competence in early childhood tend to experience more behavior challenges, such as bullying and aggressive behaviors, and are deficient in their ability to solve problems with peers (Schmitt et al., 2018).
Kindergarten Readiness

Kindergarten is widely known as the milestone in children’s lives that marks their official transition into formal education (Hustedt et al., 2018). The necessity for children to be prepared for kindergarten in all domains of development has vastly increased with the surge in academic expectations in kindergarten (Hustedt et al., 2018). Currently, students in kindergarten are exposed to and expected to learn content that was previously taught in first or second grade (Miller & Kehl, 2019). Kindergarten teachers report that one-third of children entering their classrooms are unprepared to meet the challenges of kindergarten. Specifically, 34% of children demonstrate a significant need for assistance with reading and math (Miller & Kehl, 2019). According to one study, 88% of students who were deemed unready by kindergarten teachers demonstrated difficulty with language, 86% of the students demonstrated a lack of general knowledge of relevant topics and subjects, and 80% demonstrated deficiencies in social competence (Miller & Kehl, 2019).

Multiple factors contribute to the concept of kindergarten readiness, a term that is used interchangeably with school readiness (Hatcher et al., 2012; Hustedt et al., 2018). “Child school readiness is the child’s level of development across multiple domains needed for optimal performance in school” (Montes et al., 2014, p. 541). Conceptually, kindergarten readiness can be defined as factors that determine a child’s preparedness to succeed in school (Wright et al., 2019). More specifically, kindergarten readiness can be defined as a process whereby parents and society prepare children for a successful school transition (Brotherson et al., 2015).

Additional research has indicated that kindergarten readiness is determined by children’s “chronological age and mastery of skills” (Miller & Kehl, 2019, p. 445), or formal readiness. Informal readiness factors refer to the expectations regarding children’s abilities and skills upon
entering the classroom in order to be successful in the kindergarten setting (Miller & Kehl, 2019). A child’s age, developmental level, cognitive skills, and social skills are all factors that determine a child’s level of readiness for school (Hatcher et al., 2012). There has been an increased interest in the importance of school readiness with the increase in the pressure to achieve high academic success (Kokkalia et al., 2019). School readiness encompasses children’s readiness to learn as well as their readiness to manage the structure of a school setting, which includes their ability to follow directions, participate in classroom activities, and adhere to classroom routines (Regenstein et al., 2018). As young children possess an innate curiosity and insatiable appetite for learning, they are considered always ready to learn (Miller & Kehl, 2019). However, determining children’s readiness for school involves established standards of physical, cognitive, and emotional development (Regenstein et al., 2018).

Kindergarten readiness domains include language, literacy, and mathematics (Little et al., 2016). However, state-established early learning standards incorporate social-emotional development with cognitive, language arts, and physical development (Hustedt et al., 2018). To determine the level of a child’s readiness for entering kindergarten, it is essential to examine each child individually and identify factors that would ensure that each child is prepared in all domains of development (Miller & Kehl, 2019). It is clearly defined in the literature that social-emotional development must be considered as an integral part of the overall readiness of a child to enter kindergarten with the skills and abilities necessary to ensure success (Hustedt et al., 2018).

Kindergarten readiness also incorporates the interactions between families, early childhood education programs, and elementary schools (Emfinger, 2012). The interaction between children’s development and all the facets of their environment must be considered when
understanding the concept of school readiness (Duncan et al., 2018). Children who are cognitively and socially prepared for kindergarten are more likely to experience long-term academic and personal success into adulthood (Fitzpatrick, 2012). However, statistics show that many children lack the foundational kindergarten readiness skills necessary for achieving success (Peterson et al., 2018). Interventions designed to promote school readiness can mitigate the risk factors of social and academic challenges throughout children’s educational careers (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Considering the importance of kindergarten readiness on children’s futures, it is essential to examine thoroughly all the opportunities for increasing children’s likelihood of achievement and success (Peterson et al., 2018).

**Academic Emphasis of Kindergarten Readiness**

With the introduction of the Common Core State Standards, the academic expectations of children are much higher in today’s schools (Smith, 2019). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the Race to the Top (RTTT) initiatives have accentuated the emphasis on academics by increasing the standards, objectives, and accountability for children’s learning (Little et al., 2016). The RTTT initiatives build upon the NCLB initiatives by increasing federal funding to expand children’s access to preschool through the development of state-funded preschools (Little et al., 2016). Additionally, the RTTT initiatives impose the requirement for the administration of kindergarten readiness assessments to all children entering kindergarten (Hustedt et al., 2018). It is posited that children who score highly on these academic tests are ready for the challenges associated with kindergarten, thus increasing their likelihood of achieving immediate and long-term success (Little et al., 2016). Intended to address the achievement gap among the nation’s diverse student populations, these federal academic mandates vastly increased the necessity for adequately preparing children for the academic demands of kindergarten (Hover, 2015).
As a result of the NCLB and the RTTT initiatives, teachers are increasingly challenged by the need to balance developmentally appropriate practice with more structured instruction, as dictated by these initiatives (Hustedt et al., 2018). Learning through play and engaging in hands-on learning experiences are critical components of early childhood education (NAEYC, n.d.). As children engage in play-based learning experiences, they develop essential social-emotional, cognitive, problem-solving, decision-making skills (Gestwicki, 2016). However, the increase in expectations for academic achievement in recent years has created pressure for teachers to focus more effort and attention on meeting standards, often at the expense of children’s social-emotional learning (Hover, 2015).

**Social-Emotional Kindergarten Readiness Factors**

Social-emotional development has been identified as one of the most significant indicators affecting children’s success (Denham et al., 2014). Specifically, children’s positive dispositions and emotional well-being is related to positive long-term outcomes, such as being mentally healthy, developing effective relationships with others, and attaining academic and professional success (Allbright et al., 2019). Statistics have shown that preschool-age children were three times more likely to be expelled from their preschools than students enrolled in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade (Sharkins et al., 2017). This is due primarily to the children’s inability to regulate their emotions and behaviors, which leads to high levels of aggression and disruption in the classroom (Sharkins et al., 2017). This provides further evidence of the importance of the development of social-emotional skills in early childhood (Allbright et al., 2019).

Children’s readiness to learn is largely determined by their ability to express their emotions appropriately and regulate their behaviors (White & Walker, 2018). Essentially,
children who can follow directions, express their emotions in appropriate ways, and demonstrate independence have a greater capacity for learning new skills and concepts (Denham et al., 2014). Socially and emotionally competent children can regulate their own emotions while identifying and responding appropriately to the emotions of others (Vesely et al., 2013). As children learn to empathize with others’ emotions, they develop positive relationships with others (Vesely et al., 2013). Along with understanding emotions, socially and emotionally competent children are able to use expanding vocabulary to express their needs and wants and to work toward resolving conflicts with peers (Denham et al., 2014).

As learning is a social process, the specific social-emotional developmental expectations for kindergarteners need to be prioritized in pre-kindergarten curriculum (Shrier, 2014). Developing the ability to get along with peers and adults, being able to follow directions, persisting in task completion, and regulating emotions are developmentally appropriate social-emotional expectations for kindergarten children (Shrier, 2014). These identified social-emotional skills should be primary components of all early childhood education curriculum and teachers and parents need to be aware of the significance of social-emotional learning on children’s overall development (Denhan et al., 2014). Additionally, children who are identified as having behavior problems relating to a lack of social-emotional skills, can have delayed speech and language abilities, decreased motor skills, and delayed abilities to engage in play and other classroom activities upon entering kindergarten (Montes et al., 2014). It is essential to prioritize the facilitation of social-emotional development in early childhood educational programs and provide parents with the knowledge and skills to effectively support their children’s social-emotional development at home. Additionally, Bandura’s social learning theory notes the ways in which children learn behaviors modeled by adults (Panhwar, 2016). It
is reasonable to conclude that parents play a significant role in their children’s social-emotional
development as it relates to kindergarten readiness, and parents need to be equipped with the
skills, knowledge, and resources for supporting their children’s development.

Another factor to consider within the concept of social-emotional kindergarten readiness is children’s enthusiasm for learning and engagement in classroom learning activities (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Children who are engaged in the learning processes are more likely to be prepared for kindergarten and attain higher levels of achievement (Fitzpatrick, 2012). In preschool children, emotions that are considered to be negative in nature, such as sadness, shyness, and anger have been connected with lower engagement and motivation to learn (Miller & Kehl, 2019). Studies have shown that this paradigm is particularly evident regarding preschool-age boys (Miller & Kehl, 2019).

Children need to be exposed to learning through engaging, hands-on activities that are designed to meet their unique learning needs (Fitzpatrick, 2012). This kinesthetic learning fosters the successful development of a life-long love of learning (Fitzpatrick, 2012). This has become vastly more challenging for teachers with the increase in academic expectations (Little et al., 2016). Children also need to feel free to explore their world with competence and confidence, which are skills directly related to the development of social-emotional competence (Roffey, 2017).

In coordination with enthusiasm and engagement, motivation plays a significant role in children’s learning (Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005). Children who are intrinsically motivated to learn are more likely to achieve greater levels of academic success (Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005). This is largely due to the connection between social-emotional competence and children’s development of a positive attitude of school (Sharkins et al., 2017). In contrast,
children who are not as socially-emotionally competent tend to be less attentive, which leads to lower levels of academic achievement and a negative attitude toward school (Miller & Kehl, 2017). As with all other aspects of social-emotional kindergarten readiness factors, parents and other primary caregivers have a significant responsibility to promote their children’s motivation and enthusiasm for learning and achievement (Fitzpatrick, 2012).

Despite the pressure to emphasize academics within preschool and kindergarten classrooms, teachers contend that children’s non-academic skill development remains a priority within education (Hustedt et al., 2018). Therefore, the social and emotional development components should also be considered with a greater emphasis (Denham et al., 2014). Over the past decade, research has placed a greater emphasis on the social-emotional factors of children’s education and development; however, still more attention is needed on the social development of children (Allbright et al., 2019). This expanded research has resulted in an emphasis on early childhood educators to provide children with the nurturing and support necessary for their social-emotional development (Wood, 2015). Strengthening the parent component of children’s social-emotional development is also of utmost significance (Sharkins et al., 2017).

**Gap in the Literature**

Scholarly literature addresses parental knowledge of the academic aspects of kindergarten readiness, particularly with regard to literacy and language development (Brannon & Dauksas, 2014). However, a gap in the literature exists about parents’ level of knowledge and skills necessary for facilitating the social-emotional development of their children. Much of children’s preparedness for kindergarten is shaped by parents and other primary caregivers. However, if parents and caregivers do not possess adequate knowledge of the essential social-emotional skills, they will be deficient in their ability to facilitate this developmental facet.
Summary

Bowlby’s attachment theory, Bandura’s social learning theory, and Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory provide the theoretical framework for this study. Bowlby posited that the attachments that children develop with their parents and other significant caregivers in the early years of life lead to children’s development of a positive self-image (O’Connor et al., 2013). Much of children’s learning and social development occurs by imitating the behaviors of parents and other significant adults, as outlined by Bandura’s social learning theory (Schunk, 2016). Additionally, when parents model effective communication skills and emotion regulation, children acquire these valuable life skills (Schunk, 2016). Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory is also relevant to this study as children learn from the social and cultural influences of their environment (Panhwar et al., 2016).

A literature review provided evidence of the effects of parenting practices on children’s social-emotional development. These practices include responding warmly and consistently to children’s needs to ensure secure attachments (Lai & Carr, 2018). As children develop secure attachments, they can face stressors and challenges with confidence, leading to long-term success and achievement (Lai & Carr, 2018). It is also essential for parents to understand and acknowledge their children’s strong emotions while helping them develop positive and effective strategies for coping with these emotions (Hyson, 2004). Setting clear limits and establishing developmentally appropriate expectations are also identified as essential parenting practices for facilitating children’s social-emotional development (Hyson, 2004).

Current research suggests a relationship between parent education and training and children’s level of kindergarten readiness. Due to the emphasis placed on academics by the Common Core State Standards, being prepared for the demands of kindergarten is essential for children’s future academic and personal success (Casbergue, 2017; Hover, 2015). Children who
are academically and socially prepared for kindergarten are likely to experience a smoother transition into kindergarten and achieve higher levels of success throughout their educational careers (Hover, 2015).

Parent involvement in their children’s education is critical to children’s academic outcomes (Dunst et al., 2018). Parent education and training programs are effective in increasing involvement by giving parents the knowledge and skills necessary for facilitating their children’s academic success (Anthony et al., 2014). However, there is a primary focus on literacy initiatives regarding parent training and education. It was determined in a review of the literature that there is a paucity of research as it pertains to evidence of parent training programs focusing on the social-emotional development of children.

Parental reflective functioning is essential to children’s social-emotional development. Also known as mentalizing, parental reflective functioning involves the ability of parents to see the perspective of their children by considering what their children are experiencing (Luyten et al., 2017). As parents put themselves in their children’s place, they are more likely to respond promptly and appropriately to their children’s needs (Pazzagli et al., 2017). This leads to the development of secure attachments, which are necessary for children’s emotion regulation and social-emotional development (Luyten et al., 2017).

The literature provides a multi-faceted approach to understanding the concept of kindergarten readiness (Miller & Kehl, 2019). Kindergarten readiness, as an entire concept, is a complex combination of multiple factors (Hover, 2015). Academic preparedness, including literacy, math, and level of classroom engagement, is one critical facet of kindergarten readiness (Hover, 2015). However, the academic focus must be combined with explicit instruction and intervention in social-emotional development in order to facilitate children’s success (Montes et
al., 2014). As children acquire social-emotional skills, they develop social-emotional competence (Miller & Kehl, 2019). Socially-emotionally competent children can regulate their emotions and establish and maintain positive relationships, which are skills that are strongly linked to academic learning and acquisition of knowledge (Miller & Kehl, 2019).

To prepare children fully for kindergarten, parents must demonstrate parenting practices that support their children’s kindergarten readiness in all domains of development. This study attempted to address this gap in the research and further the current research on parental involvement and social-emotional kindergarten readiness factors. The literature does not address the extent to which parents possess the knowledge and skills necessary for promoting the social-emotional development of their children. The desired outcome of this study was to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by examining the reflective functioning and parenting practices affecting children’s social-emotional development for the purpose of informing the development of parent training programs designed to address the identified gaps in knowledge.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to address a gap in the literature by exploring parental (1) innate reflective functioning and (2) parenting practices of students entering kindergarten. The study further includes the effect of pre-kindergarten settings on these findings. The population is comprised of parents or other primary caregivers who have at least one child enrolled in a traditional or non-traditional early learning center in the southeastern United States. Bowlby’s attachment theory is the theoretical foundation of this study. This chapter provides details regarding the (1) research design, (2) research question, (3) null hypotheses, (4) participants and setting, (5) instrumentation, (6) procedures, and (7) data analysis.

Design

This quantitative study utilized a causal comparative research design. Causal comparative study is consistent with the research questions in this study, which sought to uncover the difference between groups. The causal comparative design is appropriate as the components of this study align with the defining characteristics of this research design. The study aligns because (1) it sought to identify relationships between independent and dependent variables in preexisting groups, (2) the researcher did not manipulate the independent variable, and (3) this design is descriptive rather than experimental (Gall et al., 2007). Research Question 1 has an independent variable of learning setting for the pre-kindergarten student and a dependent variable of parents’ reflective functioning skills. Research Question 2 has an independent variable of learning setting for the pre-kindergarten student and a dependent variable of parenting practices. The independent variables in both research questions are defined as non-traditional and traditional early learning settings. The non-traditional early learning settings utilize a two-generation approach that provides support and education for parents and
children equally. These programs place an emphasis on parents actively participating in their children’s learning activities. Traditional learning settings provide care and education for children in their parents’ absence. The dependent variable in Research Question 1, parents’ reflective functioning skills, is defined as parents’ ability to consider their own and their child’s thoughts, behaviors, and feelings, which helps positively guide parents’ interactions with their children (Rutherford et al., 2017). The dependent variable in Research Question 2, parenting practices, is defined as parental involvement in their children’s education, demonstrating emotional responsiveness to their children’s needs, and modeling positive problem-solving strategies, which are critical for children’s development of social-emotional competence (Healy et al., 2015).

**Research Questions**

The research questions for this study were as follows:

**RQ1:** Is there a difference between parents’ reflective functioning skills of pre-kindergarten students that are learning in a traditional setting and non-traditional setting?

**RQ2:** Is there a difference between parenting practices of pre-kindergarten students that are learning in a traditional setting and non-traditional setting?

The independent variable is identified as the type of early learning program: traditional or non-traditional. The dependent variables are the parental reflective functioning skills and parenting practices that affect the social-emotional aspects of their children’s kindergarten readiness.

**Hypotheses**

The following were the null hypotheses for this study:
**H₀₁:** There is no statistically significant difference between parents’ reflective functioning skills and the child’s pre-kindergarten learning setting as measured by the Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire.

**H₀₂:** There is no statistically significant difference between parenting practices and the child’s pre-kindergarten learning setting as measured by the Knowledge of Effective Parenting Scale.

**Participants and Setting**

The population of this study was comprised of parents or other live-in primary caregivers who had at least one child enrolled in a non-traditional or traditional early learning program in the southeastern United States. The participants for this study were drawn from a convenience sample of parents who have at least one child enrolled in a traditional or non-traditional early learning center. A non-traditional early learning center provides early learning programs for families, giving parents opportunities to participate with their children as they engage in daily learning activities. In these programs, parents are actively involved in their children’s learning and a significant facet of these programs is to provide parents with the knowledge and skills necessary for them to facilitate their children’s development and learning with kindergarten readiness as the goal. The non-traditional settings had 50 subjects who participated in this study.

The traditional early learning programs chosen for this study provide for the children’s learning without requiring parent participation and 50 subjects were recruited to the traditional setting group. In these traditional early learning centers, parents drop their children off for the day, typically while they go to work or attend to other personal matters, and the children engage in learning activities facilitated by the classroom teacher. While these parents may participate in center events, they are not actively involved in their child’s learning on a regular daily basis.
within the early learning center. The sample for this study consisted of 100 parents or other primary caregivers who had at least one child enrolled in a traditional or non-traditional early learning program. Of the 50 participants with children enrolled in a non-traditional early learning program, 35 were mothers, 5 were fathers, 4 were grandparents, 3 were aunts/uncles, and 3 were identified as other. Of the 50 participants with children enrolled in a traditional early learning program, 43 were mothers, 6 were fathers, and 1 was a grandparent.

The sample size for this study was 100 and involved two groups equal in size (Gall et al., 2007). The researcher contacted program directors so that parents were recruited to participate in the research study with an email from the directors to the parents. Parents were required to fill out consent forms if they chose to participate. The sampling represented convenience sampling and was a facet of the causal-comparative research design; the research locations were chosen based on the researcher’s access to and association with these programs (Gall et al., 2007).

**Instrumentation**

The Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (PRFQ) was used to assess parents’ reflective functioning capabilities, also known as mentalizing capabilities (Appendix A). The PRFQ instrument has been used in numerous peer-reviewed studies and has been found to be valid and reliable across multiple studies (Adkins et al., 2018; Luyten et al., 2017; Rutherford et al., 2017; Schultheis et al., 2019). There is a strong correlation between parents’ reflective functioning capabilities and the self-regulation and emotional attachment of their children (Luyten et al., 2017). The PRFQ is designed for parents of children from birth to 5 years of age and is appropriate for use across a wide range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds (Luyten et al., 2017). The PRFQ is comprised of 18 items that are divided into three subscales measuring parental reflective functioning. The three subscales are identified as prementalizing,
certainty about mental states, and interest and curiosity (Luyten et al., 2017). Prementalizing refers to nonmentalizing ways of thinking; a lower score indicates a parent’s ability to interpret accurately their child’s mental experience, including their thoughts, feelings, desires, and attitudes (Luyten et al., 2017). Certainty about mental states indicates a parent’s ability to consistently recognize their child’s needs and wants in addition to recognizing that the child’s mental states are not transparent (Krink et al., 2018; Rutherford et al., 2017). A parent’s interest and curiosity refers to a parent’s desire to understand what is in a child’s mind by determining the thoughts and feelings underlying the child’s behaviors (Cooke et al., 2017). Specifically, interest and curiosity refers to the parents’ ability to see their child’s perspective (Luyten et al., 2017; Rutherford et al., 2017). As parents completed the questionnaire, they were instructed to keep their child in mind (Schultheis et al., 2019). A 7-point Likert scale was used to score each of the 18 items with 1 being strongly disagree to 7 being strongly agree (Luyten et al., 2017). Higher scores on the certainty about mental states and interest and curiosity subscales and lower scores on the prementalizing subscale indicate optimal reflective functioning (Rutherford et al., 2017). This is reflective of interval (continuous) data; therefore, the data analysis reflects this.

The authors of the PRFQ used exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses to support the structure of the three factors identified as prementalizing, certainty about mental states, and interest and curiosity in mental states (Adkins et al., 2018). Internal consistency of the subscales was reported as ranging from $\alpha = .70$ to $\alpha = .82$ across multiple studies (Luyten et al., 2017; Pazzagli et al., 2017; Rutherford et al., 2017)). The questionnaire showed good internal consistency, with Chronbach’s alpha coefficients reported as $\alpha = .70$ for pre-mentalizing, $\alpha = .82$ for certainty about mental states and $\alpha = .74$ for interest and curiosity in mental states (Pazzagli et al., 2017).
The instrument was also found to be valid among the subscales of prementalizing, certainty, and interest and curiosity (Rutherford et al., 2017). Regarding construct validity, the subscales were found to be positively correlated with parental attachment and distress and parental emotional availability, and show moderate associations with some demographic variables, such as mothers and fathers (Luyten et al., 2017; Rutherford et al., 2017). For parental attachment and distress, prementalizing was positively correlated and reported as $r = .29, p < .001$ and attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance was reported as $r = .49, p < .001$.

Parental emotional availability as related to certainty about mental states was reported as $r = .19, p < .01$ (Luyten et al., 2017). Additionally, interest and curiosity were significantly correlated and reported as $r = .30, p < .01$ (Luyten et al., 2017). Construct validity was also demonstrated by indicating a positive correlation with parental attachment, emotional availability, and infant attachment (Rostad & Whitaker, 2016). Cooke et al. (2017) showed that the PRFQ “related in theoretically predicted ways with parental attachment, emotional availability, parenting stress, and child attachment status” (p. 562).

This PRFQ instrument takes approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. It is available online and can be used in either a paper or online format, without affecting the reliability and validity of the instrument. This instrument is available for public domain use; permission to use the instrument is not required.

The Knowledge of Effective Parenting Scale (KEPS) was used to assess the parenting practices that relate to the social-emotional aspects of kindergarten readiness (Appendix B). The KEPS instrument has been found to be reliable and valid (Winter et al., 2012). This instrument was designed at the University of Queensland, Australia for the purpose of exploring parents’ level of knowledge of effective parenting practices (Winter et al., 2012). This instrument is
appropriate for parents with children ranging from 2 to 10 years of age and measures parenting practices across four areas of social-emotional developmental factors (Winter et al., 2012). The first section is the promotion of development, which includes the development of positive relationships, encouraging desirable behavior, and teaching new skills and behaviors (Winter et al., 2012). The second area measured is principles of effective parenting (Winter et al., 2012). These principles include ensuring a safe and engaging environment, creating a positive learning environment, establishing realistic expectations, and taking care of oneself as a parent (Winter et al., 2012). The other two areas are defined as the use of assertive discipline practices and causes of behavior problems (Winter et al., 2012).

This instrument was appropriate for this study because the author sought to assess parenting practices affecting the social-emotional aspects of kindergarten readiness, which closely aligns with the questions posed by the KEPS. Parenting practices, as measured by the KEPS instrument, include the promotion of development, which encompasses the development of positive relationships, encouraging desirable behavior, and teaching new skills and behaviors. The KEPS also measures principles of effective parenting, which include providing a safe and engaging environment, creating a positive learning environment, establishing realistic expectations, and self-care for parents. Using assertive discipline practices and understanding causes of behavior problems are additional factors measured by KEPS relating to social-emotional development (Winter et al., 2012). Additionally, this instrument was chosen to give the researcher a clear indication of the parenting practices in alignment with one of the research questions and subsequent null hypothesis. The KEPS instrument has been used in studies aimed at improving the knowledge, skills, and parenting practices of parents through parenting programs and parenting-focused public health strategies (Olson, 2017). Additionally, the KEPS
instrument was used in a study that compared the KEPS with another instrument known as the Knowledge of Infant Development Inventory (KIDI) for the purpose of assessing parent knowledge and skills of parenting factors and developmental milestones (Winter et al., 2012). The study by Winter et al. revealed that the KEPS instrument was more effective at determining the social-emotional parenting factors and had a greater impact on child development than the use of the KIDI, which focused primarily on knowledge of developmental milestones.

The KEPS instrument consists of 28 multiple choice questions divided among the four categories stated above (Winter et al., 2012). In identifying the scales of measurement, each question has four options for selecting the correct answer and each correct answer earns one point. Incorrect answers or unanswered questions earn zero points. Higher scores on this assessment indicate a greater effectiveness of parenting practices as related to the social-emotional aspects of kindergarten readiness (Winter et al., 2012). In contrast, low scores earned by participants on this assessment indicate a lower level of effectiveness of parenting practices. This is reflective of interval (continuous) data; therefore, the data analysis reflected these data types.

The KEPS instrument was found to have satisfactory test-retest reliability of \( r = 0.70 \) and satisfactory internal consistency of \( \alpha = 0.73 \). As evidence of content validity, this instrument has empirically demonstrated in numerous randomized controlled trials of the Triple P Parenting Program to improve parenting competence and promote positive outcomes for children (Winter et al., 2012). The Triple P Parenting Program is a multi-level strategy for parenting and family support that focuses on the prevention of behavioral, developmental, and emotional difficulties in children through an emphasis on strengthening parents’ confidence and competence (Winter et al., 2012). Additionally, KEPS demonstrated “greater predictive validity across both parent- and
child-related variables” (Winter et al., 2012, p. 94). This provides evidence of construct validity (Winter et al., 2012). The relationship between parental knowledge and demographic variables indicated that the scores of the KEPS were significantly positively related to income level \(r = .39, p = .002\) but not education level \(r = .17, p = .188\), parity \(r = -.18, p = .174\), or parental age \(r = -.08, p = .558\). In comparison, the scores from the KIDI instrument were not significantly related to income level \(r = -.05, p = .707\), education level \(r = .20, p = .131\), parity \(r = -.05, p = .707\), or parental age \(r = -.21, p = .108\).

The KEPS instrument takes approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. It is available online and can be used in either a paper or online format, without affecting the reliability and validity of the instrument. This instrument is for public domain use and permission to use the instrument is not required.

**Procedures**

Prior to conducting this study, the directors of the non-traditional and traditional early learning centers were contacted for permission to conduct this study in their facilities. All required paperwork for granting permission was completed and retained. As the non-traditional setting is funded by a grant through Frostburg State University, the Institutional Review Board for Frostburg State University accepted IRB approval from Liberty University as fulfillment of their requirements. Once permission was obtained from the participating research sites, approval was obtained from the Liberty University IRB (Appendix C) before conducting any part of the research for this study. Upon receiving IRB approval for conducting this study, this researcher sent a letter describing the research in detail, along with consent forms, to the program directors to be distributed to all parents with children enrolled in the selected programs. Parents were made aware that their participation in this study was voluntary and procedures for protecting the
privacy of the participants were detailed in this letter. Participants were notified that no personally identifying information would be stored or tracked during this research process and that personal information would be limited to demographical information collected. Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from this study at any time during the completion of the KEPS survey and the PRFQ. As the first request for participation did not yield the required number of participants, the letter of explanation was resent. Additional early learning centers were contacted, and the appropriate permission forms completed, to increase the numbers of participants for the required sample size numbers. Individuals who expressed a willingness to participate in the research signed and returned a consent form. Reminders were sent to return the consent forms by a designated date. This researcher had access to and is associated with multiple early learning centers to promote the recruitment of participants.

The KEPS survey and PRFQ were distributed to all consenting participants at all research locations by the center directors to ensure anonymity of the participants. Participants had the option of completing the surveys electronically or in paper format. All participants completed the surveys in electronic format. The participants were given a deadline for completion, and directors were requested to prompt the participants with reminders to complete the assessment at chosen intervals. The researcher collected and stored data in a locked and password protected format to which only the researcher had access. The data collected from the surveys were entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis and interpretation. The data will be documented as destroyed after a period of seven years. Throughout the entire research process, the researcher followed all Liberty University protocols for maintaining the highest ethical standards.
Data Analysis

Data were collected from the KEPS and PRFQ, and to analyze this continuous data, they were entered into the SPSS software system, version 27.0 and analyzed with t-tests. First, descriptive statistics captured data to describe the sample such as caregiver status (parent or other). Data was sorted and screened for unusual scores or inconsistencies using visual analysis. A box and whisker plot was used for extreme outliers. Independent t-tests were conducted to analyze the data for the null hypotheses. The t-test was appropriate to use because this study examined the statistical significance of differences between two independent groups (Gall et al., 2007).

The independent t-test data analysis process also included multiple assumptions. Assumption testing was done as follows: (1) a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was conducted to test the assumption of normality because the sample size (n = 100) is greater than 50, and (2) the assumption of equal variance was tested using Levene’s Test of Equality of Error Variance (Warner, 2013). As this study required running two sets of significance, a Bonferroni correction was used. To guard against type I error, the significance level was calculated as follows: .05 / 2 = .025. Therefore, the alpha level was set at p < .025. Following data screening, independent means analysis, and assumption testing, Eta-squared was used to capture effect size.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to address a gap in the literature by exploring parental (1) innate reflective functioning and (2) parenting practices of children entering kindergarten. The study further included the effect of pre-kindergarten settings on these findings. A non-experimental causal comparative study was conducted to explore the reflective functioning abilities and parenting practices of parents whose children were enrolled in a traditional or non-traditional early learning center. Data were collected and analyzed using SPSS software, version 27.0. This chapter outlines the (1) descriptive statistics and the (2) results of this study.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were as follows:

**RQ1:** Is there a difference between parents’ reflective functioning skills of pre-kindergarten students that are learning in a traditional setting and non-traditional setting?

**RQ2:** Is there a difference between parenting practices of pre-kindergarten students that are learning in a traditional setting and non-traditional setting?

Null Hypotheses

**H₀₁:** There is no statistically significant difference between parents’ reflective functioning skills and the child’s pre-kindergarten learning setting as measured by the Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire.

**H₀₂:** There is no statistically significant difference between parenting practices and the child’s pre-kindergarten learning setting as measured by the Knowledge of Effective Parenting Scale.
Descriptive Statistics

The participants completed two instruments: The Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (PRFQ) and the Knowledge of Effective Parenting Scale (KEPS). Descriptive statistics for the PRFQ indicated a mean of 64.080, a median of 63.000, and a standard deviation of 8.531. Descriptive statistics for the KEPS (see Table 1) revealed a mean of 72.990. Additionally, the KEPS had a median of 73.000 and a standard deviation of 5.080.

Regarding the descriptive statistics of the independent variable, type of early learning program, and a dependent variable, the PRFQ, the parents with children enrolled in a nontraditional early learning program showed a mean score of 66.300 and a standard deviation of 10.144 (see Table 2). The descriptive statistics for parents with children enrolled in a traditional early learning program revealed a mean score of 61.860 and a standard deviation of 5.989. Regarding the KEPS instrument (see Table 3), parents with children enrolled in a nontraditional early learning program showed a mean score of 73.160 and a standard deviation of 6.158. The descriptive statistics for parents with children enrolled in a traditional early learning program revealed a mean score of 72.820 and a standard deviation of 3.761.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics: Instrumentation

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<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<td>8.531</td>
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<td>84.00</td>
<td>63.000</td>
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Table 2

Descriptive Statistics: Type of Early Learning Program – PRFQ

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<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>61.860</td>
<td>5.989</td>
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</table>

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics: Type of Early Learning Program – KEPS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>73.160</td>
<td>6.158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>72.820</td>
<td>3.761</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Data for each null hypothesis were analyzed using an independent sample \( t \)-test. However, one assumption was not met. Therefore, a Welch’s ANOVA was conducted to compare the two means to determine if they were equal. Assumption testing included Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances and a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for each hypothesis. An alpha level of \( p < .025 \) was used for data analysis and effect size was reported for each hypothesis using Eta-squared. The following sections outline the results for each null hypothesis.

Null Hypothesis One

**RQ1:** Is there a difference between parents’ reflective functioning skills of pre-kindergarten students that are learning in a traditional setting and non-traditional setting?
**H01:** There is no statistically significant difference between parents’ reflective functioning skills and the child’s pre-kindergarten learning setting as measured by the Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire.

Participants completed the PRFQ, which was used in this study to assess parents’ reflective functioning capabilities, also known as mentalizing capabilities. The PRFQ is a 7-point Likert scale that is comprised of 18 items, which are divided into three subscales that measure parental reflective functioning: prementalizing, certainty about mental states, and interest and curiosity. Data screening using visual analysis of the box and whisker plot revealed no extreme outliers.

Assumption testing included Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances and a Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test. The Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances revealed a statistic of 7.806 and a significance of .006 based on mean (Table 4). The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test revealed a significance of .002, which indicated a violation of the assumption (Table 5).

**Table 4**

*Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances: PRFQ*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Levene Statistic</th>
<th>df1</th>
<th>df2</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Based on Mean</td>
<td>7.806</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on Median</td>
<td>7.287</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on Median and</td>
<td>7.287</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>76.486</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adjusted df</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on trimmed</td>
<td>7.312</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mean</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results of the Welch’s ANOVA indicated an $F$ value of 7.102 and a significance of .009. See Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6
ANOVA: PRFQ

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>$df$</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>492.840</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>492.840</td>
<td>7.102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>6800.520</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>69.393</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7293.360</td>
<td>99</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7
Welch: PRFQ

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistic</th>
<th>$df1$</th>
<th>$df2$</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welch</td>
<td>7.102</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>79.464</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances showed a violation of the assumption of equal variance, a Mann-Whitney test was performed. For parents with children enrolled in a
nontraditional early learning program, the mean rank was calculated at 57.36 and for parents with children enrolled in a traditional early learning program, the mean rank was calculated at 43.64. The significance was .018. With the alpha level set at $p < .025$, the results of the Mann-Whitney test indicate significance; therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected.

The effect size for the PRFQ instrument was measured using Eta-squared. The results indicated a point estimate of .068, which indicates a medium effect size (Table 8).

**Table 8**

*Effect Size: Eta-Squared – PRFQ*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point Estimate</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.068</td>
<td>.004 – .178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Null Hypothesis Two**

**RQ2:** Is there a difference between parenting practices of pre-kindergarten students that are learning in a traditional setting and non-traditional setting?

**H₀2:** There is no statistically significant difference between parenting practices and the child’s pre-kindergarten learning setting as measured by the Knowledge of Effective Parenting Scale.

In addition to the PRFQ, participants also completed the KEPS. This instrument was used to assess the parenting practices that related to the social-emotional aspects of kindergarten readiness. This multiple-choice questionnaire measured parenting practices across four areas of social-emotional developmental factors: promotion of development, principles of effective parenting, assertive discipline practices, and causes of behavior problems. Data screening using visual analysis of the box and whisker plot revealed no extreme outliers.
Assumption testing included Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances and a Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test. For null hypothesis two, the Levene’s Test of Equality of Variances revealed a statistic of 5.787 and a significance of .018 based on mean (Table 9). The Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test revealed a significance of .054, which did not violate the assumption (Table 10).

**Table 9**

*Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances: KEPS*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Levene Statistic</th>
<th>df1</th>
<th>df2</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Based on Mean</td>
<td>5.787</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on Median</td>
<td>5.315</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on Median and</td>
<td>5.315</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>74.424</td>
<td>.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and with adjusted df</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on trimmed</td>
<td>5.679</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mean</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 10**

*Kolmogorov-Smirnov: KEPS*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistic</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.088</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>.054</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the Welch’s ANOVA indicated an $F$ value of .111 and a significance of .740. See Tables 11 and 12.
Table 11

ANOVA: KEPS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>2.890</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.890</td>
<td>.111</td>
<td>.740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>2552.100</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>26.042</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2554.990</td>
<td>99</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12

Welch: KEPS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Statistic</th>
<th>df1</th>
<th>df2</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welch</td>
<td>.111</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>81.092</td>
<td>.740</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances showed a violation of the assumption of equal variance, a Mann-Whitney test was performed. For parents with children enrolled in a nontraditional early learning program, the mean rank was calculated at 53.07 and for parents with children enrolled in a traditional early learning program, the mean rank was calculated at 47.93. The significance was .374. With the alpha level set at $p < .025$, the results of this Mann-Whitney test indicated no statistical significance; thus, indicating a failure to reject the null hypothesis.

The effect size for the KEPS instrument was measured using Eta-squared. The results indicated a point estimate of .001, which indicates a small effect size (Table 13).
Table 13

*Effect Size: Eta-Squared – KEPS*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point Estimate</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.000 – .046</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

This chapter provides a discussion of the results of this research study as related to the theoretical foundation of this study and the relevant literature. Implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research are addressed.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to address a gap in the literature by exploring (1) parental reflective functioning and (2) parenting practices of parents with children entering kindergarten. The study also examined the effect of pre-kindergarten settings, non-traditional and traditional, on these findings. The dependent variables were identified as parental reflective functioning and parenting practices and the independent variable was type of pre-kindergarten program: traditional and non-traditional. A traditional pre-kindergarten program provides care and education for children in their parents’ absence. A non-traditional pre-kindergarten program utilizes a two-generation approach, which places significant emphasis on family involvement by actively engaging parents in their children’s learning (Harding et al., 2017). This study sought to address two research questions. As the findings were unique for each question, the results for each question are discussed individually.

Research Question One

RQ1: Is there a difference between parents’ reflective functioning skills of pre-kindergarten students that are learning in a traditional setting and non-traditional setting?

Regarding Research Question One, this study revealed a statistically significant difference in the parental reflective functioning skills of parents whose children are enrolled in a traditional versus a non-traditional pre-kindergarten program. The results of the Welch’s
ANOVA showed a significance of .009 and, with the alpha level set at \( p < .025 \), the null hypothesis was rejected. As further evidence of significance, a medium effect size was reported.

To address Research Question One, participants completed the Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (PRFQ) in electronic format, which is a 7-point Likert Scale designed to measure parental reflective functioning in three subsections: prementalizing, certainty about mental states, and interest and curiosity. As stated in previous chapters, prementalizing is a parent’s ability to understand and accurately interpret their child’s mental experience (Pazzagli et al., 2017). Certainty about mental states measures parents’ ability to recognize the needs and wants of their children and measures parents’ ability to recognize that mental states are not transparent (Krink et al., 2018). Interest and curiosity involves parents’ ability to think about their child’s mental experiences and take their child’s perspective while determining the thoughts and feelings underlying their child’s behaviors (Cooke et al., 2017).

In this study, parents with children in non-traditional pre-kindergarten programs showed higher levels of parental reflective functioning. This was evidenced by a mean score of 66.30 as compared with the mean score of parents with children enrolled in traditional pre-kindergarten settings, which was 61.86. This indicates that parents with children enrolled in non-traditional pre-kindergarten programs have a greater ability to understand the thoughts and feelings underlying their child’s behavior, they can accurately discern their child’s needs and wants, and they can view the world from their child’s perspective (Luyten et al., 2018). This was the expected outcome of this study. This expectation stems from the research that has shown that parental involvement leads to higher levels of reflective functioning, as parents learn about the unique characteristics of their children through active engagement in their learning experiences (Gordo et al., 2020). Children whose parents are involved in their early childhood experiences
achieve higher levels of academic success and have higher levels of social-emotional competence (Breiner et al., 2016). In general, parental involvement leads to more positive outcomes for children (Gol-Guven, 2018; Toldson & Lemmons, 2013). As parents engage with their children in the nontraditional early learning programs through active participation, it was expected that their scores would be higher than parents who are not actively engaged in their child’s learning.

The results of this study align with Bowlby’s attachment theory, which was identified as the primary theoretical foundation of this study. Bowlby’s attachment theory acknowledges the significance of relationships between parents and their children and the influence that parents have on their children’s development (O’Connor et al., 2013). Attachment theory espouses that children who experience loving and nurturing relationships with their parents and other primary caregivers will develop strong, secure attachments (Matias et al., 2014). These secure attachments lead to children developing social-emotional competence and a strong sense of self-worth (Lai & Carr, 2018).

Parents who demonstrate higher levels of reflective functioning by having the ability to recognize the needs and wants of their children and understand their children’s mental states, including their thoughts, feelings, and desires, are more likely to develop secure attachments with their children (Nijssens et al., 2020). These secure attachments are essential for the development of social-emotional competence, which is an important facet of kindergarten readiness (Miller & Kehl, 2019). The results of this study indicate that the parents of children enrolled in nontraditional pre-kindergarten programs have higher levels of parental reflective functioning, which correlates with the constructs of attachment theory (Luyten et al., 2018).
The results of this study also align with the literature as the findings agree with researchers who have examined parental reflective functioning. Although there is a dearth of research regarding parental reflective functioning, the literature that is currently available outlines the relationship between parental involvement and attachment, children’s social-emotional development, and parental reflective functioning (Luyten et al., 2018). In reviewing the literature on parental involvement, many researchers have espoused that parental involvement leads to positive outcomes for children in all domains of development. Specifically, research has indicated that parental involvement in children’s education in the early years has been positively related to higher levels of social-emotional competence (Toldson & Lemmons, 2013). Children who are socially and emotionally competent demonstrate skills such as sharing, cooperating, and using words to resolve issues (Breiner et al., 2016). Additionally, social-emotional competence is essential for kindergarten readiness (Sharkins et al., 2017).

As parents engage in positive interactions with their children, while responding to their children’s needs promptly and appropriately, the children are more likely to be able to regulate their emotions effectively and consider the perspective of others (Breiner et al., 2016). As parents actively engage in their child’s early learning experiences, as in a non-traditional pre-kindergarten setting, they get to know their children on a deeper level, form stronger attachments with their children, and have a greater capacity to respond appropriately to their child’s needs (Nijssens et al., 2020). The non-traditional pre-kindergarten programs that were chosen for this study, Head Start and a grant-funded program in the state of Maryland, utilize a two-generation approach which emphasizes the education and support for families as well as the children (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016). The two-generation approach is designed to improve children’s experiences in the two primary facets of their lives: home and school (Gershoff et al., 2016).
The idea behind this concept is that child-focused outcomes would be more positive if improvements were made in their lives both at home and school rather than just focusing on one aspect alone (Gershoff et al., 2016). Head Start was founded on the two-generation concept with dual goals to directly affect children’s lives through high-quality preschool experiences and indirectly by improving parenting knowledge and skills (Harding et al., 2017). Head Start regulations require parents to be included in all aspects of the program and parents are engaged as equal partners in their child’s learning and development (Gershoff et al., 2016). Additionally, programs designed to enhance parenting skills, knowledge, and understanding of their child’s development are required by Head Start regulations (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016). The other non-traditional program that served as a research site for this study based its program on the principles of Head Start by also utilizing this two-generation approach. As evidenced by the results of this dissertation, it can be surmised that this approach enhances parental reflective functioning (Gordo et al., 2020).

A thorough review of the literature on parental reflective functioning revealed a universal belief that parents who have high levels of reflective functioning abilities have children who display higher levels of social-emotional competence. However, the results of two recent studies offered a different perspective. Instead of focusing solely on the impact of parental reflective functioning on children’s development, these researchers explored the impact of children’s innate features on parental reflective functioning (Yatiz et al., 2020; Nijssens et al., 2020). These studies looked specifically at children’s temperament and the social-emotional competence of children who displayed difficult or challenging behavior. In the literature, difficult behavior is defined as negative affectivity displayed by the child, behavior problems, and social maladjustment (Yatiz et al., 2020). Innate features of children, such as their temperaments, were
found to influence parent-child interactions including parental reflective functioning (Nijssens et al., 2020; Yatiz et al., 2020). Temperament is comprised of several characteristics such as adaptability, intensity, reactivity, and approachability (Yatiz et al., 2020). Researchers agree that temperament cannot be changed; however, parents can nurture their child’s development by adapting to their child’s temperament style (Yatiz et al., 2020). These studies found that children who have deficits in social-emotional development, due to their temperament, are more challenging (Nijssens et al., 2020). This challenging behavior leads to more parental attachment insecurity, which results in lower levels of parental reflective functioning and a reduced ability to adapt to their child’s temperament (Nijssens et al., 2020; Yatiz et al., 2020).

This research study did not consider any child features such as temperament or innate behaviors. This study focused solely on the responses of the parents as they completed the PRFQ. In consideration of the aforementioned studies, this should be considered when interpreting the results.

**Research Question Two**

**RQ2: Is there a difference between parenting practices of pre-kindergarten students that are learning in a traditional setting and non-traditional setting?**

Regarding Research Question Two, the results of this study indicate that there is no statistically significant difference between parenting practices of parents whose children are enrolled in a traditional or non-traditional early learning setting. Welch’s ANOVA was used to analyze the data for Research Question Two and the results showed a significance of .740. With the alpha level set at $p < .025$, the result was not significant, thus indicating a failure to reject the null hypothesis.
To address Research Question Two, the participants who completed the PRFQ also completed the KEPS in electronic format. This instrument was comprised of 28 multiple choice questions and it was designed to assess parenting practices related to children’s social-emotional development (Winter et al., 2012). Parenting practices that were measured by this instrument include the development of positive relationships, encouraging desirable behavior, creating a safe and engaging environment, and establishing realistic expectations (Winter et al., 2012). The results of the study revealed a mean score of 73.16 for parents whose children are enrolled in non-traditional pre-kindergarten settings and a mean score of 72.83 for parents with children enrolled in traditional pre-kindergarten settings. Additionally, the effect size as measured by Eta-squared was .001, which indicates a small effect size.

Though the data analysis revealed no statistically significant difference between the independent variables, the mean score indicates a slightly higher score for parents with children enrolled in non-traditional pre-kindergarten programs. As parental involvement is linked to effective parenting practices, which impacts children’s social-emotional development, it was expected that parents with children learning in non-traditional settings would receive a higher score on this instrument (Backen-Grondahl & Naerde, 2015).

In examining the results of this study from a theoretical perspective, Bandura’s social learning theory should be explored. Bandura posited that a significant amount of children’s learning takes place in a social environment, and children learn skills, beliefs, attitudes, and social rules by observing others (Bandura, 1988). Regarding social-emotional development, children learn essential problem-solving strategies and acquire skills for managing their emotions by observing others, particularly their parents and other primary caregivers (Sanders, 2019). As parents engage with their children in the learning process, as with those in a non-traditional pre-
kindergarten program, it can be surmised that children are imitating the behaviors modeled by their parents (Froiland et al., 2012). However, it is essential to note that even though parents are actively engaged with their children, this does not conclude that they have the knowledge and skills to model appropriately for their children (O’Connor et al., 2013). As the results of this study would indicate, there is no significant indication that parents who are actively engaged with their child’s learning have stronger parenting practices.

The lack of statistical significance in this study does not align with the literature regarding parenting practices. Research has indicated that parenting practices are significantly correlated to children’s social-emotional development (Backen-Grondahl & Naerde, 2015). For the purposes of this study parenting practices include the behaviors that parents display, the approaches they use to manage their children’s behavior and facilitate their development, and the emphasis they place on promoting children’s success (Healy et al., 2015). Parents who display more positivity and help children manage their strong emotions have children who are able to respond to stressful situations in a more positive manner and display greater levels of social-emotional competence (Duch et al., 2019).

In addition to effective parenting practices, the results of this study would suggest that active parental engagement in their children’s learning does not necessarily strengthen parents’ knowledge. However, this conflicts with the literature, particularly regarding the framework of the two-generation approach of non-traditional pre-kindergarten programs. Parental knowledge refers to the facts, information, and skills that parents possess about their children’s development, growth, and learning (Breiner et al., 2016). Understanding of developmental milestones of typically developing children is a facet of parental knowledge (Healy et al., 2015). The Head Start campus and the grant-funded program that served as research sites for this study
offer resources and support to improve parent knowledge and education (Ansari et al., 2016). In addition to giving parents the opportunity to learn in the classroom as they observe the classroom teachers guide children’s behavior through positive, developmentally appropriate, and child-centered strategies, these non-traditional programs offer parents opportunities to engage in parenting classes and other programs designed to improve parenting skills (Harding et al., 2017). Parenting programs aimed at increasing parents’ knowledge and competence are effective and positively influence child outcomes (Anthony et al., 2014). However, the lack of statistical significance revealed by this study does not support this assertion.

When considering the results of this study, it is essential to examine the unique challenges that pre-kindergarten programs were presented with as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the traditional pre-kindergarten programs that participated in this study remained open to serve children and families in an in-person capacity, the non-traditional programs provided instruction and early learning activities in a virtual format. Nationwide, the COVID-19 pandemic forced pre-kindergarten programs to either shut down entirely or switch to a virtual format (Garbe et al., 2020). Teachers and parents were not prepared for these sudden changes and had to adapt very quickly to constantly changing circumstances (Szente, 2020).

Although the traditional programs remained open to care for and educate children, state licensing regulations prohibited parents from entering the pre-kindergarten facilities. Though parental involvement in traditional pre-kindergarten programs is already somewhat limited due to the nature of these programs, the pandemic likely decreased the level of involvement due to the parents’ inability to physically enter the facilities. When examining the results of this research study, it must be acknowledged that scores of parents with children enrolled in
traditional pre-kindergarten programs may have been influenced by these abnormal circumstances.

Parents with children enrolled in the non-traditional pre-kindergarten programs were also affected by the pandemic. These programs were not open for children to be physically present and instead teachers presented a lesson and an activity in a virtual format each day. Parents were required to assist by logging their children into the virtual lesson and remaining with their children throughout the lesson. A significant component of the two-generation approach is for teachers to model effective behavior guidance strategies for parents as they seek to strengthen their parenting practices (Harding et al., 2017). Additionally, parents engaging in classroom activities have the opportunity to observe other parents as they interact with their children. As parents and children were not physically present in classrooms, there were limited opportunities for teachers to model strategies for behavior guidance or for parents to observe other parents. Therefore, this could have had an impact on the results of the KEPS instrument as completed by the parents with children in non-traditional pre-kindergarten programs.

**Implications**

As parental reflective functioning has not been widely researched, the results of this study are significant and will contribute to the knowledge of parental reflective functioning as it relates to children’s social-emotional development. Parental reflective functioning and effective parenting practices for supporting the social-emotional development of children has a profound effect on children’s ability to achieve academic and long-term personal success (Peterson et al., 2018; Rostad & Whitacre, 2016; Sanders, 2019). As this dissertation revealed stronger reflective functioning abilities of parents whose children are enrolled in a non-traditional pre-kindergarten
program, this would suggest that the two-generation approach to supporting and educating families is effective at promoting reflective functioning skills.

However, the scores on the KEPS instrument of this group were only slightly higher than those with children in traditional programs with no statistical significance found. This would indicate a possible lack in knowledge of effective parenting practices as related to children’s social emotional development. As the Head Start program and the grant-funded program are committed to strengthening parenting skills through their two-generation approach, this study has implications for these programs. To fully support children’s social-emotional development, parents must be knowledgeable about child development and learn strategies for supporting their child’s social-emotional development (Breiner et al., 2016). These non-traditional programs can utilize this data to develop additional initiatives aimed at strengthening parenting practices. This could include parenting classes targeting specific areas, professional development for teachers to ensure that they are modeling the most effective strategies, and identifying additional ways to include the parents in their child’s learning and development.

In consideration of the importance of social-emotional development, especially as it relates to kindergarten readiness, all early childhood programs should promote the social-emotional development of children. As indicated by this study, parents with children enrolled in traditional programs displayed lower reflective functioning scores and slightly lower scores on parenting practices. This has implications for all early childhood programs as they could utilize this data to strengthen their parent involvement initiatives. By the nature of these programs, which provide care and education for children in the parents’ absence, it is not realistic to expect parents to remain onsite and actively engage in their child’s learning. However, the results of
this study indicate the need for teachers and administrators of traditional programs to implement additional initiatives aimed at involving all parents to a greater extent.

Overall, this study contributes to the existing literature by providing additional data to reinforce the effectiveness of parental involvement as it relates to children’s social-emotional development. As early learning programs involve, support, and educate parents, their reflective functioning and parenting practices will improve, thereby greatly contributing to positive social-emotional outcomes for children.

**Limitations**

According to Gall et al. (2007), if a result of a study did not align with a researcher’s prediction, possible weaknesses in the methodology should be explored. The sample size of this study was 100, which was indicated as an optimal sample size by Gall et al. (2007). Additionally, the two groups of 50 participants each were equal in size. Though this study met the targeted number for sample size, this study had the potential for higher levels of validity if the sample size had been larger.

Originally, one research site was identified as a non-traditional pre-kindergarten program. However, due to low numbers of enrollment, the sample size of 50 was not able to be met, which created a threat to validity. To mitigate this threat, the researcher received approval to expand the study to include a Head Start program. As both programs offer a two-generational approach to children’s education by providing education and support for parents and children equally, expanding the research enhanced the data collected and contributed to the findings.

Another identified limitation was regarding the Knowledge of Effective Parenting Scale (KEPS) instrument. A thorough review of the literature revealed a lack of available instruments to measure parenting practices. The KEPS instrument was selected; however, it was determined
that this instrument did not completely align with the original research question, resulting in an additional threat to validity. To address this, the research question was modified, and an additional research question was added to strengthen the study.

Additionally, as parenting practices cover a broad range of skills and knowledge and are multi-faceted, it is difficult to identify a comprehensive way to measure this concept (Duch et al., 2019). The KEPS instrument, though it was found to be valid and reliable, was limited in its ability to capture the essence of parenting practices (Winter et al., 2012). The researcher posits that the limitations of this instrument could explain the lack of statistical significance for the research question related to parenting practices.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study focused on parental reflective functioning and parenting practices of parents with children enrolled in nontraditional or traditional early learning programs with an emphasis on social-emotional development of children. Social-emotional development is critical to children’s long-term achievement and success and parents’ preeminent source for facilitating children’s social and emotional development (Sharkins et al., 2017). To further contribute to the knowledge of these topics, future research is recommended in the following areas:

1. This study included grandparents, aunts, uncles, and others who identified themselves as primary caregivers. Future research should be limited to just mothers and fathers to examine further the maternal and paternal attachment factors as related to parental reflective functioning and parenting practices.

2. As many children today are raised by grandparents or other family members, future studies should specifically examine parental reflective functioning and parenting practices of primary caregivers that are not mothers or fathers. This research could reveal
the need for more support for these additional primary caregivers by determining gaps in their reflective functioning abilities or parenting practices.

3. The sample size for this study included parents and primary caregivers across a wide range of diverse backgrounds. Future research should explore the effects of socioeconomic status on parental reflective functioning and parenting practices. Additional research should also look at parent education levels to further contribute to the body of knowledge on these two aspects as related to parenting.

4. A qualitative study that captures parents’ perceptions of their children’s social-emotional development as related to parental reflective functioning would also be recommended to further advance the knowledge of this field.

5. This study should be replicated using a larger sample size and include other programs that would be considered nontraditional due to their two-generational approaches to promoting positive outcomes for children and families.

6. Future studies should also examine the social-emotional kindergarten readiness of children enrolled in a traditional or non-traditional pre-kindergarten program to further explore the impact of parental engagement and involvement on children’s development.
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APPENDIX A

Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire

Removed to comply with copyright.


https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0176218
APPENDIX B

The Knowledge of Effective Parenting Scale

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Dear Stacey Park, D Mattson:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46: 101(b):

Category 2.(i). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording). The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office