PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' LIVED EXPERIENCES EMBRACING CHALLENGES IN

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR KINDERGARTEN:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Rhodora A. Alonzo

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology was to describe pre-school teachers' lived experiences embracing challenges in preparing students for kindergarten at a public-school district in Mid-Atlantic State. The theory that guides this study was Vygotsky's sociocultural theory keying in on the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which represents the amount of learning possible by a student, given the proper instructional conditions. The research questions include, "What do pre-school teachers perceive as challenges to preparing students for kindergarten?" "What are teachers' perceptions about the importance of alignment between the pre-school and kindergarten programs?" "What are markers of pre-school students that demonstrate kindergarten readiness?" and "What do teachers perceive as ways to improve the readiness of their students for kindergarten?" The data collection strategies included interviews, and series of focus group discussions. This sequence allowed me to collect information in a progressive way that resulted in multiple opportunities to gain valuable insight into the participants' experiences. Moustakas' phenomenological reduction in transcendental phenomenology was employed for data analysis.

Keywords: kindergarten readiness, preparing, challenges, experiences, alignment

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to God, my fortress, my help, and my guidance from whom all great things flow!

I dedicate this to my children, Nico and Lian, who inspired me and believed that I could finish this journey.

To Ed, who will always have a special place in my heart as he rests in God's loving hands.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

First, I honor our Lord Jesus Christ that I have completed my doctoral degree by His grace.

Thank you to my loving children, Nico and Lian. Having your love, support, and encouragement truly means so much to me. I hope to inspire you with my hard work and commitment to this journey that anything is possible with prayers, perseverance, and God's grace.

Thank you to my family back in the Philippines, who constantly inspire me to overcome obstacles through faith and prayers.

Thank you, Susan, for your continuous support throughout this journey in many ways.

To Dr. Vacchi, I am forever grateful for your shared wisdom, guidance, and support in every step of my dissertation journey. You are the best!

Thank you, Dr. Puga! You were one of my favorite professors, and your gentle spirit has encouraged me to keep going. Also, the opportunity to be a part of my committee means a lot to me.

I wanted to thank my ECC administrators, especially Ms. Diedra and Ms. Cindy, for all the support and encouragement. There were quite a few bumps in this journey, but you all have always been around to lift me.

To my cohort, I appreciate the exchange of ideas, frustrations and challenges, and joy. I have learned so much in this group, and I will forever be grateful.

Finally, to my participants, for your relevant contributions to this research. I could not have done it without you. You have shared with me your valuable time and experiences that completed this study.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE)

Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA)

Race to the Top (RTTT)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTTT-ELC)

Ready for Kindergarten (R4K)

Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA)

Early Childhood Education (ECE)

Early Childhood Center (ECC)

Early Learning Assessment (ELA)

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

Family and Children Early Education Service (FACES)

English Language Learners (ELL)

Individualized Educational Plan

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Restrictive Educational Placements (REP)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The main goal of early childhood education was to prepare students for kindergarten. Kindergarten readiness often refers to the scope of knowledge, skills, and behaviors children have acquired before kindergarten (Ohle & Harvey, 2019). A plethora of research has been conducted about kindergarten readiness. Nevertheless, studies related to the challenges of teachers on the lack of students' kindergarten readiness remain few (Gan et al., 2016). Those from leading organizations on early childhood education reiterate that kindergarten readiness is not only the knowledge and skills of children but also the readiness of schools, educators, caregivers, and communities who are prepared to help all children thrive (Regenstein et al., 2018). This phenomenology described the pre-school teachers' experiences embracing challenges in preparing students for kindergarten at a public-school district in Mid-Atlantic State. The purpose of this study was to give pre-school teachers with more than two years of experience the opportunity to share the challenges in their practice associated with preparing students for kindergarten. This chapter comprises the overview, research background with historical, social, and theoretical, the researcher's situation, problem statement, purpose statement, and significance of the study. In addition, research questions, the definition of terms, and the summary are also encompassed.

Background

Students that enroll in kindergarten lacking the readiness skills identified by administering a readiness assessment often struggle throughout the school year (Holloway et al., 2017). Therefore, placing additional constraints on kindergarten teachers ensures students meet the required outcomes at the end of the school year (Holloway et al., 2017). The lack of readiness

means that children are still struggling to focus attention, follow instructions, manage emotions, and maintain positive relationships with adults and classmates (Bettencourt et al., 2018). Also, the children who enter kindergarten with low academic skills (Le et al., 2019) is another indicator of lack of readiness. A synopsis of the historical, social, and theoretical background was intended to establish the research problem's framework.

Historical Background

In the 1960s, the field of early childhood education was determined by a maturationist theory of development, which meant that the children's development was defined by their genetic formation (Saracho, 2015). According to Hunt (1969), the maturationist theory is the biological development that emerges spontaneously in predictable, sequential phases over time. Accordingly, the maturationist theory indicates that young children will obtain knowledge naturally and instinctively as they physically develop and interact with their environment, which is the constructivist theory (Saracho, 2015). Such a concept of readiness triggered the indices of development used to match instruction to the children's developmental level, that is, to create developmentally appropriate programs (Saracho, 2015).

Program evaluation outcomes became necessary for the experimental programs of the early 1960s, including the Head Start program (Saracho, 2015). The experimental programs and Head Start were intended to offer children with experiences that would raise their levels of intelligence upon school entry and, thus, improve their opportunities to succeed in school (Spodek, 1973). In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) released the A Nation at Risk report, identifying a crisis in American education and highlighting the perceived failures of the American educational system (Ruff, 2019). The report sparked a new "standards-based reform movement" (Carnoy & Loeb, 2002) to improve student achievement,

culminating in the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as No Child Left Behind ([NCLB]; Duke et al., 2003). Passage of The No Child Left Behind Act (2002) ushered in an accountability movement in the United States, spanning the preschool years through high school graduation, with goals that included school readiness (DellaMattera, 2010). With Race to the Top (RTTT) initiatives beginning in 2010, states responded to additional early childhood priorities through a series of federal funding competitions (Hustedt et al., 2018). Under RTTT, state applicants competed for federal funds based on their demonstrated willingness to adopt education policies (Howell & Magazinnik, 2017). RTTT retained a very clear sense for the specific kinds of policies that state and local governments ought to enact; and offered very little leeway in the choice of policies that states could adopt if they hoped to win (Howell & Magazinnik, 2017).

Later, the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTTT-ELC) offered a specific focus on improving early childhood systems (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). Among the key priorities for reform was measuring outcomes and progress, including assessment of kindergarten readiness (Hustedt et al., 2018). According to Regenstein et al. (2018), young children are continually developing and acquiring new skills, and the rate at which early learners acquire new concepts and skills varies significantly among children. Head Start programs have proven to affect preparing students for kindergarten positively; however, students in urban schools have continued to perform lower than their counterparts (Jenkin et al., 2016). Moreover, children come from different races, cultures, and socio-economic statuses (Miller et al., 2016), factors for children's developmental pacing.

Furthermore, specific studies on vertical alignment between pre-k and kindergarten have been conducted. Alignment can involve high-level policies, local policies, curricula, outreach,

teaching practices, and many other factors operating across spheres of influence (Vitiello et al., 2019). Vitiello et al. (2019) examine the areas of alignment and misalignment in the proximal characteristics of pre-k and kindergarten teachers and classroom that affects children's daily school experiences. Growing evidence suggests a misalignment between proximal characteristics of pre-k and kindergarten may be one factor contributing to the pattern of fade out in the benefits of pre-k (p. 2). These findings posed a challenge for kindergarten teachers on how to close the gaps of misalignment.

Additionally, the lack of increased transition activities is remarkable, given the consistent and growing evidence that these transition practices are positively associated with children's success in kindergarten (Purtell, 2019). Cook et al. (2019) stated, "Our work shed light on how preschools and elementary schools engage in practices to support children's transition to kindergarten, with a focus on knowledge transfer, alignment, and outreach to families." One surprising finding was the lack of knowledge kindergarten teachers and elementary school administrators had about their students' pre-school experiences (Purtell et al., 2019). Despite the unprecedented interest and investment in early education, we have little empirical evidence on whether children entering kindergarten in recent years have essential math, literacy, and behavioral skills at school entry than they did in the past (Bassok & Latham, 2017).

Social Background

While kindergarten teachers likely experience any of the same classroom demands as teachers in other grades, the kindergarten teaching environment is unique (Lambert et al., 2019). Kindergarten teachers are often working with children who are in very early cognitive, social, physical, and emotional developmental stages (Lambert et al., 2019). Kindergarten readiness took on new meaning, placing added pressures on teachers to teach literacy and numeracy skills

to children still struggling to focus attention, follow instructions, manage emotions, and maintain positive relationships with adults and classmates (Bettencourt et al., 2018). Indeed, teachers comment that students entering kindergarten struggling to meet academic standards in math or literacy are far less challenging for them to teach than the students who lack the social-behavioral skills needed to learn (Loewenberg, 2016). Mollborn's (2016) study on young children and developmental ecology stressed the importance of three proximal influences on children's cognitive preparedness for school: (1) social psychological factors (interpersonal interactions), (2) experiential factors (experiences other than family relationships), and (3) personal factors (child attributes). Developmental ecology is defined as interrelated features of a child's proximal social environment that are distinct from but influence children's social interactions and individual characteristics (Mollborn, 2016). Developmental ecology provides a setting for a child's characteristics, perceptions, and interpersonal interactions with family members, teachers, and peers; it represents a major pathway through which demographic factors shape school readiness (Mollborn, 2016).

Theoretical Background

Constructivism is a theory of knowledge that claims that humans generate knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their experiences and their thoughts (Saracho, 2015). In Hunt's (1961) book, *Intelligence and experience*, the systematic analysis of the evidence led to the conclusion that experiences in early childhood education programs can have an important after-effect on the children's development (Saracho, 2015).

Constructivism, which highlights that children actively construct their experience and knowledge through the environment, has been advocated worldwide (Porcaro, 2011; Yilmaz, 2008). In the latest version of the curriculum framework for kindergartens in Singapore

(Ministry of Education [MOE], 2012), beliefs and principles adopted from constructivist pedagogy have been highlighted. For example, children construct knowledge through quality interactions and actively build on prior experiences to gain a new understanding (Yin et al., 2020). There were six principles proposed to enhance kindergarten's teaching quality: "an integrated approach to learning, teachers as facilitators of learning, engaging children in learning through purposeful play, authentic learning through quality interactions, children as constructors of knowledge, and holistic development" (MOE, 2012). Rooted in constructivism, these six principles posed a high standard for kindergarten teachers' pedagogical practices.

Consequently, pre-school teachers were compelled to align their instructional practices with these principles to prepare students for kindergarten. In terms of the Chinese literacy curriculum, the six constructivism-based principles proposed are also re-iterated in the Chinese language framework (MOE, 2014). Also, Ogunyemi & Ragpot's (2016) study on early childhood education in Nigeria and South Africa conceptualizes constructivism with reference to early childhood education. The study provided an overview of the challenges and prospects of constructivist early childhood curricula in Nigeria and South Africa (Ogunyemi & Ragpot, 2016).

Situation to Self

I was interested in conducting this study since I became a school administrator in our school district's most prominent early childhood center. I was charged to oversee our school student performance data on top of other school-related responsibilities. I was in my sixth year as an educational leader. At the start of every school year, I conducted a data review and facilitated data analysis activities with the staff members to examine our students' strengths and weaknesses. The school district used Ready for Kindergarten (R4K) tools to measure student

performance, specifically, the Early Learning Assessment (ELA) and the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA). ELA is a formative assessment for children ages 36 to 72 months measuring the learning progress of young children in seven domains of learning -social foundations, language/literacy, mathematics, physical well-being, and motor development, science, social studies, and the fine arts (Ready at Five, 2019). KRA assesses children entering kindergarten, measuring school readiness in four domains -- social foundations, language/literacy, mathematics, physical well-being, and motor development (Ready at Five, 2019). I find it interesting that there was a disconnect between our school data based on ELA and the KRA data over the years. Maryland has been the pioneer in using KRA as a system-wide measurement of children's strengths and needs when they enter kindergarten (Regenstein et al., 2018).

The majority of our pre-school students meet the state target on ELA; however, our students who moved to our feeder elementary schools have been performing below grade level based on the KRA data. In school years 2017-18 and 2018-19, KRA was based on sample administration. In sample administration, KRA is administered to an identified random sample of students in each classroom (Ready at Five, 2019), making it challenging to determine the percentage of our tested students. For the school year 2019-20, the school district opted for census administration, which means that all our students were assessed for KRA. This decision was essential to help us track our students' performance and figure out the barriers that impede our students' performance at grade level.

I conducted vertical alignment sessions in the school year 2017-18 and 2018-19, where kindergarten teachers from our feeder schools were invited to have a dialogue with our pre-school teachers. The goal was to address the achievement gaps through meaningful conversation, resulting in a clear understanding of some barriers to students' preparedness for kindergarten.

Nevertheless, some of these barriers are beyond the classroom setting, making it more difficult for preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers.

As an educational leader with Christian values, I conducted this study with ontological assumptions related to the nature of reality and its characteristics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers tend to embrace multiple realities in ontological assumptions, as do the individuals studied when conducting qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Having a good grasp of the facts, I hoped to promote more research focused on pre-school teachers' challenges and understand the different experiences in their practice.

The epistemological assumption in which subjective evidence is assembled based on individual views (Creswell & Poth, 2018) does not coincide with embracing realities. My epistemological premise of the participants' account of the phenomenon was relative to my perception of the participants' description of their experiences based on my personal interpretation. In the axiological assumption, the researcher brings values to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which does not compliment the data analysis method of this research, precisely the bracketing approach. Consequently, my axiological assumption guided me throughout the research process to ensure that I set aside my personal experiences of the phenomenon and concentrated on participants' accounts of their experiences.

The paradigm I employed in this study was social constructivism, where individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work and develop subjective meanings of their experiences directed toward certain objects or things (Creswell &Poth, 2018). I used open-ended questions to delve into the participants' perspectives on the situation shaped by their historical and social experiences.

Problem Statement

The primary goal of early childhood education was to prepare students for kindergarten. Nevertheless, as the focus of kindergarten has become more academics, expectations of what students should come to school already knowing have increased, academic centers have replaced developmental centers, and workbooks have replaced hands-on activities with manipulatives (Bassok et al., 2016). These expectations often represent the foundational skills that students need to be successful throughout schooling. (Schachter, Strang, & Piasta, 2017; 2019). The exact names of domains may vary, but they generally include concepts like language and literacy, cognition, general knowledge (including early science and mathematics concepts), approaches to learning, physical well-being, and social and emotional development (Shepard et al.,1998; Regenstein et al. 2018).

The entry into kindergarten is a key transition that children experience and has lasting consequences for their academic development (Purtell et al., 2019). Many schools have implemented transition practices designed to foster positive development during this time (Purtell et al., 2019). Research has documented that the transition to kindergarten is challenging for many children; for some students, the transition to kindergarten indicates the first formal schooling (Cook & Coley, 2017). The problem was many pre-school students in the Mid-Atlantic state are underprepared as they transition to kindergarten. Many children struggle during the transition, as they experience dramatic shifts in both environment experiences and expectations (Mashburn et al., 2018). Pre-school teachers have been facing challenges in many forms as they prepare students for kindergarten. Studies related to the challenges of teachers on the lack of kindergarten readiness remain few (Jenkins et al., 2016). This qualitative transcendental phenomenological design described the pre-school teachers' experiences

embracing the challenges in preparing students for kindergarten at a public-school district in the Mid-Atlantic state.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology was to describe pre-school teachers' experiences embracing challenges in preparing students for kindergarten at a public-school district in the Mid-Atlantic state. As not all students demonstrate readiness for kindergarten, gathering pre-school teachers' experiences preparing students for kindergarten helped expand more studies related to the teachers' challenges. Preparing students means that children achieve essential readiness on the ELA and KRA assessments to follow instructions, manage emotions, and maintain positive relationships with adults and classmates (Bettencourt et al., 2018). The theory that guided this study was constructivism by Vygotsky's theory on the zone of proximal development (ZPD). According to Puntambekar & Hubscher (2005), ZPD represents the amount of learning possible by a student given the proper instructional conditions. In ZPD, a teacher and learner work together on a task that the learner could not perform independently because of the difficulty level (Gredler, 2012).

Significance of the Study

Describing the pre-school teachers' experiences embracing the challenges in preparing students for kindergarten readiness was significant to the stakeholders who will ultimately support students in their learning and teachers' practice.

Theoretical Significance

Constructivism is a psychological and philosophical perspective contending that individual forms or constructs much of what they learn and understand (O'Donnell, 2012).

Constructivism is a theory of knowledge that claims that humans generate knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their experiences and their thoughts (Saracho, 2015). Constant exposure to learning opportunities for meaningful experiences was critical to their future learning readiness. One significant outcome of advocacies and research efforts in early childhood care, development, and education is the popularity of 'constructivist early childhood education' (Ogunyemi & Ragpot, 2016;2015). The application of the principles of constructivism in the theory and practice of children's education and care, especially during their formative years (Ogunyemi & Ragpot, 2016;2015), is crucial for a child's development. Vygotsky considered the social environment as critical for learning and thought that social interactions transformed learning experiences (Schunk, 2016). Learners bring their understanding to social interactions and construct meanings by integrating those understandings with their experiences in the context (Schunk, 2016). Providing children with developmentally appropriate learning experiences in early childhood education to build knowledge will help them prepare for kindergarten. Children learn best with experiential learning in developing their foundational skills, behavior, and knowledge in math, literacy, physical, and social-emotional domains.

Empirical Significance

According to Lambert et al. (2019), "When teachers have a more positive experience with their jobs and are less stressed, they are much more effective at supporting the growth and development of young children." The importance of this study was crucial for the educational community, students, and their families because it described the challenges of the pre-school teachers that will promote additional research to address the challenges. Currently, it is not clear whether all Early Childhood Education (ECE) and K-12 systems are similarly aligned or whether

there are distinct categories of alignment (or misalignment) (Franko et al., 2018). A specific

component of vertical continuity includes curriculum, standards, classroom factors, and

pedagogy (Franko et al., 2018). To gain a deeper understanding of how kindergarten is enacted

in the evolving curricular landscape, a conceptual framework for analyzing kindergarten

education is required that engages a comprehensive and realistic account of teaching and

learning in the early years (Pyle & Luce-Kapler, 2014). Pre-school teachers' challenges in

preparing students for kindergarten must be considered in decision-making about policies and

procedures in early learning education. The alignment in the curriculum, classroom environment,

transition practices, and assessment should be encompassed by the policymakers to preserve

early childhood education and kindergarten programs' proximal characteristics.

Practical Significance

The study results were shared with the people who make policies and decisions at the

school district and state level, particularly in early childhood to primary education, to advocate

for a shift in setting expectations, procedures, guidelines, and programs. Policy reforms further

constrain teachers in increasingly regulated kindergarten and early elementary classrooms

(Heimer & Klefstad, 2015). Probing this phenomenon was vital in acquiring a clear

understanding of what support the pre-school teachers need in improving their practice, thus

strengthening their resiliency. Within education, resilience as a capacity includes a teacher's

ability to utilize personal and contextual resources to problem-solve challenges (McKay &

Barton, 2018). A teachers' resiliency in coping with the challenges is essential in maintaining

their commitment to the profession.

Research Questions

The research questions in this study explored pre-school teachers' experiences embracing challenges in preparing students for kindergarten.

Central Research Question

What do pre-school teachers perceive as challenges in preparing students for kindergarten?

Kindergarten marks a transition point for children as they move from early learning and development settings to the K–12 system (Goldstein et al., 2017). How children fare during the kindergarten transition has critical implications for subsequent academic achievement and life-long consequences (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2018). Hence, given the impact of lack of kindergarten readiness on the teachers, it is essential to ask this question to stage awareness. The reality of lived experience (van Manen, 2015) is there for us to know, understand, and make sense of the challenges that the pre-school teachers embrace in preparing students for kindergarten.

Sub Question One

What are teachers' perceptions about the importance of alignment between the pre-school and kindergarten programs?

The current descriptive studies examine areas of alignment and misalignment in the proximal characteristics of pre-k and kindergarten teachers and classrooms that affect children's daily school experiences (Vitiello et al., 2019). Pre-school teachers' perceptions about the importance of alignment between the pre-school and kindergarten programs determined the intentionality of their teaching practice that impacted how well they prepare their students for kindergarten.

Sub Question Two

What are markers of pre-school students that demonstrate kindergarten readiness?

It is essential to obtain an insight into the child's socio-emotional and behavioral adaptations (which in part determine their degree of school readiness) in relation to their early literacy, language comprehension, numeracy, and mathematical ability (Hamerslag et al., 2018). Goldstein et al. (2017), in their study on the predictive validity of kindergarten readiness judgments, found that children who entered with lower school readiness skills tended to maintain their relative disadvantage over time. Knowing the indicators of kindergarten readiness was crucial for pre-school teachers in preparing their students for kindergarten.

Sub Question Three

What do teachers perceive as ways to improve the readiness of their students for kindergarten?

Pre-school students' experiences before kindergarten are predictors of how they will perform when they enter kindergarten. Students that enroll in kindergarten lacking readiness skills, as determined by kindergarten readiness assessment, often struggle throughout the school year, therefore placing additional constraints on kindergarten teachers to ensure students meet the required outcomes at the end of the school year (Holloway et al., 2017). Thus, understanding how to better support the development of school readiness as children enter kindergarten is critical (Ferretti & Bub 2017).

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Definitions

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1. *Alignment* – Bi-directional information sharing about programming, curricula, standards, and assessments (Cook et al., 2019). The two directions refer to preschool and kindergarten programs.

2. *Census Administration* – The KRA is administered to all incoming kindergarteners assessing each student's knowledge, skills, and abilities (Ready at Five, 2019)

3. *Constructivism* – a psychological and philosophical perspective contending that individuals form or construct much of what they learn and understand (O'Donnell, 2012).

4. *Demonstrating Readiness* – a child, shows the foundational skills and behaviors that prepare them for curriculum based on the Maryland kindergarten standards (Ready at Five, 2019)

5. *Kindergarten Readiness* – a multidimensional theoretical construct that represents children's preparedness for participation in formal schooling (Hustedt et al., 2018).

6. *Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA)* – Maryland system-wide measurement of children's strengths and needs when they enter kindergarten (Ready at Five, 2019)

7. *Knowledge Transfer* – Information sharing about individual children (Cook et al., 2019) between the sending and receiving schools.

8. *Ontological* - issue relates to the nature of reality and its characteristics (Creswell, & Poth, 2018).

9. *Random Sample Administration* – KRA is administered to an identified random sample of students in each classroom (Ready at Five, 2019)

11. *Phenomenology* – describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

12. *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)*- the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygostky, 1978).

Summary

As identified in this study, the issue of pre-school teachers' challenges in preparing students for kindergarten at a public school district in the Mid-Atlantic state was underexplored. As determined in the existing studies, there was an abounding study on kindergarten readiness and transition practices. However, despite the much research related to kindergarten readiness, the problem was that many of the students entering kindergarten still lack the skills that will help them become successful in their learning, thus posed a dilemma for kindergarten teachers. The focus of this study was to give pre-school teachers with more than two years of experience the opportunity to share the challenges in their practice associated with the lack of students' kindergarten readiness.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology was to describe pre-school teachers'

experiences embracing challenges in preparing students for kindergarten at a public-school

district in the Mid-Atlantic state. Describing the experiences of the pre-school teachers'

challenges in preparing students for kindergarten was significant to the stakeholders; teachers,

students, education administrators, and the community, which ultimately will benefit students in

their learning and teachers in their practice.

This chapter presented a detailed review of the past and current research related to this

study and illustrated the challenges that pre-school teachers experience in preparing students for

kindergarten. This chapter begins with the theoretical framework, which encompasses

constructivism by Vygotsky. Following the theoretical framework was the consolidation of

related literature about kindergarten readiness in its broader description, including KRA,

academic skills, and social-emotional skills, essential in understanding pre-school teachers'

challenges. Subsequently, I examined the focus on the pre-school and kindergarten programs'

vertical alignment, encompassing the curriculum, learning environment, and the teaching and

learning processes. Pre-school experiences on kindergarten readiness with a description of the

public-school pre-k, inclusive early childhood centers, special education in the pre-school

setting, and the English Language Learners (ELL) in the pre-school setting were explored. The

transition practices between pre-school and kindergarten programs that framed the teachers'

challenges were studied.

Furthermore, kindergarten and pre-school teachers' experiences in their practice were

studied. Moreover, parents and family involvement in the pre-school setting with an exploration

of the Head Start program, immigrant family involvement highlighting the Latin American family involvement were reviewed. The final section summarized the related literature reviews that supported the purpose of this research and established the need for further study.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that guided this study was constructivism by Vygotsky, an educational theory that emphasizes hands-on, activity-based teaching and learning in which students develop their frames of thought (Keengwe et al., 2014). Similarly, constructivism requires structured learning experiences to challenge students' thinking so that they will be able to construct new knowledge (Schunk, 2016). Constructivist learning environments are intended to provide multiple paths for students to explore, with teachers performing the role of a guide, mentor, or facilitator (Keengwe et al., 2014).

Constructivist approaches rooted in the educational theories of Vygotsky are grounded in the belief that children construct knowledge through the experience of making meaningful connections between prior knowledge and interactions with real-world situations (Nie & Lau, 2010). Constructivist approaches are commonly touted in the literature as developmentally appropriate for younger learners, and thus, best practice in a kindergarten classroom (Geist & Baum, 2005). Nevertheless, in a kindergarten classroom, there is no single solution to the integration of academic learning and developmentally appropriate practice (Pyle & Luce-Kapler, 2014). Developmentally appropriate practices are instructional practices that support the growth and learning of students in their individual zone of proximal development (Kravtsova, 2009).

Explicitly relevant to this study is Vygotsky's theory of zone proximal development (ZPD). According to Puntambekar & Hubscher (2005), ZPD represents the amount of learning possible by a student given the proper instructional conditions. It is mostly a test of a student's

developmental readiness or intellectual level in a specific domain (Schunk, 2016). In Lindqvist's

play pedagogy (1995), which agrees with recent expansions of ZPD, the development of adult-

child cooperative play is made possible by creating a common fiction space in which both

children and adults are creatively engaged (Ferholt & Lecusay, 2009). She calls this space a

"Playworld." An example of Playworld is where adults and children work together to bring a

classic piece of literature to life through joint scripted and improvisational acting and the creation

of stage sets (Ferholt & Lecusay, 2009). Lindqvist refers to Vygotsky when stating that a child

plays to satisfy needs and motives. Thus, play is the source of development and creates a zone of

proximal development (Nilsson, 2009; 2010). The supporting role for teachers was determined to

be active, not passive, in supporting students in the ZPD (Kravtsova, 2009).

Teaching and learning processes within ZPD allow the students to handle their pacing of

the new information with previous learning and establish a better understanding of the matter at

hand, which is a manifestation of knowledge advancement. Hence, the experience one brings to a

learning situation can greatly influence the outcome (Schunk, 2016). Children bring a different

level of readiness as they enter kindergarten, and their pre-school learning experiences are good

predictors of how they will perform in kindergarten. Pre-schooling years are a timeline of growth

and expansion; the rich experiences stimulate children's cognitive and emotional pathways that

preschool programs offer (Brown & Jernigan, 2012). Interactions and experiences gained by

children in the early period have a remarkable impact on their brain development and help

children build a strong foundation for future learning (Glaser, 2014). Delays in developmental

tasks until children reach kindergarten cause deficiencies that are difficult to recover without

necessary interventions (Rimm-Kaufman, & Sandilos, 2017). The deficit results in an

achievement gap, which challenges teacher's instruction in kindergarten (Garcia &Weiss, 2015).

Necessarily, identifying students' skill deficits will help the teachers know how to intervene. Such deficit skills of pre-school students as they enter kindergarten could have emanated from lack of readiness.

Developmentally appropriate instructional strategies such as differentiated instructions, scaffolding, modeling, and repetitions are the basic strategies that would help students succeed in their learning. In ZPD, a teacher and a learner work together on a task that the learner could not perform independently because of the difficulty level (Gredler, 2012). If the students do not possess the skills to perform kindergarten tasks, it will add more challenges to the kindergarten teachers responsible for acquiring them.

As kindergarten teachers face the unique challenge of considering the spectrum of ability levels of entering kindergarten students (Ohle & Harvey, 2019), children bring different levels of skills, knowledge, and behavior as they enter kindergarten because of their experiences prior to kindergarten. It becomes a challenge for kindergarten teachers when there is a significant gap between students' performance versus kindergarten expectations.

The gap is represented by the misalignment of what is being taught in a preschool setting. The skills, behavior, and knowledge the children bring with them as they enter kindergarten are not proportional to kindergarten expectations. Kindergarten readiness and lack of readiness definition are relative to educators' perception with different lenses on what it means to be kindergarten ready. Often, the terms school readiness and kindergarten readiness are used interchangeably. Yet, the meanings may vary depending on one's lens (e.g., policymaker versus a teacher) or the intended purpose or use (Ohle & Harvey, 2019).

Additionally, the alignment and misalignment of preschool and kindergarten programs are essential factors in establishing the zone of proximal development. Considering children's

differences in adjustments, some transitions were smooth with no challenges; others were good with minor and resolvable challenges, whereas others were problematic with ongoing challenges (Jarrett, & Coba-Rodriguez, 2019). Yelverton and Mashburn (2018) have expanded the Developmental and Ecological Transition to Kindergarten model by developing a framework around the kindergarten transition that focuses on how child characteristics, settings characteristics, and system characteristics interact over time to support or thwart children's growth during the transition to school. The challenges that kindergarten students are experiencing resulted from the disconnect between the pre-school and kindergarten programs, which could lead to the short-term benefit of preschool education. Researchers and theorists have a focus on the transition to kindergarten and how current early education systems can promote long-term benefits for children (Mashburn et al., 2018). Specifically, there is a need for more empirical information on issues related to coordination and continuity across systems that could promote successful educational transitions (Stipek et al., 2017).

The key is to structure the learning environment such that students can effectively construct new knowledge and skills (Schuh, 2003). The alignment of structures in the learning environment between pre-school and kindergarten is crucial for students for the transfer of knowledge and skills. The arrangements do not have to be the same; the pre-school learning environment should be designed to prepare students to meet kindergarten readiness expectations. The learning environment is where the students will have the learning opportunity to explore and develop their foundational knowledge, skills, and behavior that are essentials not only in kindergarten but later in their educational journeys.

Related Literature

The literature review comprised the existing studies related to pre-school teachers' experiences embracing challenges in preparing students for kindergarten. Studies on kindergarten readiness, including a KRA description, academic skills, and social-emotional skills, were examined. Necessarily, I studied the vertical alignment of pre-school and kindergarten programs on curriculum, learning environment, and the teaching and learning processes to establish patterns of factors that impact pre-school teachers' challenges in their practice. Subsequently, the impact of pre-school experiences on kindergarten readiness was explored involving the Head Start program, public-school pre-k, inclusive early childhood centers, special education in the pre-school setting, and the ELL in the pre-school setting. Moreover, the transition practices between pre-school and kindergarten programs were reviewed, followed by descriptions of pre-school and kindergarten teachers' experiences in their practice. The final theme in the related literature review was the parent and family involvement exploring immigrant family involvement capturing the Latin American family involvement in early childhood education. A limited study on pre-school teachers' experiences embracing challenges in preparing students for kindergarten supported the significance of this study.

Kindergarten Readiness

The premise that "kindergarten is the new 1st grade" has been widely circulated by researchers, professional organizations, and the media (Strauss, 2016). Kindergarten readiness is one of the most critical parts of children's ability to begin their education and access the long-term benefits of educational success (Fitzpatrick, 2017). Justice et al. (2017) define kindergarten readiness as "a multidimensional, theoretical construct representing children's preparedness for participation in formal schooling, which more often than not corresponds to kindergarten

entrance in the twenty-first century." Readiness encompasses multiple domains of growth and development (Regenstein et al.,2018). The exact names of domains may vary, but they generally include concepts like language and literacy, cognition, general knowledge (including early science and mathematics concepts), approaches to learning, physical well-being, motor development, and social and emotional development (Shepard et al.,1998; Regenstein et al., 2018).

Although some states do not have a formal definition of kindergarten readiness, they all have a de facto definition of kindergarten readiness in their learning standards (Regenstein et al. 2018). "De facto" means how decision-making occurs in practice and how actors involved in the process perceive it (González, 2018). That is, all 50 states have learning standards that cover the pre-kindergarten years and are articulated to some degree by standards for kindergarten (Education Commission of the States 2014; Regenstein et al. 2018). State early learning standards generally take this into account by addressing a wide range of domains (Early Childhood Education Research Alliance 2013; Education Commission of the States 2014, Regenstein et al., 2018). These learning standards from both early learning and K–12 provide a guide to educators about what kindergarten readiness should look like (Regenstein et al., 2018).

Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA)

The students' readiness as they enter kindergarten varies on how readiness is measured by the different kindergarten programs across the nation. In public schools in Maryland, kindergarten eligibility is determined by age; however, not all five –year old students are equipped to face the challenges of formal schooling. Early gaps could be identified and closed (Schachter et al., 2019). Kindergarten screening tools such as state and federal policy-mandated Kindergarten Readiness Assessments (KRA) are one mechanism for identifying early gaps so

that teachers and schools can respond effectively (Schachter et al. 2019). KRAs, alternately referred to as Kindergarten Entry Assessments, are a central feature of early childhood assessment systems incentivized and funded by the Early Learning Challenge Grant (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). To date, at least 40 states are either developing or implementing a KRA (Center on Standards and Assessment Implementation, 2017). Although KRAs vary from state to state in their form, content, and administration (Ackerman, 2018; Weisenfeld, 2017), the assessment will occur in the fall as children begin their kindergarten year (Regenstein et al. 2018) to provide an important foundational understanding of kindergarten students' knowledge, skills, and behaviors from the outset of formal schooling (Goldstein & Flake, 2016; Pianta et al., 2007; Sabol & Pianta, 2017) in the domains of mathematics, language and literacy, social foundations and physical well-being and motor development (Ready at Five, 2019).

At the classroom or school level, KRAs can serve an important role in informing instruction and helping schools prepare to meet the needs of students on an individual and a group level (Schachter et al., 2019). There are two ways that KRA is administered per district mandate: The Census Administration, where all kindergarten students in the district are tested, and the Sample Administration, where about 12 percent of the kindergarten students are tested. Simultaneously, teachers and school leaders need ways to interpret and respond to classroom-level data in ways that can both advance the learning of those with the highest levels of pre-kindergarten preparation and accelerate the learning of those who bring less school preparation to the kindergarten classroom (Schachter et al. 2019). It is important to note that kindergarten students who are tested comprise typical peers and students with special needs. Testing

accommodations are provided according to the student's Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). Testing is administered in English, and there is no accommodation available for ELL students.

Academic Skills

Given the early emergence of academic disparities, researchers have begun to examine life experiences even earlier in children's development, seeking to identify characteristics that serve as risk or protective factors for later academic achievement (Edyburn etal., 2017). Children of all backgrounds - and especially those from low-income and disadvantaged homes - who attended high-quality early childhood programs at age 4 enterkindergarten more ready academically (Bailey et al., 2017). However, when considering explanations for variation in the immediate benefits (or drawbacks) of Early Childhood Education (ECE), a one-point discussion, is children's age of entry (Ansari et al., 2019). For example, in some studies, children who enter ECE programs by 2½ to 3 years of age and whoremain in ECE through age four display stronger academic skills (but weaker social behavior skills in the short term) as compared with children entering ECE at a later age or with nonattendees (Burchinal et al., 2016; Loeb et al., 2004; Puma et al., 2012).

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on academic skills development (Bassok et al., 2016; Hatch, 2002) aswell as a marked increase in the expectations of the academic skills that kindergarteners need to have to be considered ready for school (Brown & Lan, 2015). The growing emphasis onacademics at kindergarten has received a mixed reception from educators and researchers (Le et al., 2019). In Fayez et al. (2016), a study on teachers' beliefs of school readiness found thatboth the kindergarten and first-grade teachers rated basic academic knowledge as the most important dimension. On the one hand, research suggests that instruction focusing on advancedcontent can enhance student achievement (Engel et al., 2016).

On the other hand, critics are concerned that kindergartners may not be developmentally ready for advanced content traditionally taught at a higher grade and that a focus on academics may come at the expense of children's social-emotional development (Christakis, 2016).

Social-emotional Skills

Some researchers have suggested that socio-emotional and behavioral functioning are just as important, if not more critical, than academic skills in kindergarten and other educational settings (Fowler et al. 1991; McIntyre et al. 2006; Rimm-Kaufman et al. 2000, Welchons et al., 2017). Kinkead-Clark (2017), a qualitative study of 17 first grade teachers in the Caribbean Islands, found that social-emotional skills that included strong resilience, the ability to deal with stress, and self-regulation were recognized. These are traits that help children transition from a pre-school (or pre-primary) setting to that of a primary school, where academic skills are more of the focus (Kinkead-Clark, 2017). Fayez et al. (2016) and Kinkead-Clark (2017) studies acknowledge the importance of social-emotional skills in students' academic success. Social and behavioral expectations are high for students (Welchons et al., 2017). For example, beginning kindergarten students are expected to function autonomously, develop relationships with peers and teachers, understand and conform to classroom routines and rules, and remain on-task for considerably longer periods compared with demands in early education classrooms (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000, Welchons et al., 2017). When students fail to deal with stress and self-regulation, their ability to process information declines; hence, the social-emotional aspect should be integrated into the curriculum as equally important as academics. If children struggle with meeting social and behavioral expectations in kindergarten, they may not fully benefit from academic instruction (LoCasale-Crouch et al. .2008, Welchons et al., 2017).

Vertical Alignment of the Pre-school and Kindergarten Programs

Vertical alignment refers to the degree of alignment among policies across grade levels (Cohen-Vogel et al., 2020). Specific components of vertical continuity include curriculum, standards, classroom factors, and pedagogy (Franco et al., 2018). The premise behind the push to vertically align instructional supports is that "designating what students should know and be able to do at the completion of each grade level or course equips educators to set targets by which students climb a ladder of ever-increasing demand and proficiency toward college and career readiness" (Valdez & Marshall, 2014). Here, the focus is on specifying an articulated pathway between grade levels to reduce redundancies, fill content gaps, and scaffold opportunities to learn (Cohen-Vogel et al., 2020). Despite substantial writing, thinking, and research on alignment, there remain serious challenges in defining what it means for children's experiences to be aligned or misaligned (Stipek et al., 2017; Yelverton & Mashburn, 2018). Understanding the extent to which pre-k programs differ in terms of their alignment with kindergarten may help explain variation in the persistence of program impacts into elementary school and beyond (Cohen-Vogel et al., 2020). For example, pre-k and kindergarten systems may be considered aligned at a policy level if the learning goals for pre-k are concordant with the expectations for incoming kindergarteners or if the same system for home-school communication is used across pre-k and kindergarten (Vitiello et al., 2020). Efforts to promote alignment may be difficult to implement due to the decentralized nature of early childhood education systems, lack of existing evidence-based curricula that cut across the early grades, and significant differences in the workforces and professional development opportunities in pre-k versus elementary school Stipek et al., 2017). Hence, vertical alignment between pre-school and kindergarten programs would

encompass the programs' scope and sequence and related components that foster the continuity of learning in a sustainable environment.

Curricula

As educators, we focus on a different and relatively neglected determinant of the quality of learning experiences: the content and style of instruction (known in schools and the education literature as the curriculum) (Jenkins et al., 2018). Curricula provide teachers with day-to-day plans on what and how to teach, including daily lesson plans, project materials, and other pedagogical tools (Jenkins et al., 2018). While social scientists have recently begun to consider the effects of curricula in other settings (Jackson & Makarin, 2016; Koedel et al., 2017), there exists little or no evidence about which early childhood curricula are best for whom (Jenkins et al., 2018). A recent review by Brooks-Gunn et al. (2016) on the directions of future work in early education stated that "if the quality is high in a pre-k program but not in the K–3 classrooms that a child later attends, it stands to reason that sustained achievement gains will likely be low". Thus, there is widespread interest in aligning the preschool curriculum with the kindergarten to the third-grade curriculum to ensure a sustainable environment (Stipek et al., 2017). A sustaining climate is, by definition, a subsequent environment that generates persistent treatment effects of the earlier intervention (Bailey et al., 2020). Efforts by early education programs and elementary schools can help support a successful transition (Ahtola et al., 2011.Cook & Coley, 2017; Cook et al., 2017; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Schulting et al., 2005), suggesting that when adults provide continuity and alignment between educational contexts, children may benefit through positive educational experiences that lead to improved social and academic skills in kindergarten.

The Learning Environment

Classrooms are considered learning environments in which teachers and children interact meaningfully (Hoang et al., 2019). There are three dimensions in this domain: behavior management, productivity, and instructional learning format (Hoang et al.,2019). Behavior management refers to the teacher's ability to monitor, prevent, and redirect student's misbehavior effectively, while productivity reflects how well teachers prepare for teaching and maximize learning times (Hoang et al.,2019). In shaping foundations for lifelong learning, early education is critical in equipping children not only with academic knowledge and abilities but also with socio-emotional skills and competencies (Durlak et al. 2011; Wall et al. 2015) and is critical in preparing the student for kindergarten. Growth in cognitive and noncognitive skills across a preschool academic year depends first and foremost on the amount and quality of the learning experiences in the classroom (Jenkins et al., 2018). The learning environment is where the teaching and learning processes take place. A prepared learning environment is crucial for students' acquisition of academic knowledge and should provide positive experiences for developing their social-emotional foundational skills.

Growing evidence suggests that misalignment between proximal characteristics of pre-k and kindergarten may be one factor contributing to the pattern of fade out in the benefits of pre-k (Vitiello et al., 2020). Proximal characteristics refer to the alignment in the factors that comprise children's daily experiences – may be particularly important to supporting children's wellbeing as they start school (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta, 2000, Yelverton and Mashburn, 2018). For example, Lipsey et al. (2018) found that the short-term benefits of Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-K program faded by the end of first grade in their study on the effects of the Tennessee

prekindergarten program on children's achievement and behavior through third grade. One study that descriptively examined alignment from pre-k to kindergarten using nationally representative Head Start data from the 2009 Family and Children Early Education Service (FACES) study found several areas of misalignment in structural classroom features (Abry et al., 2018).

Evidence from Head Start FACES suggested that pre-k classrooms may spend more time on math than kindergarten classrooms. In essence, about two-thirds of pre-k and kindergarten classrooms reported daily literacy instruction, but reports of daily math instruction were lower in kindergarten than in pre-k (Abry et al., 2018). The whole dynamic of the classroom setting has a profound impact on the teaching and learning processes that takes place. The learning environment is the stage for teaching and learning to occur; it is where the students should benefit from meaningful learning opportunities that will prepare them for the next level of their educational journey.

Teaching and Learning Processes

In most of the evaluations of pre-k, explanations for null, positive, or even negative effects most often rest on inferences related to the nature of children's experiences of classroom processes, including the nature and quality of interactions, the curriculum, and the quality and differentiation of teachers' instruction (Barnett et al., 2018; Keys et al., 2013; Phillips et al.,2017; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Instructional materials and the strategies promoted by curricula constitute some of the most direct and policy-relevant connections to learning activities in the classroom (Jenkins et al., 2018). Similarly, teacher-student interactions, characterized by teacher sensitivity and responsiveness to children's cues, support for engaged and positive behavior, and stimulation of language and cognitive development (Ansari & Pianta, 2018; Burchinal et al., 2016; Vitiello et al.,2018) are essential elements in the teaching and learning process. Similarly,

children whose teachers create an organized and emotionally supportive classroom demonstrate improvements in self-regulatory and social-behavioral outcomes (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2019), which are significant components in preparing students for kindergarten.

The Impact of Pre-school Experience on Kindergarten Readiness

"Children who participate in high-quality preschool programs have better healthy, social-emotional, and cognitive outcomes than those who do not participate" (Livington, 2015) and are more likely to be kindergarten-ready (See Table 1). Growing understanding of both the importance of early childhood in the life course and the documented benefits of high-quality pre-school interventions have led to a sharp increase in public support for early childhood opportunities (Bassok & Latham, 2016). Many communities have center-based Head Start classrooms, public pre-k programs located within public schools, and even subsidized placements for children within private, for-profit childcare centers (Vitiello et al., 2020). Additionally, when children enter ECE for the first time, they must adapt to social and school-based settings, often resulting in heightened behavior problems (Ansari, 2018; Dearing et al., 2015; Pingault et al., 2015). Under this frame, any immediate negative social-behavioral effects of ECE participation may have more to do with children adapting to new social groups, which is inevitable for all children, rather than with a specific effect of ECE (Ansari et al., 2019). However, several studies find lingering—albeit small—persisting negative associations between ECE enrollment and children's social-behavioral functioning through the early elementary school years (Ansari, 2018; Belsky et al., 2007). The pre-school period is the formative years for children to develop their foundational skills, particularly the social-emotional aspect, which will be carried through in their later educational experiences. Social skill deficits in early childhood

gradually become permanent over time, are related to poor academic performance, and are predictive of social adjustment problems and serious psychopathology in adolescence (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2017).

For students entering kindergarten, the lack of readiness means that children are still struggling to focus attention, follow instructions, manage emotions, and maintain positive relationships with adults and classmates (Bettencourt et al., 2018). Also, the children who enter kindergarten with low academic skills (Le et al., 2019) is another indicator of lack of readiness. Children are challenged each day with novel learning situations, both academically and socially (Bustamante et al., 2017), and lacking the necessary skills which can be developed by participating in a preschool setting, students will not be likely to have a successful learning experience. In Maryland, parent-reported students' prior care experience was provided in Ready at Five (2019) KRA data. Table 1 gives an overview of the percentage of students with prior care experience related to kindergarten readiness.

Table 1

Kindergarten Students Prior Care Experience and Readiness

	Percentage of Students	
Setting	Parent-reported prior care experience	Demonstrate kindergarten readiness
Childcare center	13%	62%
Family childcare	3%	36%
Head start	3%	33%
Home/Informal	28%	36%
Non-Public Nursery	7%	70%
Pre-K	20%	45%

Note. KRA assessed 65% of 65,012 kindergarteners.

Ready or not, about four million U.S. children enter kindergarten each year (Livington, 2105). While age is the only actual requirement that a child must have to enter kindergarten, students need additional resources to equip them with the skills necessary to be successful in kindergarten (Datar & Gottfried, 2015). Nevertheless, a report issued by the U.S Department of Education in 2015 stated that not every child is ready for kindergarten or success. Starting from behind can trap children in a cycle of continuous catch-up related to learning (Livington, 2015). The report acknowledges the importance of pre-school opportunities those parents may consider to prepare their children for kindergarten. Despite consensus about the importance of indergarten readiness and the value of improving readiness for children at-risk for being unready, there is a limited empirical understanding of how best to determine whether a child is or is not likely to be ready for schooling, which demands a level of skills for children to be successful (Justice et al., 2017). In Maryland, every child that turns five-year-old by September 1st is considered eligible

for kindergarten with or without pre-school experience. Since pre-school is not a mandatory

school program, parents have the option for their children to attend a school or wait until the

child turns five-year-old for kindergarten.

Head Start Program

The Head Start program is a federally funded early childhood education program that

mixes social services for families with pre-school education for children (Leong et al., 2019).

The Head Start's "whole child" approach to school readiness offers multiple services to children

and families with the expectation that the accurate targeting of services to needs, and the positive

synergy among the services and benefits received, will act together to adequately prepare

children for kindergarten (Miller et al., 2016). The "whole child" model aims to promote

children's transition to school by enhancing their development by providing educational, health,

and nutritional services to children and families (Miller et al., 2016). A cornerstone of the Head

Start program is the successful engagement of families in Head Start services (Leong et al.

2019). For example, by getting parents involved, Head Start teachers can build parents' social

capital by modeling cognitively stimulating activities such as reading books and playing math

related games (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016). When parents become involved by volunteering in the

classrooms or elsewhere in the center, they can imitate the activities they have observed and

apply these new skills in their interactions with their children at home (Ansari & Gershoff,

2016). Engaging families in Head Start services at the earliest point in a child's education not

only provides the families with a model for how to engage in their child's education but also

provides effective social services to allow the family to resolve challenges in the home (Leong et

al. 2019). Additional efforts are needed to strengthen the sustained impact of Head Start as

children transition into kindergarten (Bierman et al.,2015). Helping parents teach their children

at home may be a valuable and underutilized strategy to achieve this important goal (Bierman et al.,2015).

Public School Pre-K

Students coming from public pre-schools are more likely to perform better than students from early childhood centers because of the continuity of greater alignment to the kindergarten program. Findings are increasingly clear that pre-k classrooms located within public schools tend to be higher on several indicators of quality (Bassok et al., 2016) and are more effective at preparing children for kindergarten compared with center-based classrooms (Phillips et al., *2017).* Bassok, Finch, et al. (2016) defined public pre-school as any publicly funded, classroom-based early childhood program, including any state-sponsored pre-kindergarten Head Start program or subsidized center-based care. Because they are co-located with kindergarten classrooms within schools, it may be the case that school-based pre-k classrooms show greater alignment to kindergarten classrooms than do center-based classrooms (Vitiello et al., 2020). Given this widespread deployment of public early education, for many children, this represents the start of their educational careers (Pianta et al., 2020).

In some states, public pre-k is universal, with access granted to all age-eligible children, while in others, it is only available to those considered "at-risk" of low educational achievement (Willinski, 2019). Program regulations, such as maximum class size and staff-child ratios, also vary, and spending on pre-k differs dramatically across programs (Barnett et al., 2017). Additionally, studies on the resolution on the disparity of the number of hours pre-school students spend in the classroom are very scarce, which is also critical in preparing students for kindergarten classrooms. In Northern Maryland, there are pre-school sites that are half a day, and there are full-day programs that create inequality in the learning opportunities that students can

experience. Hence, occasional or inconsistent exposures to content are the norm in most pre-k classrooms (Pianta et al., 2020).

Inclusive Early Childhood Center

As described in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), children with disabilities have the right to attend and are included in school alongside their typically developing peers in the least restrictive environment (LRE, U.S. Department of Education, Health and Human Services, 2015), a practice is known as inclusion (Pelatti et al., 2016). With this act, the federal legislation mandated an inclusive educational environment for all students. Public-school educators were charged with the primary responsibility to provide equal opportunities for students, regardless of their level of functioning (Banerjee et al., 2016). Inclusivity in early childhood programs refers to including children with disabilities in early childhood programs, together with their peers without disabilities, holding high expectations, and intentionally promoting participation in all learning and social activities (U.S. Department of Education, Health and Human Services, 2015).

Accordingly, over the past years, several laws were designed to ensure that young children with disabilities and at-risk are given opportunities to develop and learn in the least restrictive environments, particularly in educational settings (Coelho et al., 2019). Potential barriers, however, exist that limit opportunities for all young children with disabilities to attend high-quality pre-schools with their typically developing peers (Coelho et al., 2019). Example of barriers includes the large variability in the training, education, and expertise of the early childhood workforce where providers may lack basic knowledge and competencies in child development, early childhood pedagogy, individualizing instruction, managing challenging

behavior, promoting social-emotional development, and scaffolding learning across activities and between peers (U.S. Department of Education, Health and Human Services, 2015).

Teacher training, in general, is important for the students' success (Bryant, 2018). When the resources are not available and the training is not provided, regular education teachers have not always been positive about their experience in inclusive classrooms (Gaines & Barnes, 2017). One challenge faced by inclusive ECE teachers is how to best modify the classroom environment to best meet the needs of the individual while providing a high-quality environment to all children in the classroom (Pelatti et al., 2016). The availability of developmentally appropriate instructional materials is also critical in teaching students with special needs. Research also suggests that promoting high-quality interactions in educational settings is a challenge for teachers (Pelatti et al., 2016). The challenge can be even higher in inclusive environments, as teachers need to be responsive to a wider span of children´s needs (Pelatti et al., 2016). Exploring how classroom quality and activity settings can interact to promote engagement in children with different developmental characteristics in inclusive settings can contribute to inform teachers on how to better plan pre-school routines, namely, the planning of time distribution per activity settings and the quality of their interactions with children (Coelho et al. 2019).

Moreover, studying context variables, namely, quality of teacher-child interactions and activity setting characteristics, in relation to child engagement in inclusive contexts, can contribute to portray the quality of the inclusion processes better and to identify aspects through which the contexts can enhance development and participation in children with disabilities or at risk in early inclusive education settings. (Coelho et al., 2019). According to Efthymiou and

Kington (2017), even though inclusive practices have been mandated, implementing these guidelines is determined, to a significant degree, by school agendas and social and local conceptualizations of the government guidelines, which may vary from school to school and region to region.

Special Education in Pre-school Setting

The Individual Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 1990 paved the way for students with special needs to receive a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) (Bryant, 2018). One way that schools frequently attempt to address the needs of these high-risk children is to educate them in separate special education or alternative settings, collectively described as Restrictive Educational Placements [REPs] (Powers et al., 2016). The goal of REPs is to provide a more structured and nurturing environment, with specially trained teachers and small student: teacher ratios that allow for individualized instruction and well-implemented behavioral interventions (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1995; Jull, 2008, Powers et al. 2016). Class size is a specific program characteristic that has been a focus of ECE research (Pelatti et al., 2016). In 2013, more than half (54.3 percent) of preschool children with disabilities received early childhood special education services in settings separate from their peers without disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, Health and Human Services, 2015).

Interestingly, the number of children with disabilities changes as children age, as some are newly identified, and others are considered to no longer have a disability (Hebbeler & Spiker, 2016). Potential developmental effects of early education and childcare experiences on later chronic disabilities may vary in important ways across types of disability (Muschkin et al., 2015). Early intervention is crucial to a child's development. Children who attend school-based pre-school programs are more likely to receive support for the transition to kindergarten, and

effective transition strategies significantly improve the school success of high-risk children (Carlson et al., 2009; Phillips & Meloy, 2012; Schulting et al., 2005; Muschkin et al., 2015). Teachers in high-quality childcare programs are trained to identify children performing below normative expectations, thereby increasing the likelihood of effective remediation at an early age (Mann et al., 2007; Muschkin et al., 2015).

English Language Learners in Pre-school Setting

English-language learners (ELLs) constitute the fastest-growing group of PK-12 students in the United States (US) (Zhao et al., 2017). In 2012–2013, ELLs comprised 9.2 % of all students, with the most being Spanish-speaking students (Kena et al., 2015). In 2014, the United States experienced an 11% increase in foreign-born immigrants over 2013 (Zong & Batalova,2016). From New Mexico to New Hampshire, classrooms continue to diversify, with over 10 million school-age children speaking a language other than English at home (American Community Survey, 2015). Currently, ELLs make up approximately 10% of students in preschool-through-grade-12 (P-12) schools, having doubled their number since the turn of the century (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015). The challenge of successfully educating these students should be of great concern to every educator and teacher as they deal with rapidly increasing numbers of language minority students in schools nationwide (Zhao et al., 2017). The language barrier has been the biggest challenge in educating ELL students; moreover, accommodations are not always available. Despite this large and growing population, the U.S. educational institution has largely failed to ensure their academic success, as reflected in lower than average scores on standardized assessments and higher-than-average dropout rates (NCES, 2015).

Increased awareness of the school-readiness gap has led policymakers, researchers, and practitioners in the United States to examine the quality of language and literacy programs for children at risk of academic failure, particularly for students from linguistically diverse backgrounds (Garrity & Guerra, 2015). The examination of how preschool programs can meet the needs of these children and prepare them for school is critical (Garrity & Guerra, 2015). To promote the optimal language development of all young children, including monolingual English speakers and ELLs, adults in ECE classrooms should use a wide array of language facilitation techniques (Sawyer et al., 2018). Early childhood educators are adults who play a critical role in early language development (Abel et al., 2015). Based on children's language abilities, teachers may differentiate how they speak with individual children (Sawyer et al., 2018). Within the zone of instruction and learning, rich verbal interactions accompanied by reinforcing environmental cues are known to improve language development (Bouchard et al., 2010; Abel et al., 2015). Additionally, children who are exposed to an environment rich in vocabulary and supportive of verbal interaction with adults develop a greater facility with language than those who did not afford such opportunities (Abel et al., 2015, Owens 2008; Dickinson, 2001). Furthermore, children's language skills are positively predicted by the language ability of their peers (Atkins-Burnett et al., 2017; Henry & Rickman, 2007; Justice et al., 2011; Mashburn et al., 2009) as well as children's frequency of language interactions with peers (Chesterfield et al.,1982; Palermo et al., 2014; Rojas et al., 2016) suggest that peers with more vital language skills serve as language models for young children.

Transition Practices

Transition practices are an essential component for preparing pre-school students for kindergarten. The transition to school is an important time in the lives of children and families

(Cook & Coley, 2017). School readiness abilities impact the nature of children's transition: when children lack expected readiness skills, the kindergarten transition is more difficult (Abry et al., 2015). Transitional kindergarten and other pre-kindergarten programs thus represent a middle ground between pre-school and kindergarten, a unique opportunity to bridge the child-centered, development-driven practices of preschool and the standards-centered, data-driven practices of kindergarten (Maniates, 2016). Transition practices implemented by schools can help serve as a bridge for children and families as they move into kindergarten (Cook & Coley, 2017). For many beginning students, kindergarten represents the first time they have participated in school activities; for others, who have been in early childhood programs or Head Start, this experience is not new but certainly represents a different rule-governed system that needs to be navigated (Tindal et al., 2015). When entering kindergarten, children can face vastly different educational contexts, expectations, and requirements than experienced in their prior early education and home settings (Mashburn et al., 2018). Yet limited research has focused on coordination between educational systems during the transition to school, specifically between early education programs and elementary schools (Cook & Coley, 2017).

Nearly 70% of children in the U.S. have attended a formal early education program before kindergarten (Corcoran & Steinley, 2017). Preparing children for the transition to kindergarten is challenging because kindergarten is changing with an increasing emphasis on academic preparedness for elementary schools (Bassok & Rorem, 2014). Most of the transition practices examined in past studies were focused on children and families, except for the practice of sharing information (Cook et al., 2019). The transition is particularly challenging because children are experiencing a multitude of significant changes simultaneously (Purtell et al., 2019). For example, the nature of a child's interactions with adults changes as children experiences

larger teacher-to-child ratios, relative to both preschool and obviously to home environments they have experienced (Purtell et al., 2019). Recent studies have shown small positive associations between transition practices engaged in by pre-kindergarten programs(LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008) or elementary schools (Cook & Coley, 2017; Schulting et al., 2005) in children's social and academic skills in kindergarten.

Studies in the U.S. and internationally have shown that when early education teachers and elementary schools share information about children, children's academic and social outcomes are enhanced in the first year of school (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008: Ahtola et al., 2011; Cook et al., 2017). For example, a study in Norway found that when first grade teachers (the first year of school in Norway) received information about both individual children and their early education programs, children were rated as having higher social and academic adjustment at the beginning of school entry and mid-way through the school year (Cook et al., 2017).

Transitional practices can also include more collaborative and coordinated efforts between early education programs and elementary schools to share children's records, align standards and instruction, and engage in joint training and activities (Cook & Coley, 2017). This idea has been commonly invoked as an insight for maintaining the early benefits of preschool (Phillips et al., 2017). In a context in which early education programs and elementary schools are increasingly called upon to coordinate with one another, it is essential to understand how coordination efforts function and the barriers and strengths of existing systems (Cook et al., 2019). Such coordination should generally encompass what the students need to learn in the domains of math, literacy, and social-emotional foundations to be ready for kindergarten. Having pre-school students equipped with the pre-requisite skills in the areas, as mentioned earlier, students will have a better chance to have a positive learning experience in kindergarten.

Teachers' Experiences

Teachers often experience a serious change in their careers every year. Briggs et al. (2018) stated that change is embedded in the very nature of teachers' work, for example, a new class of students at the start of each school year. Consequently, one may expect that teachers are experiencing a sense of uncertainty as the line between early childhood and elementary school is shifting (Briggs et al., 2018). In the same manner, students are also experiencing ambiguity because of the changes in their learning environment, peer, and adult familiarity, classroom rules, and the amount of academic learning that is being presented to them.

Kindergarten Teachers

In kindergarten classrooms, students that are entering kindergarten bring different levels of readiness in pre-academic and social-emotional domains, which poses a challenge to kindergarten teachers regardless of students' level of preparedness. Today's kindergarteners are expected to meet over 90 standards (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015), and the demands placed on them far exceed those of first-grade students 15 years ago (Bassok et al., 2016). More than ever, kindergarten teachers must manage students' cognitive, social, and emotional needs during the transition to elementary school while also ensuring that they reach mandatory benchmarks (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Graue et al., 2017; Main, 2012). Teachers who expressed consistent buy-in to the standards talked about student readiness and even acknowledged that some students were not ready to meet the academic rigor of the standards upon entry to kindergarten (Briggs et al., 2018). Additionally, teachers consistently talked about student readiness as interfering with their ability to implement the standards despite their buy-in (Briggs et al., 2018). Similarly, these teachers expressed concern about the impact of more academics on students' self-esteem, acknowledging that students who were not ready for the academics would

only fall further behind (Briggs et al. 2018). Wherefore, critics are concerned that kindergartners may not be developmentally ready for advanced content traditionally taught at a higher grade and that a focus on academics may come at the expense of children's social-emotional development (Christakis, 2016). It was relevant to look at kindergarten teachers' challenges that come along with students as they embarked on the world of "big school."

Pre-school Teachers

Pre-school education is increasingly viewed as a means of promoting the development of children's cognitive and academic skills and reducing disparities among diverse groups in these barometers of future educational success (Benner et al., 2017). Early educators may face challenges in implementing social-emotional learning-focused activities or programs within a school day due to the lack of time, resources, or priority in achieving academic curricular demands (Ng & Bull, 2018). Educators are concerned that teachers may be shifting their instructional time to direct instruction of academics and reducing the opportunities children must develop and practice their skills through play (Le et al. 2019). Accordingly, a potential consequence of teaching advanced content that may not be aligned with children'sdevelopmental status and sacrifices time for play is more deficient social-emotional development (Le et al. 2019). The success of the teaching and learning process depends on children'sreadiness to absorb what is being presented to them, and consequently, if students are not ready, it becomes a challenge for teachers.

Parents and Family Involvement

Parents and school partnerships in children's education are crucial for students' learning. Family involvement refers to the proactive engagement of parents in various activities and behaviors that aim to promote the learning and development of their children (Fantuzzo et al.,

2000). Families are crucial to childhood success, and educators can assist families in supporting their child's educational needs (Roberts, 2017). It is critical to understand family motivations around their child's education and to support them to adapt and develop new skills as needed (Roberts, 2017). It is also vital for parents and families to participate in school activities. Parents' desires to be involved stem from wanting to find out more about their child's activities and daily routines, information about their child's progress, and concern for their child's well being (Rouse & O'Brien, 2017). Beyond parent and child characteristics, sources of support and satisfaction with services are important to consider and may influence parent willingness to partner with school professionals in the care of the child (Garbacz et al., 2016). In building empathetic and trusting educational environments, collaboration can break down barriers, increase understanding, share a common purpose, and embrace diversity (Roberts, 2107).

Immigrant Family Involvement

Children of immigrant parents in the U.S. generally have more barriers to educational attainment than their U.S.-born peers. 52% of immigrant children and children with immigrant parents live in low-income families (Jiang et al., 2017). The importance of teacher-parent partnerships in children's education is crucial; nevertheless, educators find it challenging to establish a kind of relationship with parents and families. Diverse family backgrounds and differences in ethnicities, cultures, socioeconomic levels, religions, and languages contribute to educators' hesitation to interact meaningfully with some families (Knight-McKenna & Hollingsworth, 2016). Among immigrant parents who attempt to be involved in their child's early education, some have described their experience as less of a partnership with their child's teacher and more of a unidimensional directive-based relationship (teacher to parent) (Crosnoe &Ansari, 2015). Research has suggested that immigrant families may have limited involvement

in their child's early education due to language or cultural barriers, working hours, and concerns over immigration status (Turney & Kao, 2009).

Latin American Family Involvement

Latin American immigration is a critical lens through which to study disparities in parental involvement in the U.S. Latino/a immigrants tend to engage in lower levels of many dimensions of involvement (Crosnoe & Ansari, 2015). These disparities reflect many of the same practical constraints discussed above and immigration-specific limitations, such as language barriers that tend to be even more acute among immigrants from Latin America than immigrants from other regions (Crosnoe & Ansari, 2015). A few studies have found that newly arriving immigrant families are more likely to be exposed to deep, unstable household income and longer spells of poverty, which may negatively affect a child's academic achievement (Annie Casey Foundation, 2017)). In 2014, nearly 27% or 4.8 million children of immigrants had parents without secure employment in the United States, putting these children at great risk of economic instability (Annie Casey Foundation, 2017). One of the major mechanisms that help cushion children from the impact of poverty on their academic achievement is the family value (Zhang et al., 2017).

Findings from studies using ethnographies or qualitative approaches suggest that children of immigrants may be raised in a family environment that strongly supports academic achievements (Leong et al., 2019). However, many low-income, hourly-wage parents struggle to manage work schedules and in-school activities such as parent-teacher meetings or classroom volunteering, leaving many to appear uninvolved (Leong et al., 2019). Furthermore, many immigrant families approach their child's education from a different cultural perspective, which

shapes ideas around parent involvement in education and may not fit under a purely school-based concept of parent involvement (McWayne et al., 2013).

Summary

Past and recent literature indicated that the primary goal of early childhood education was to provide a meaningful learning experience to students for kindergarten readiness. A broad description of what kindergarten readiness was depicted in the literature review encompassed the skills, knowledge, and behaviors, mainly in literacy, mathematics, and social-emotional domains. Yet to establish was the developmentally appropriate concrete definition of kindergarten readiness to guide the people in the educational arena across the nation looking at a child with a holistic approach. Considerations of the variations in the state-by-state standards, academic priorities, funding, and socio-economic status were crucial in this process.

Teachers' perceptions of school readiness were relative to the state or district mandated expectations aligned with the kindergarten standards. What was unknown in this study was how early childhood education could better prepare students for kindergarten that will fill in the learning gap amidst the growing disparity in the alignment of early childhood education and kindergarten programs in the aspect of educational continuity. In this study, what was yet to know was the demographic composition of the subgroup of students entering kindergarten from the early childhood centers as pipelines for kindergarten classrooms and how it impacted kindergarten readiness? Addressing the remaining barriers to inclusion in early childhood programs and ensuring children with disabilities receive the individualized supports they need to thrive requires a communitywide (ECE, U.S. Department of Education, Health and Human Services, 2015) remains to be a challenge. Many teachers have not been appropriately trained for the inclusion process with students with disabilities in the pre-school setting (Ignatovitch &

Smantser, 2015), and affects all children, including those with disabilities, and may present a challenge to providing high-quality inclusive early learning experiences (U.S. Department of Education, Health and Human Services, 2015)

Researchers have identified family/parental demographic variables associated with a lack of school readiness and challenging transition outcomes (Jarrett, & Coba-Rodriguez, 2019). It has been suggested that the most influential child-level factor accounting for school success centers on demographics - the combination of financial, educational, and cultural variables that often forecast poor performance for many children (Pianta et al., 2020; Reardon, 2011).

Describing the pre-school teacher's experiences embracing the challenges in preparing students for kindergarten was added to the existing literature on kindergarten readiness issues and served as another source for future study. This research paved the way for a more definitive definition of kindergarten readiness and served as a resource for pre-school teachers to fill in the gaps for students with a lack of readiness. Additionally, this study proved to be the breaking point for district policymakers to revisit the existing policies to improve transitional practices and vertical alignment between the early childhood schools/centers and kindergarten programs.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology was to describe pre-school teachers'

experiences embracing challenges in preparing students for kindergarten at a public-school

district in the Mid-Atlantic state. As not all students demonstrate readiness for kindergarten,

gathering the pre-school teachers' experiences in preparing students for kindergarten helped

expand more studies on the teachers' challenges.

This chapter presented the methods, which encompassed the design, research questions,

setting, participants, procedures, and the researcher's role. Additionally, the data collection

process description was explained based on the guiding principles for ethical research. The

phenomenological reduction was utilized for data analysis. Trustworthiness techniques were also

described to explain how credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were

achieved. Finally, ethical considerations are presented pertinent to this study to ensure that all

participants are well informed about the methods and processes.

Design

Qualitative research was employed for this study. Creswell & Poth (2018) defined

qualitative research as an inquiry process of understanding based on a distinct methodological

approach to inquiry that explores a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex,

holistic picture; analyzes words; reports detailed views of participants; and conducts the study in

a natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this rationale, a qualitative approach was

appropriate for this study – to provide the pre-school teachers the opportunity to share their

stories and brought essence to what they have contributed to this research.

Specifically, a phenomenological research design was suitable for this study for

describing the pre-school teachers' experiences embracing the challenges in preparing students for kindergarten. In this study, phenomenology was intended to reconstruct pre-school teachers' experiences conceived from the combination of their individual accounts of the phenomenon so that the impact of the texts is so compelling that the readers can relate to it. Phenomenology calls to wonder, reflect, and draw nearer to joy, love, loss, contact, care, and all manner of deeply human meanings (Adams & van Manen, 2017) because of our experiences.

The specific type of design used was transcendental phenomenology, which is focused less on the interpretation of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of participants (Moustakas, 1994). Incorporating this specific approach substantiated the purpose of this study in describing the pre-school teachers' experiences embracing challenges in preparing students for kindergarten apart from my experiences.

Research Questions

Central Question: What do pre-school teachers perceive as challenges in preparing students for kindergarten?

SQ 1: What are teachers' perceptions about the importance of alignment between the pre-school and kindergarten programs?

SQ 2: What are the markers of pre-school students that demonstrate kindergarten readiness?

SQ 3: What do teachers perceive as ways to improve the readiness of their students for kindergarten?

Setting

The settings chosen for this study were the student pipeline for kindergarten within one public school district in the Northern region of a Mid-Atlantic state. The three schools serve a diverse student population aged three to five years old with and without special needs. Each

school has one school principal, one assistant principal, and a special education coordinator as the school administrators; the schools have the same programs and vary from the number of classrooms for each program. The Northern ECC has six pre-k classrooms, four four-year-old self-contained classrooms, and nine three-year-old classrooms. The Southern ECC has six pre-k classrooms, 12 four-year-old self-contained classrooms, and 12 three-year-old classrooms. The Eastern ECC has four pre-k classrooms, 12 four-year-old classrooms, and six 3 -year-old classrooms. In all three ECCs, pre-k was a full-day program in a co-teaching setting with ten typical students, ten students with IEP , one general education teacher, one special education teacher, and two paraprofessionals. The four-year-old program comprised 12 students with IEP, two special education teachers, and two paraprofessionals.

The three-year-old self-contained classroom has nine students with one special education teacher and one paraprofessional. Moreover, the three-year-old was a half a day program. The total school population in each school has an average of 300 students at the beginning of the school year; however, it is essential to note that every school has ongoing enrollment, and the trajectory for each of the school population is about 500 students at the end of the school year. Students in the four-year-old and pre-k programs are transitioning to kindergarten programs and are tested for KRA. Table 2 gives an overview of the percentage of students' demographics for each school.

Table 2

Student Demographic

Setting	Percentage of Students					
	Black	White	Hispanic	Asian	FARM	Students with Disability
Northern ECC	60%	10%	29%	2%	35%	71%
Southern ECC	81%	0%	17%	2%	38%	67%
Eastern ECC	70%	6%	19%	5%	36%	82%

Note: FARM – Free and Reduced Meals

This study chose the settings because most students are transitioning to kindergarten programs in the Mid-Atlantic state every year. The sites also consist of teachers known to be "exemplars" in preparing kindergarten students based on the ELA data.

Participants

In this study, all the participants were referred to as pre-school teachers serving 10 to 15 students in the classroom. The study sample was selected from one of the nation's 25 public school districts serving over 130,000 students with cultural and ethnic diversity. The participants involved in this study were determined by utilizing total population sampling, a form of purposeful sampling. According to Creswell & Poth (2018), purposeful sampling means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can meaningfully inform an understanding of the research problem and the central phenomenon of the study. Patton (2015) explained that purposeful sampling involves studying information-rich cases from which the researcher can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry. Schachter et al. (2019), in their research on teacher's experiences with state-mandated

kindergarten readiness assessment, utilized a purposeful sampling method. Given the size of the

district and the diversity of the student population, purposeful sampling will include a range of

teachers whose experiences could be relatable to other teachers working in both urban and

suburban settings as well as high poverty to high-income districts (Schachter et al., 2019).

Such an environment provides me with the opportunity to immerse myself in the field,

create relationships with the respondents, and engage in meaningful dialogue (Asamoah, &

Oheneba-Sakyi, 2017). With 24 pre-k teachers at the sites, ten teachers with a minimum

criterion of having been teaching for more than two years in the pre-school setting serving 10 to

15 students in the classroom participated in this study. Each participant was assigned a

pseudonym.

Procedures

The Liberty University Review Board has determined that my study falls under the

exemption category exempt from further IRB review (Appendix A). The school district's

requirement to get approval to conduct research was proof of successful proposal defense and

IRB approval. I sent correspondence and a copy of my proposal and IRB exempt letter to the

school district board of education (BOE). I was directed to obtain approval from the district's

Research and Evaluation Office (REO). After receiving the REO approval (Appendix B), I was

provided the permission form for the site administrators and secured approval and consent

(Appendix C). The purpose of this activity was to give evidence to the review board that the

study design follows their guidelines for conducting ethical research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A

copy of the consent form for the targeted participants, timeline, categories of the target

populations, and the procedure for collecting data was included. Once approval from the district

and site administrators were obtained, the IRB-approved consent form was sent via email to

selected participants for consent to participate (Appendix D). Participants who elected to

participate returned their completed form to me before the interview. Once permission was

received from the participants and before the data collection process began, I contacted the

individual participants to discuss the procedures, risks, and the voluntary nature of the study. I

also explained the directions and the manner that their responses would be collected. The

participants were also informed that they would be under a pseudonym to protect their identity.

The participants were allowed to ask questions related to the procedures to ensure they

understood the whole process. The withdrawal process was clarified if participants were no

longer interested in participating at any given time during the research process; hence the data

collected will be discarded.

      I collected the data using the following approaches: first was to conduct a semi-structured

interview (Interview Questions - Appendix E). Due to the pandemic, all interviews were virtual.

I set up the link to the interview with every individual based on their schedule and availability.

Interviews were audio-recorded and manually transcribed to ensure that participants' responses

were captured. Sufficient time was afforded to participants in responding to questions to ease any

pressure and guarantee the authenticity of the responses. A document analysis of the students'

performance data based on ELA and KRA followed the interviews. Also, findings on the

alignment of the pre-school and kindergarten curriculum were added to the document analysis.

      Additionally, a review of the archival data has established the effectiveness of the

alignment of the preschool and kindergarten programs. Also, two virtual focus groups with 4-5

participants completed the data collection process (Focus Group Questionnaire – Appendix F). I

initially set the data collection timeline for six weeks to allow the participants to account for their

experiences. However, due to the delay in obtaining approval from the district and the

availability of the participants, it took 12 weeks to complete the data collection process.

Data analysis techniques included bracketing. I described the participants' experiences with the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and set aside my biases to focus more on the participants' recounting their experiences. Additionally, horizonalization was applied to avoid repetitions and overlap of data and establish patterns of the phenomenon's participants' experiences. Also, delimiting horizons of meaning, clustering horizons into themes, individual textural and structural descriptions, and coherent textural and structural descriptions methods were applied in this study. The aim was to arrive at structural descriptions of experience, the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced (Moustakas, 1994). I recorded the participants' descriptions of what they experienced and how they experienced the phenomenon with examples. This process allowed me to get a clear picture of the participants' experiences and felt how the phenomenon affected each participant.

The Researcher's Role

I was an assistant principal in one of the largest early childhood centers in our school district. I had an increasing interest in conducting this study since I started in this capacity. I carried out this study as a researcher rather than as an administrator. The school principals from the three sites in which I am conducting this study supported this research as they were also seeking ways to help their pre-school teachers prepare their students well for kindergarten. Participants from the three ECC sites were involved voluntarily, and there was no way that there would be repercussions by not participating in or withdrawing from the study. Participants' accounts of experiences were strictly confidential and did not affect their profession under any circumstances. As a researcher, my understanding of the pre-school teachers' experiences has guided me in exploring the existing factors that impact the ability of the pre-school teachers to

prepare students for kindergarten better.

I was in my sixth year as an educational leader. At the beginning of each school year, I conducted a data review. I facilitated data analysis activities with the staff members to examine our students' strengths and weaknesses based on the ELA data. The pre-k students from the three schools have always met the state target based on the state ELA, which is designed to measure the skills, behaviors, and knowledge of our preschool students' proficiency level. The ELA standards are aligned with the KRA and are administered to kindergarten students at the beginning of the school year. Our state has been the pioneer in using KRA as a system-wide measurement of children's strengths and needs when they enter kindergarten (Regenstein et al., 2018). Students who moved to feeder elementary schools performed below grade level based on recent year's KRA data. I find it thought-provoking that there is a disconnect between the ELA data and the KRA data. The three early childhood centers in the district have always performed well. They have excellent teachers who are passionate about their work to ensure that students are afforded meaningful learning experiences. Overall, I believe that the three ECC sites were in excellent shape and living up to their mission to prepare students for kindergarten.

I was motivated to conduct this study after facilitating professional development on vertical alignment between pre-k and kindergarten programs. The event has resulted in a clearer picture of some of the kindergarten teachers' frustrations with students' readiness to enter kindergarten. As an educational leader, my responsibility to our students does not end when they leave our school. I wanted to make sure that our students are well-prepared in their transition to kindergarten. This study has allowed pre-school teachers to share their stories about their challenges in preparing students for kindergarten and established patterns of issues and concerns.

Setting aside my own experiences and biases related to this study was vital because of my

professional experience as a former preschool teacher and an administrator in the early childhood education setting. I conducted interviews, document analysis of the ELA and KRA, and archival data on the pre-school and kindergarten programs' alignment and facilitated two focus groups for data collection. This process has allowed me to establish rapport with the participants to overcome hesitancy and gain genuine insight into the teachers' experiences in their practice related to preparing students for kindergarten readiness. Also, Moustakas (1994) focuses on one of Husserl's concepts of bracketing, in which investigators set aside their experiences and biases, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination. Without subjecting myself to bracketing, there was a threat that my experiences would have taken precedence over the experiences of the research participants.

Data Collection

This study employed a triangulation of data. Creswell & Poth (2018) defined triangulation as using multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence for validating the accuracy of their study. The process has involved consolidating the data collected from interviews, document analysis, and focus group discussions. The data collection strategies were conducted sequentially: interviews, document analysis, and focus group discussions. This sequence has allowed me to collect information progressively, resulting in considerable opportunities to fine-tune the approaches and gained valuable insight into the participants' experiences.

Interviews

Conducting interviews seems less intrusive in phenomenological projects (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews yield direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge (Patton, 2015). The transcendental phenomenological study was about

lived experiences of the phenomenon; conducting interviews was the most practical way to collect data to account for the phenomenon's participants' experience. The 12 interview questions were thoughtfully designed and have gained insight into the participants' personal and professional information related to the study and established rapport with the participants.

Moreover, the interview process aimed to account for the participants' experiences in embracing challenges in preparing students for kindergarten. Due to the pandemic, all interviews were conducted virtually. Asking the same question in the same format and order was helpful to simplify the data analysis process. Interviews were transcribed with audio recordings.

The interview questions were generated to gain insight into the phenomenon relative to the pre-school teachers' experiences embracing the challenges in preparing students for kindergarten at a public-school district in Mid-Atlantic State. Hence the interview questions were as follows, was listed in Appendix E, and were based on the theoretical framework and research questions:

1. Please tell me about your academic journey up until your current role as a teacher here.

2. What was your work experience prior to being a pre-school teacher?

3. Please describe a regular workday with your students.

4. Please describe your experiences in managing your challenges in preparing students for kindergarten.

5. What motivational factors keep you teaching pre-kindergarten students?

6. Please describe the other adults or support you have in the classroom, including related service providers.

7. Describe your perception of the alignment of the pre-school and kindergarten programs in the district.

8. Based on your previous years of experience with being a pre-school teacher, please describe your students' challenges in meeting kindergarten readiness indicators.

9. Describe your intervention strategies in addressing your students' different learning styles and needs to help them meet kindergarten readiness indicators.

10. Please describe your students' parents/family involvement in their child's education?

11. Please describe how you establish a positive classroom climate that may improve student academic and social-emotional levels of performance?

12. In your opinion, what are the three most significant factors that impact students' transition to kindergarten?

Questions one, two, and three were designed to get connected with the participants. I introduced myself based on the items that were asked of them. These questions were essential in establishing rapport with the participants. Building rapport is not easy, nor does it occur automatically after some period of time (Akamoglu et al., 2018). Learning to read another person's verbal or non-verbal cues and then act appropriately takes experience and time (Akamoglu et al., 2018). Getting insight into the participants' professional background set the common ground between the participant and me and has built an understanding of why we do what we do for our students.

Questions four and five were created to determine the teachers' steps to manage their practice challenges. Probing this question was vital in understanding what support the pre-school teachers need to improve their practice, thus strengthening their resiliency. A teachers' resiliency in coping with the challenges is essential in maintaining their commitment to the profession. According to Baron & Baron (2019), "It also implies that these educators are deeply concerned with their students' results and experiences within the classroom. These teachers acknowledged

their role in the students' outcomes."

Questions six aimed to get a view of adult support in the classroom to alleviate some of the participants' challenges. Diversity in education usually refers to the effects of gender and ethnicity on student performance…they have different backgrounds, strengths and weaknesses, interests, ambitions, senses of responsibility, levels of motivation, and approaches to studying (Felder & Brent, 2005). Differences in culture had an impact on student and adult relationships.

Questions seven, eight, and nine were created to account for the connections between the preschool and kindergarten expectations. According to Justice et al. (2017), pre-kindergarten programs, especially those that are publicly funded and target enrollment to children from at-risk backgrounds, are correspondingly expected to enhance children's readiness for kindergarten and intervene with those children who are deemed at-risk for not being ready. We do not know whether all ECE and K-12 systems are similarly aligned or whether there are distinct categories of alignment (or misalignment) (Franko et al., 2018). A specific component of vertical continuity includes curriculum, standards, classroom factors, and pedagogy (Franko et al., 2018).

Question ten was designed to get an insight into the parents/family involvement in their child's education. According to Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez (2018), a small body of qualitative research considers parental knowledge, concerns, expectations, and coping strategies during kindergarten transition. Parents and families are the educators' partners in children's education and their involvement; more so, their participation is imperatively necessary. There is a recognition that families play an important and positive role in kindergarten adjustment and future educational trajectories (Miller, 2015) and influence how children perceive and manage the kindergarten transition (Harper, 2015).

Question 11 was designed to establish the significance of a positive classroom climate in students' performance. The research supporting the benefits of positive, well-managed classroom climates has driven stakeholders and policymakers to include relevant statements in state-level standards for teacher licensure and practice (Shewark et al., 2018).

Question 12 was grounded in Elder's (1998) statement on transitions as the key points in developmental trajectories in which individuals need to adapt to their changing environment. When children enter kindergarten, they enter a new context that is unlike their prior environment, even if they have attended preschool (Purtell et al., 2019). As the first-hand source of information, teachers can account for the foundational skills that students should possess as they enter kindergarten.

Document Analysis

Another form of data collection for this study was document analysis, which involved an in-depth analysis of the school's material culture, including students' assessment scores in ELA and KRA. The interpretation of the meaning and significance of material culture is a contemporary activity (Pearce, 1994). To understand material culture, the researcher must think in terms that go entirely beyond it, to go beneath the surface appearances to an underlying reality (Pearce, 1994). The analysis of documents often entails a specialized approach called content analysis (Rossman & Rallis, 2017), which means that the researchers are thinking about relationships between things (Pearce, 1994). It is assumed that studying these interconnections can provide one of the richest sources of information (Roberts & Linden, 2011) to establish the gaps in students' achievement and create a path for improvement. I also dived deeper into the pre-school and kindergarten programs' alignment and confirmed how the scope and sequence of the two programs impact preschool students' readiness for kindergarten. Archival data was an

example of material culture available in the qualitative inquiry that is routinely gathered records of a society, community, or organization, such as test scores (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). For this study, I conducted a fundamental analysis of the pre-school students' scores on the ELA data and correlated scores on KRA to determine factors that affect students' performance over the last three years.

Additionally, I explored the alignment of the pre-school and kindergarten programs within the district to understand better the components of the two programs that highly influenced pre-school students' readiness for kindergarten. Data from ELA and KRA consisted of the students' SKB's (skills, knowledge, and behavior) scores in math, literacy, social foundations, and physical development for correlation. Additionally, factors such as students' demographics and subgroups were examined to clearly understand the disparities in the teaching and learning processes with marginalized groups. Furthermore, it is also critical that I looked at the alignment and sequence of the SKB's between ELA and KRA and established the disconnect between the pre-school and kindergarten programs.

Focus Groups

Focus group discussions were the final sequence for data collection. This process took place after all the interviews and document analysis were carried out. The data collected from the focus group substantiated the data collected from the interviews and document analysis. Additionally, at this stage of collecting data, I have already established rapport with the participants, and that certain sensitive and personal disclosures emerged in focus groups (Guest et al., 2017). This process substantiated the data collected from the interviews and document analysis, which opened sensitive issues that needed to be clarified and explored more deeply. This process took place virtually and has occurred after school hours. A single session took no

more than an hour. The focus group discussions revolved around ten questions to collect group-level data and have established patterns. There were two focus groups, with four to five members in each group. The semi-structured approach was utilized with open-ended questions, thus, enabling me to improvise follow-up questions based on participant′s responses (Polit & Beck, 2010). See Appendix F for the focus group discussion questions.

Focus Group Discussions Questions:

1. What is the most rewarding aspect of being a pre-k teacher?

2. What is the most frustrating part of being a pre-k teacher?

3. How do you cope with workplace frustration?

4. What is your biggest challenge in preparing your students academically for kindergarten?

5. What is your biggest challenge with your students as you prepare them for social-emotional skill readiness for kindergarten?

6. How do you communicate these challenges with the parents/families?

7. How do parents receive information conveyed about the challenges in preparing their children for kindergarten?

8. How do you prepare your students as they transition to kindergarten?

9. How do you provide your students information to the receiving schools about their academic performance and social-emotional skills?

10. In your perception, what are the primary factors that impact students' scores on the KRA?

Questions one, two, three, four, and five were designed to establish a pattern of the pre-school teachers' experiences as they embrace challenges in preparing students for kindergarten. There are many aspects that could be of interest to enrich the experiences of teachers and

learners in early childhood education (Farquhar et al., 2015). Each of these aspects will assist us in making sense of the complexity of being an early childhood teacher (Farquhar et al., 2015).

Questions six and seven were created to determine the teachers' steps to express their challenges to the stakeholders. Probing this question was vital in understanding what support the pre-school teachers needed to improve their practice, thus strengthening their resiliency. A teachers' resiliency in coping with the challenges is essential in maintaining their commitment to the profession. According to Baron & Baron (2019), "It also implies that these educators are deeply concerned with their students' results and experiences within the classroom. Additionally, parent and family involvement in children's education is crucial to students' overall success in life. These teachers acknowledged their role in the students' outcomes."

Questions eight and nine allowed the participants to describe strategies, initiatives, and programs relative to transitional activities that will better prepare students for kindergarten, hence alleviating teachers' challenges in their practice. The entry into kindergarten is a key transition child experience and has lasting consequences for their academic development (Purtell et al., 2019). Despite the importance of this transition, many children struggle during the transition, as they are experiencing dramatic shifts in both environmental experiences and expectations (Mashburn et al., 2018). Considering this, many schools have implemented transition practices designed to foster positive development during this time (p.1).

Question ten has allowed the participants to offer their valuable insight into kindergarten readiness assessment data based on their experiences preparing students for kindergarten readiness. Young children are constantly developing and acquiring new skills, but the rate at which early learners acquire new concepts and skills varies significantly among children (Regenstein et al., 2018). While pre-school teachers must provide appropriate support to

students' learning needs and learning experiences, students' readiness level varies as they enter kindergarten.

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Data Analysis

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Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological reduction in transcendental phenomenology is focused less on the interpretation of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of participants. I focused on participants' accounts of the phenomena converging into logical themes. At an early stage in the analysis process, researchers typically organize data into digital files and create a file naming system (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I began by classifying data according to categories of the essential patterns in the data. This process was done manually with a continuing system of keeping the files protected. Patton (2015) explained that without classification, there is chaos and confusion. Data analysis techniques included bracketing, Giorgi (1997) stresses that the phenomenological reduction demands that the researcher bracket "past knowledge about the phenomenon encountered, in order to be fully present to it as it is in the concrete situation in which one is encountering it." Additionally, horizonalization, delimiting horizons or meaning, clustering horizons into themes, individual textural and structural descriptions, and coherent textural and structural descriptions methods were applied in this study. The phenomenological reduction has allowed me to have a more in-depth understanding of the preschool teachers' experiences, embracing the challenges in preparing students for kindergarten.

Bracketing

Data analysis techniques included bracketing. The researcher will describe their personal experiences with the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and focus more on the participants' recounting their experiences about the phenomenon. According to Moustakas (1994), bracketing is the first step in "phenomenological reduction," the data analysis process in

which the researcher sets aside, as far as humanly possible, all preconceived experiences best to understand the experiences of the participants in the study. I had no connection with the participants in any capacity. However, I had to bracket because of my position serving as a school administrator in the early childhood education setting. Setting aside my own experiences related to this study was vital because of my professional experience as a former pre-school teacher and an administrator in the early childhood education setting. Without subjecting myself to bracketing, there was a threat that my experiences would take precedence over the experiences of the research participants.

Horizonalization

According to Moustakas (1994), horizonalization was the second step in phenomenological data analysis in which the researcher lists every significant statement relevant to the topic and gives it equal value. I read through my transcripts from interviews, document analysis, and focus group discussions, constituting the first cut at organizing the data into topics and files (Patton, 2015). The list was recorded on a computer, and I did the data analysis manually. Hence, horizonalization was used to avoid repetitions and overlap of data and establish patterns of the participants' experiences of the phenomenon.

Delimiting Horizons or Meaning

Following the process of horizonalization was delimiting the horizons that constitute the invariant constituents of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In this phenomenological reduction stage, I highlighted the distinctive and already established horizons, reflective of the common denominators from participants' accounts of their experience of the phenomenon.

Clustering the Horizons into Themes

The researcher clusters the statements into themes or meaning units, removing

overlapping and repetitive statements (Moustakas,1994). I worked manually to establish themes and categories and looking at trends to answer my research questions. The clustering of meaning involved developing codes and categories. According to Creswell & Poth (2018), coding consists of aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code from different databases being used in a study, and then assigning a label to the code. In this loop, forming codes and categories represents the heart of data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In developing codes and categories, a qualitative analyst must first deal with the challenge of "convergence" (Guba, 1978) – figuring out what things fit together, and "divergence" – includes a careful and thoughtful examination of data that do not seem to work (Patton, 2015). On the other hand, categories are "grounded" in the set of data that were collected and seek to explain the phenomena that are observed as well as to describe them (Gall et al., 2007).

Individual Textural and Structural Descriptions

This study used the textural and structural descriptions in answering the questions "What happened" (Textural) and "How it happened" (Structural). I recorded the individual participants' descriptions of what they experienced and how they experienced the phenomenon with examples. This process has allowed me to picture every participant's experiences and feel how the phenomenon affected each participant. It involves seeking all possible meanings, looking for divergent perspectives, and varying the frames of reference about the phenomenon or using imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). As described by Lincoln & Guba (1985), this process involves making sense of the data, the "lessons learned." Findings will be presented independent of my own perception and experience of the phenomenon and are entirely based on the participants' data.

Coherent Textural and Structural Description of the Phenomenon

The coherent textural and structural description of the phenomenon was the final step in phenomenological reduction. It involved the amalgamation of all the participants' textural and structural descriptions into a consolidated story. Croswell & Poth (2018) described the coherence of the textural and structural description of the phenomena as the "essence' of the experience and represented the culminating aspect of the phenomenological study. It was grounded from the individual account of the participants. I had established a composite description of "what" and "how" they experience the phenomena with comprehensive textural and structural representation.

I established credibility through the triangulation of data. Researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence for validating the accuracy of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Patton (2015) explained, "that a common misunderstanding about triangulation is that the point is to demonstrate that different data sources or inquiry approaches yield essentially the same results, but the point is really to test for such consistency." I analyzed the data collected from interviews, document analysis, and focus group discussions utilizing the phenomenological reduction method.

The final product was reflective of the document analysis that served as the lens to view the relationship of the participants' experiences to what the data is telling. It also described the gaps and importance of alignment between pre-school and kindergarten programs that will somehow mitigate the pre-school teachers' challenges in preparing students for kindergarten.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness or truth value of qualitative research and transparency of the conduct

of the study was crucial to the usefulness and integrity of the findings (Cope, 2014). To establish

trustworthiness, the following methods were integrated into this study.

Credibility

Polit & Beck (2014) defined credibility as the confidence in the truth of the study, and

therefore, the findings are the most important criterion. This study utilized the triangulation of

data to establish credibility. Data collected through interviews, document analysis, and focus

group discussions were triangulated for validation. According to Creswell & Poth (2018),

researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, and theories to provide

corroborating evidence for validating the accuracy of their study. Member checking was also

used to establish credibility in this study. Creswell & Poth (2018) states that this technique

involves taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants to judge

the accuracy and credibility of the account. This process increased reliability because the

feedback came from the participants, and I ensured that their input was interpreted correctly.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability refers to the stability of the data over time and over the conditions of the

study (Polit & Beck, 2014). Both dependability and confirmability are established through the

auditing of the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Dependability and confirmability were

established through the process of member checking and sought participant feedback.

Confirmability is where the degree of findings is consistent and could be repeated (Connelly,

2016). In this process, the researcher solicits participants' views of the credibility of the findings

and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

Additionally, peer debriefing sessions were conducted to increase the reliability of data

and theme development. The researcher seeks an external check by "someone familiar with the

research of the phenomenon explored" (Creswell & Miller, 2000). For this validation strategy, I

sought corrective feedback from my dissertation chair and committee. I also considered someone

known to me with extensive knowledge and experience in early childhood education to provide

input on the data collected from the participants and who have been through the same

phenomenon. The input was based on the results of data collected after cross-referencing with

the interpretation of the textural and structural descriptions of the experiences shared by the

participants

Transferability

The researcher allows readers to decide transferability because the writer describes in

detail the participants or setting under study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers support the

study's transferability with a rich, detailed description of the context, location, and people

studied and by being transparent about analysis and trustworthiness (Connelly, 2016). According

to Creswell & Poth (2018), to ensure that the study is transferable to other contexts, thick

description is necessary, meaning that the researcher provides details when describing a case or

writing about a theme. To create transferability, I utilized bracketing to minimize biases by

putting aside my own opinion. Hence, I was mindful that the information shared was based on

the participants' accounts of their experiences without entertaining my personal experiences.

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Ethical Considerations

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Typically, ethical considerations pertain to these ethical issues related to three principles

guiding ethical research: respect for persons (i.e., privacy and consent), concern for welfare (i.e.,

minimize harm and augment reciprocity), and justice (i.e., equitable treatment and enhance

inclusivity) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In cognizance of the policies and procedures as well as

ethical and professional standards in conducting a research study, first and foremost, I obtained

approval from the Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB (Appendix A).

Disclosure on the purpose of the study has ensured all participants were well informed about the

procedures and processes of the research that were proactively planned. It was also imperative to

include cultural sensitivity with respect and let the participants know that they can withdraw at

any time. Securing necessary permission and consent from the participants were put in place.

Confidentiality was respected; accordingly, participants were presented under pseudonyms to

protect their identity. Patton (2015) advised making copies of the data as they are collected,

being certain to put one copy in a safe place where it will not be disturbed and cannot be lost or

stolen. Hence, a file cabinet with a lock is utilized for paper form documents, and electronic

information is protected with a password for five years.

Summary

Gathering descriptive accounts and other experiential material is only the starting point

for phenomenological writing (Adams & van Manen, 2017). This chapter presented the methods

encompassing the design, research questions, setting, participants, procedures, and the

researcher's role. Moreover, the data collection process description was explained based on the

guiding principles for ethical research. Planning and conducting an ethical study means that the

researcher considers and addresses all anticipated and emergent issues in the study (Creswell

&Poth, 2018). Data analysis involved bracketing, horizontalization, delimiting horizons or

meaning, clustering horizons into themes, individual textural and structural descriptions, and

coherent textural and structural descriptions.

This transcendental phenomenological study was proposed to understand better pre-

school teachers' lived experiences embracing challenges in preparing students for kindergarten.

Additionally, textural and structural descriptions were used and utilized a composite report

highlighting the participants' overall experiences. Triangulation of data collected from

interviews, document analysis, and focus group discussions has increased confidence in the

study. Factors establishing trustworthiness were also explained, encompassing credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the pre-school teachers' experiences embracing challenges in preparing students for kindergarten. An opportunity was provided to pre-school teachers from early childhood centers to share their experiences in the various aspects of equipping students with critical readiness skills upon transitioning to kindergarten. Each teacher also shared their perceptions about the alignment of the pre-k and kindergarten programs and the factors that impact pre-k students' readiness upon entering kindergarten. In addition, teachers were provided the opportunities to talk about parent involvement and student challenges in meeting kindergarten readiness and ways to improve the readiness of their students for kindergarten. Additional questions related to teachers' experiences and perceptions were discussed during the focus group interviews to ensure data triangulation. This chapter presents the participants' descriptions that appeared in a tabular form. The KRA data is also in a tabular form representing the percentage of students demonstrating kindergarten readiness by subgroup for the school years of 2017-2020, the data collected during individual and focus group interviews presented by themes, and the responses to research questions. A summary of the findings will conclude this chapter.

Participants

A final sample of 10 pre-k teachers from three early childhood centers in a public school district in the Mid-Atlantic participated in in-depth individual interviews. Six participants took part in a thorough and dynamic focus group session followed by a second focus group session with three participants. Data saturation was reached after the eighth interview when there was

sufficient information to replicate the study, and there were no new themes developed (Fusch &

Ness, 2015). Table 3 presents the participants' descriptions.

Table 3

Teacher Participants

Data Collection	Teacher /School	Total Years in Education	Years as a Pre-k Teacher Certification	Highest Educational Attainment
Interview Focus Group	Tiffany / Northern ECC	6 years	6 years / Dual Certified	Masters
Interview Focus Group	Adele / Northern ECC	14 years	5 years / Dual Certified	Masters
Interview Focus Group	Mia / Southern ECC	13 years	3 years / Dual Certified	Masters
Interview Focus Group	Jorge / Northern ECC	9 years	4 years / Special Education	Masters
Interview	Camila / Northern ECC	3 years	2 years / Special Education	Masters
Interview	Addison / Southern ECC	3 years	3 years / General Education	Masters
Interview Focus Group	Gemma / Southern ECC	3 years	2 years / Special Education	Bachelors
Interview Focus Group	Tessa / Eastern ECC	21 years	21 years / Dual Certified	Masters
Interview	Mimi / Northern ECC	23 years	2 years / General Education	Masters
Interview	Stella / Eastern ECC	26 years	6 years / Dual Certified	Masters

I adjusted the criteria to participate in this study from a minimum of three years of

preschool teaching experience to two years to allow more flexibility in meeting the required

number of participants. The modification of the criteria has provided the researcher meaningful data from teachers with different teaching backgrounds in other areas and their years of experiences, particularly in a preschool setting, with professional insights into this study's phenomenon.

Results

Theme development refers to converting codes into core concepts representing the most important aspect of the results (Morgan, 2018). Codes are often a word or phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing portion of language-based data (Saldana, 2009). Coding is a way to arrange the data into their common attributes to form a pattern that, once organized, will create a theme. Themes are meaningful patterns in the data, which researchers use to interpret that data (Morgan, 2018).

The first coding cycle used to organize the data was the combination of descriptive and in vivo coding. Descriptive coding summarizes in a word or short phrase the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data (Saldana, 2009). In vivo coding refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data (Saldana, 2009). Participants' actual language from their responses was captured so that the researcher can establish a more intimate understanding of the participant's account of their experiences of the phenomenon.

The second cycle of coding involves Pattern coding and Axial coding. The purpose of the second cycle coding is to group those summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes, or constructs (Miles et al., 2014). Pattern codes can emerge from repeatedly observed behaviors, actions, norms, routines, and relationships (Miles et al., 2014). Axial coding refers to the refinement of categories linked in the form of relationships (Alhassan et al., 2019). Achieving

saturation is one of the ultimate goals of Axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It happens when there is no novel information emerging and the patterns have already been established.

Memoing contributes strongly to the development and revision of the coding system (Miles et al., 2014), where the researcher will document and reflect on the coding process and code choices; how the process of inquiry is taking shape, and the emergent patterns – all possibly leading towards theory (Saldana, 2009). I have undergone reflections throughout the coding process and create themes, documenting every point of wonderings and discoveries in the researcher's journal for analysis and findings.

Teachers' Motivational Factors in Teaching Preschool Students

Teachers intimated the reward aspect that motivates them to teach preschool students. Mimi explained that the classroom structure in preschool is more manageable than in kindergarten "I like the fact that there are four adults in the classroom with 20 students". Gemma mentioned, "having a classroom team collaboration is helpful." Jorge spoke about his students with special needs, "witnessing my students grow in several ways despite their delays." Tessa considered teaching preschool students as "always a great opportunity to reach them at a very young age, their brains are malleable with a sense of wonder, and I wanted to be a part of their brain development." Tiffany commented, "They make me feel young and energized."

The reward aspect of teaching preschool students is rooted in teachers' passion for teaching and being a part of the children's development to their full potential. Camila quipped, "See how much they've grown makes me feel fulfilled." Mia stated, "developing those personal connections with the students and their families is priceless." Addison added, "I feel like a builder; teaching those foundational skills to help them ready for kindergarten." Adele spoke about her students with special needs "I know in my heart that they will achieve something, and I

am a part of it." Tessa shared with excitement when she talked about those moments when she can say, "it worked."

Teachers' Challenges in Teaching Pre-school Students

Teachers agreed that their teaching challenges are always related to students' challenges in the many aspects of their learning. Teachers established that their challenges emanate from students' social-emotional deficits and language barriers. Furthermore, teachers agreed that the most effective way to manage their challenges is to address students' challenges. Stella explained that, for the most part, teachers have no control over these challenges. "I am trying to manage these challenges to the best I can, I can only do so much, and I have to recognize what are the things I have control over." Tessa asserted, "we do not know what our students bring with them when they come to us in the Fall, but in my experience, the emotional aspect is the biggest piece."

Students' Social-Emotional Deficits

Teachers agreed that students' social-emotional deficit is too prominent. They come from various aspects of the students' background and are influenced by the various experiences from school and home. Stella commented that "students' lack of persistence with tasks and lack of focus makes it difficult for the teaching and learning to take place effectively. Tiffany mentioned, "handling behaviors will take away a good amount of instructional time." Jorge talked about students challenging behavior "tantrums are a common manifestation of students expression of needs and want." Adelle affirmed, "those behaviors are results of what they are going through from home, many times, they come to school straight from bed, no breakfast, and even some of them come with soiled diapers." Gemma explained, "Students coming to school brings with them their emotional baggage, and they do not even recognize it because they are

just kids, but they manifest in their behavior."

Language Barriers

Due to the diversity of the student population, the teachers determined that language barriers are critical factors that foster student failure in the classroom. Students' language deficits result from the different elements that impact student language skills: a student being an English Language Learner (ELL), a student with speech delay, and a student with a disability. Ultimately, these become language barriers that impede student learning. Adelle explained, "I cannot communicate, and it creates a domino effect; they get frustrated and then misbehave, and then no learning will take place." Tessa added, "Most of our ELL students are coming to us with zero English with parents that cannot speak or comprehend English." Camila shared, "Most of my ELL students are being put in the Special Education program because they cannot communicate in English, and for me, that is not a disability." Mia added, "preschool students are tested for ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) towards the end of the school year and will not be identified as ELL until they reach kindergarten level." Gemma explained, "it is a challenge for us teachers because we are not trained or equipped to teach ELL students."

KRA Data

KRA is given in the early November of the school year. In school years 2017-18 and 2018-2019, the KRA was conducted through sample administration, where 12% of kindergarten students in the district were tested. In the school year 2019-20, the KRA was done through census administration, where 100% of the kindergarten students in the district were tested. Table 4 indicated the percentage of students demonstrating kindergarten readiness by subgroups of ELL and students with disabilities.

Table 4

Percentage of Students Demonstrating Kindergarten Readiness by Subgroup

KRA Data from 2017-2020

School Year	ELL	Student with Disability
2017-2018	11%	12%
2018-2019	19.5%	9.6%
2019-2020	14%	14%

Note: Source; Ready at Five

Factors That Impact Students' Transition to Kindergarten

Teachers recognized that the factors that impact preschool students' transition to kindergarten are rooted in emotional and social aspects: emerging from parent and family structure, student degree of independence, and pre-academic readiness. Tessa explained, "students that are demonstrating social-emotional balance are more likely to be academically ready." Jorge agreed, "preschool students that show some degree of independence can function well in a kindergarten classroom with the teacher-student ratio being 1:25."

Parent and Family Structure

Preschool teachers agreed that student's parent and family structure is not within their control; however, it is critical to students' transition to kindergarten. The teachers also recognized that parents and families have different circumstances, and what the child brings to school is a manifestation of how the parent and family structure impact the student's ability to learn and adapt to the kindergarten setting. Adele explained, "our students are very young; their vulnerability is fragile; they need a nurturing home environment." Addison added, "there are parents that are too involved and tend to do things for their child, and that takes away the

opportunity for the student to learn independence." Mia stated, "we cannot fix our students' family set-up or structure, but they are certainly affecting attendance, behavior, and ultimately, the child's learning." Mia added, "attendance creates the gap in the continuum of learning."

Student Independence

Teachers established that preschool students that show some degree of independence are more likely to have a smooth transition to kindergarten. A degree of independence means that they can follow routines, self-advocate, and being comfortable adjusting to the new environment. Jorge asserted, "I am teaching my students to learn to self-advocate and set their minds that it is all right to ask." Tiffany added, "degree of independence to me is when students can follow at least two-step directions, and they can take care of their personal needs." Gemma said, "kindergarten setting is far different from preschool setting, and being comfortable adjusting to the new environment is important." Addison commented, "our preschool students are like fish from the lake and jumping into the ocean when they go to kindergarten." Addison added, "they need that degree of independence to swim across the expectations of kindergarten."

Pre-Academic Readiness

Preschool teachers agreed that student's pre-academic readiness is as essential as social-emotional readiness as they transition to kindergarten. Nevertheless, students' social-emotional readiness will determine their pre-academic readiness. Mimi asserted, "if the students are not socially and emotionally ready, then they are not ready to learn academically." Mia affirmed, "social-emotional readiness first and then academic and everything else will fall into places."

Preparing Students for Kindergarten

Preschool teachers recognized the importance of preschool student's fluid transition to kindergarten as a two-way process, preparing the students and the receiving teachers. They

perceived that kindergarten teacher's readiness to receive their incoming students in the Fall requires intentional planning, and they can only base it on the information they have on hand. Tessa explained, "our preschool students' sense of readiness for kindergarten will manifest at the beginning of the school year as the outcome of how they are received when they walk through that door." Stella quipped, "I think the general prescription is to have a welcoming environment regardless of where the students are coming from." Tessa added, "as simple as calling them by their first name with a smile on the first day of school makes them feel welcome and would even wonder, "my teacher knows me already," and that is a good start." Camila commented, "I used the idea of going to kindergarten as a way to encourage my students to persist on their tasks to let me know they are ready for the big school; I tell them that you need to be ready for kindergarten because you will not be in preschool forever."

The Articulation Process

The school district's transition process involves articulation where the sending preschool and the receiving kindergarten teachers meet towards the end of the school year to discuss students' quantitative and qualitative data. However, the articulation process in the district only involves students in the special education program. Articulation is not being conducted for typically developing students. Tiffany explained, "Being a general education teacher, we need to articulate our outgoing, typically developing students so that kindergarten teachers know the students that are walking through their door in the Fall." Gemma asserted, "the articulation process for students with special needs prepares the kindergarten teachers to meet and welcome what the students are bringing with them in the Fall."

The Mind Set

The preschool teachers agreed that setting the preschool students' minds for kindergarten is essential for their readiness. Gemma quipped, "I get them excited and talk about what it is like to be in a "big school." Stella added, "I give them more opportunities for independent works, and no matter what the outcome, I tell them to feel proud of what they have accomplished." Jorge affirmed, "we have to help them build that capacity and develop their self-esteem that leads to independence." Tessa talked about the importance of teaching students how to problem-solve, "if students learn how to problem-solve, they will learn how to cope with their frustrations." Tiffany mentioned the importance of parent mind setting as well "parents also need to have that mindset and encourage them to have those conversations with their children about going to kindergarten." Mia mentioned, "I normally encouraged parents to do a drive-by to the receiving school several times before the end of the school year, and my students would share that experience in the classroom really excited."

Research Question Responses

Central Research Question

What do preschool teachers perceive as challenges in preparing students for kindergarten? Preschool teachers' perspectives about challenges in preparing students for kindergarten are consequential from students' challenges. Teachers agreed that the students' most significant challenge is the social-emotional aspect which is critical to their learning; it impedes their ability to absorb the preschool experiences that will prepare them for kindergarten. Jorge explained, "students' utilization of the learned social-emotional skills in preschool will determine their readiness for kindergarten; they acquire those skills through play." Mimi stated, "in my previous experience as a kindergarten teacher, I find kindergarten too academic, they lost

sight of the idea that play is an integral part of their learning; it is where they continue to develop their problem-solving skills, emotion identification, and self-regulation that will equip them in learning those academic skills to fully prepare them for kindergarten." Tessa asserted, "developmentally, we are preparing them socially and emotionally, but kindergarten program is not meeting them in the real world, that is why I never teach kindergarten because I feel like too many contradictions for me as a developmental educator." Stella commented, "if students are well-grounded socially and emotionally, academic learning will follow." Camila added, "I think in preschool, building the students social-emotional foundation is what will make them successful in their learning which they will carry on through next grade level."

Sub Question One

What are teachers' perceptions about the importance of alignment between preschool and kindergarten programs? Teachers' common responses revolved around the continuity of learning from preschool to kindergarten. The teachers believe that having exposure and access to the kindergarten program will help them better prepare their students for kindergarten. Tiffany explained, "it is like a roadmap; I need to know what direction I am taking my students to kindergarten; knowing what they need to bring with them is as important as knowing if they can withstand the challenges on their journey to a new environment." Mimi shared "based on my previous experience as a kindergarten teacher and now being a preschool teacher, I can see the gap between preschool program and kindergarten expectations which make sense that students that are transitioning to kindergarten are struggling." Mimi added kindergarten expectations are too broad compared to how the preschool program prepares students for kindergarten." Jorge asserted, "I think the alignment is as important as to get the preschool students to that spot where they can begin to learn new things and utilize the skills they have learned in preschool."

Sub Question Two

What are markers of preschool students that demonstrate kindergarten readiness? Teachers' responses lead to the social-emotional aspect as the key to students' readiness for kindergarten; emotionally ready students are ready to learn. Jorge explained, "We are talking about a conventional kindergarten; of course, the typically developing students are more likely to exhibit readiness; I am thinking about the students with special needs." Jorge added, "the most important thing no matter how you prepared them is you have to set them up in the right place and appropriate social environment where they can function developmentally." Tiffany asserted, "When the child gets to the point of a certain degree of independence where he can communicate his emotions, wants, and needs, then he is ready." Adelle affirmed, "I am speaking for students with special needs; I would add to communicate in different ways; it could be verbally, use of visuals, or gestures." Adelle added, "and their ability to communicate would come from self-confidence and being able to replace frustrations with problem-solving skills." Stella stated, "when they have that social-emotional stability, then academic learning follows." Tessa said, "I noticed that in my classroom, students who are doing well in academics are those that we did not have to deal with any behavior concerns, and I am talking in general, for both typically developing students and those with special needs."

Sub Question Three

What do teachers perceive as ways to improve the readiness of their students for kindergarten? Preschool teachers' responses are pointing to the importance of mindset activities. Getting students and parents excited about kindergarten will prepare them for a smooth transition to kindergarten. Providing them with more opportunities for independent work and making them feel good about it will add to their confidence level and increase that state of mind that they are

ready for kindergarten. Camila quipped, "I always tell my students when they complete their task especially beginning Spring. "Oh, I like your work; you are now ready for kindergarten," and you can see that pride in their face." Teachers also talked about getting students used to following routines and directions. Mia said, "The student-teacher ratio in kindergarten is 1:25; students will not get the kind of support they get in preschool, but once they established following routines and directions, they will be fine." Adelle explained, "for students with special needs, I would like to reiterate the importance of having them learn to communicate to the best of their ability; whether it is verbally, through pictures, or gestures, the most important thing is they can express for themselves." Adelle added, "I will provide parents and the receiving teacher some form of coaching and visuals for non-verbal students so that there will be consistency, that will eliminate some of the anxieties for my students being in a new environment."

<p style="text-align:center">Summary</p>

Preschool teachers' experiences in the pre-school setting vary in the number of years, school culture, community, and student demographics and subgroups that impact how they manage their challenges in preparing students for kindergarten. Teachers' responses have established that their challenges are embedded in students' challenges. Students' challenges are rooted in their lack of developmentally appropriate social-emotional skills, which are critical in their readiness for kindergarten. Teachers' responses lead to uncertainty if students catch up in time without the social-emotional skills necessary for them to thrive, where they can adapt their behavior to be disposed to learn. Our pre-school students need to have those opportunities to be spontaneous and allow those subtle experiences in their social environment to reinforce those pre-school learning experiences that will potentially prepare them for kindergarten. Teachers agreed that preparing students for kindergarten starts from building blocks of social-emotional

aspects that would impact students' development of independence, self-advocacy, and ability to communicate using different platforms, verbally, through visuals, and gestures. Mind setting is also a critical aspect in preparing students for kindergarten, getting students excited about big school, and use it as leverage to help them build their capacity by persisting with tasks and get the feel-good of being kindergarten-ready.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to describe preschool teachers' experiences embracing challenges in preparing students for kindergarten. Kindergarten readiness is gaining prevalence as a viable strategy to close the learning gap and improve equity in achieving lifelong learning and full developmental potential among young children (Kenne et al., 2018). No conclusive solution has been determined to ensure that all students are prepared for kindergarten (Brown & Lan, 2015). Consequently, preschool education provides a structured setting and is the most practical way to kindergarten readiness. This chapter begins with the interpretation of findings given the thematic results of the study from participants' accounts of their experiences related to preparing students for kindergarten. Also, the implication of this study to the policy and practice will be explained. The limitations and delimitations will be justified, and subsequently, the rationale for the theoretical and methodological implications will be described. Furthermore, the recommendations for future research related to this study will be presented, and a conclusion for this qualitative study will be recounted.

Discussion

The discussion section of this study emphasizes the researcher's interpretation of the findings, which are supported by the empirical and theoretical sources of data. The researcher will begin this with the understanding of findings, followed by the implications for practice and policy, and subsequently, the theoretical and empirical implications will be clarified. The researcher will also explain the limitations and delimitations following the recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

There are three major themes the emerged from the analysis of the study results that align with the central research question; What do preschool teachers perceive as challenges in preparing students for kindergarten? The three major themes were: (a) students' lack of developmentally appropriate social-emotional skills, (b) language barrier (c) teachers' perception about the alignment of the preschool and kindergarten programs. The following is the summary of thematic findings with interpretations.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Theme one highlights the significance of students' developmentally appropriate social-emotional skills to be ready for kindergarten. Social-emotional readiness involves some degree of independence where they can follow routines, self-regulation, self-advocacy, appropriate self-expression, and the ability to adjust to the new environment. Pre-school teachers face challenges in managing students' behaviors, making it more difficult for them to teach the academic skills that are equally important for preschool students' readiness for kindergarten. Theme two showcases the impact of the language barrier in preparing students for kindergarten. The language barrier could be a manifestation of students' cultural background, student delays in speech development, and could also be due to the nature of a disability. Essentially, it becomes a barrier that impedes student learning that poses a challenge for teachers. Theme three illustrates the teachers' perceptions about the alignment of the preschool and kindergarten programs and their impact in getting preschool students ready for kindergarten. Pre-school teachers' limited exposure to the kindergarten program makes it challenging for them to prepare preschool students to meet kindergarten expectations.

Social-Emotional Skills

The social-emotional aspect of preschool education is critical in every student's success upon transitioning to kindergarten and later through their educational journey. Pre-school teachers' significant challenges in preparing students for kindergarten are ramifications of student's social-emotional skill deficits. Behaviors are students' means of communicating their wants, needs, and frustrations. Children who demonstrate difficulty with social skills display more negative emotions and challenging behaviors that may present challenges for teachers (Curby et al., 2011).

Pre-school students lacking social-emotional skills result from the different elements that emanate from various factors in their developmental milestones. Some of the pieces directly affect the family structure, home care, parent involvement, lack of life experiences and exposure to what the outside of their world can offer, disability, and lack of training for independence, appropriate self-expression, and self-regulation. Conversely, managing behaviors takes away a considerable amount of instructional time and consequently drifting away from the teacher's lesson plan for the day. Preschool education is where students build those social-emotional foundational skills that will help them absorb academic learning and develop some degree of independence that will fully prepare them for kindergarten. It is an observable fact that preschool students that are well-rounded socially and emotionally are academically prepared for kindergarten.

Language Barriers

More often, the language barrier pertains only to ELL students from Pre-k-12. Every classroom in the early childhood centers has a mixture of ELL students and students with special needs. Nevertheless, many students in the early childhood centers in the district are impacted by

their language deficits because of the different factors. These factors include but are not limited to race and ethnicity, language delay, or due to student's disability that essentially becomes a barrier that impedes student learning.

Pre-school teachers' challenges are a combination of not being well equipped to teach ELL students and teaching students with language deficits that require special education services. Some ELL students come to school with zero English. Furthermore, their parents and families are also non-English speakers and cannot extend the learning from school to home. Pre-school students are not tested for English Language Proficiency until they reach kindergarten, and therefore there are no accommodations afforded to them.

Students with special needs often demonstrate language deficits due to the nature of their disability. Although many of them receive speech services from related service providers as stipulated in their IEP, their language deficit becomes a barrier that slows their learning through their everyday experiences in the classroom. Ultimately, the classroom teachers will have to implement the strategies that related service providers have recommended in addition to what they have already in place.

Frequently, students challenging behaviors are manifestations of their frustrations arising from the language barrier both receptively and expressively. Students' behavior is their means of communicating. Not understanding what is being said to them and not expressing their thoughts, wants, and needs would challenge the preschool teachers in teaching those essential skills that would prepare them for kindergarten.

Parents of both the ELL and students with special needs cannot also support their children in their learning. As mentioned earlier, parents of the ELL students often are zero English, and therefore learning will not occur at home. Similarly, parent of the students with

special needs relies solely on the teachers in terms of their child's education due to lack of the knowledge and skills to handle their child's disability. Teachers have been very creative in using visuals and other instructional materials to cater to ELL students' learning needs and the students with special needs. They use different learning modalities, differentiated instructions, individualized instructional materials that include visuals, individualized schedules, and tiered manipulative lessons and activities. Consequently, it requires more than their work hours to prepare thus, sacrificing their time to ensure that they have everything to meet their students' needs.

Alignment of the Preschool and Kindergarten Programs

Preschool teachers concurred that their access and exposure to the kindergarten curriculum are limited, and they cannot speak with confidence about the alignment of the preschool and kindergarten programs. Additionally, teachers cannot articulate a correlation between the ELA and KRA because they lack sufficient knowledge about the KRA, mainly how it is administered. Gemma asserted, "I can only speak about the teacher-student ratio of 1:25 in a kindergarten classroom based on my conversations with kindergarten teachers; in preschool, the teacher-student ratio is 4:20." Addison explained, "the programs do not necessarily align or misalign; where we leave off is where they pick up, but our focus is more on social-emotional, and in kindergarten, they ramp up quickly into academics."

Preschool teachers also had a desire to learn how the KRA is being administered. Tiffany asserted, "I have never been exposed to KRA, and I think it is important for preschool teachers to at least have some knowledge of it; I do not know how to prepare my students for the KRA." Jorge said, "the same thing with me, I am not intimately familiar with KRA, and I think it will be helpful to know how we can better prepare our students for KRA." Camila asserted, "It is not

about teaching to the test; it is how to prepare our students for the test." Tessa expounded, "I wanted to know at least the KRA format and how it is being administered; in ELA, we based our rating completely on observational data; in KRA, I have no idea."

Pre-school teachers lack exposure to the kindergarten curriculum, and the program is one of the challenges for preschool teachers in the early childhood setting in preparing students for kindergarten. It represents the disconnect between where the students are and where they need to be. Consequently, preschool teachers' knowledge of the kindergarten expectations will guide them on what skills, knowledge, and behaviors they need to teach their students to prepare for kindergarten. Table 5 represents the overall KRA data for the state and the district from 2017-2020, showing the percentage of students demonstrating kindergarten readiness.

Table 5

Overall KRA Data from 2017-2020

Percentage of Students Demonstrating Kindergarten Readiness				
School Year	State	District	Rank in the State	KRA Administration
2017-2018	45%	34%	25th/25	Sample - 12% of students in the district
2018-2019	47%	39%	23rd/25	Sample – 12% of students in the district
2019-2020	47%	35%	25th/25	Census – 100% of students in the district

Note: Source; Ready at Five

There are 25 jurisdictions in the state, and the district rank at the lowest in 2017-18, 3rd from the lowest in 2018-19, and again the lowest in 2019-20. The sample administration represented 12% of students in the district were tested in KRA; on the other hand, the census administration represented 100% of students in the district were tested in KRA.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The problem addressed in this research was the preschool teachers' challenges in preparing students for kindergarten. Data collected from interviews and focus group sessions indicated that policies and practices that would improve teachers preparing students for kindergarten are vital in approaching the stated problem.

Implications for Policy

The preschool teachers did not conclusively determine if the preschool and kindergarten programs are aligned based on data collected. However, these teachers' lack of exposure to the kindergarten program presents challenges in preparing students for kindergarten. All preschool students, regardless of where they earned their preschool education, are tested using the KRA. Pre-school teachers in early childhood centers are limited in preparing their students for kindergarten due to a lack of access to the resources and information about kindergarten expectations. Pre-school classrooms housed in public elementary schools have a better chance of accessing the kindergarten program.

In contrast, the preschool teachers in the early childhood centers have limited to no access to the kindergarten program. Preschool teachers in the ECC rely on the observation rubric to determine students' readiness for kindergarten, measured by the KRA. Their lack of knowledge about KRA administration and kindergarten expectations makes it difficult for them to prepare students to the level they need to demonstrate readiness for kindergarten. Therefore, I recommend a policy that directs the provision to ECC preschool teachers the information about the kindergarten program, expectations, structures, including KRA administration, so that these preschool teachers can develop the preschool students' necessary skills, knowledge, and behaviors to thrive in a kindergarten setting.

Even in the ECC setting, school administrators' roles have shifted to instructional leadership, focusing on optimizing student learning opportunities. Instructional leaders can better support preschool teachers if they know and understand the scope and sequence of the preschool in the ECC to kindergarten. Instructional leaders should intentionally look at teacher's problems of practice that impact student learning challenges. Data utilization sessions with preschool teachers and looking at multiple data sources to plan for the next steps are vital in improving teacher practice and student learning towards kindergarten readiness.

Another implication is the appropriate placement of students in the kindergarten program based on their disabilities and capabilities. Students who are misplaced often struggle in kindergarten; an example is a student with special needs placed in a regular kindergarten classroom. There is no available placement for students performing between emerging skills and demonstrating skills. These students often struggle in traditional settings because of the teacher-student ratio of 1:25, following the early childhood setting with a teacher-student ratio of 4:20. Special needs students usually do not get the support they need to thrive in kindergarten because of a lack of adult support.

Implications for Practice

Teacher practice is what determines the teacher factor. The data revealed that preschool teachers in the ECC setting are motivated by laying the foundational skills to develop their students' skills, knowledge, and behavior essentials to succeed in kindergarten. This motivational factor fuels teacher intentionality in lesson planning and lesson implementation to meet their students' different learning styles, deficits, needs, abilities, and disabilities. Therefore, it is implied that professional development in teacher practice is vital to improving student learning. Research supports the findings that teachers who have students lacking the readiness skills

needed to put in place strategies that will encourage learning and strengthen readiness skills (Puccioni, 2018).

Consequently, teachers need a roadmap that will guide their work in preparing students for kindergarten. Professional development through collaboration at the beginning of the school year between kindergarten and pre-school teachers in the ECC on what the pre-school students should know and do at the end of pre-k is worthwhile for the teachers benefiting pre-school students' readiness for kindergarten. Essentially, establishing a constant collaboration between the ECCs and feeder schools through articulations for students with special needs and typically developing peers towards the end of the school year to share student educational information is crucial for preschool students' successful transition to kindergarten. Using teachers as a resource is of great value in helping identify activities and learning centers that could help increase readiness skills (Sak, 2016).

Theoretical Implications

Pertinent to this study is Vygotsky's theory of zone proximal development (ZPD), which according to Puntambeker and Hubscher (2005), represents the amount of learning possible by a student given the proper instructional conditions. Evidence collected from the participants supports the theoretical framework that preschool students' readiness to kindergarten is relative to their experiences in the early childhood setting. Pre-school students' social-emotional and language skills are crucial to their overall readiness for kindergarten, which can be impacted by the different elements in their preschool learning environment.

Implications of Social-Emotional Skills

Pre-school teachers perceived that pe-school students' social-emotional deficits significantly impact their academic learning. Such deficits are manifestations of family

dynamics, student disability, and inequities. The implication of increasing parent and family involvement in their children's education through school family engagement activities will positively influence parents to strengthen the home setting into a more nurturing environment. Similarly, educating parents about their child's disability and providing them with strategies to use in the home setting to extend learning will decrease students' social-emotional deficits, thus making them ready for learning in the classroom. Additionally, students' access to resources and meaningful learning experiences by optimizing and offering choices in the learning environment and supporting goal setting for independence, self-regulation, and self-advocacy will result in students' social-emotional balance crucial for kindergarten readiness. When students are equipped with social-emotional skills at the time of kindergarten enrollment, fewer perceived challenges are seen in the classroom (Wenz-Gross et al., 2018).

Students bring their social-emotional baggage in the classroom, impacting their ability to process information to perform at the level they need to do tasks in the classroom.
It is implied to train teachers and paraprofessionals for additional behavior intervention strategies that will equip them to address the different students' social-emotional challenges that they can embed in their daily classroom lessons and activities. They need the training to provide altering low preference and high preference activities based on students' interests and motivational factors. Additionally, professional development on reinforcers to increase time on task and a positive behavior intervention approach can be added to their tool kit. Professional development can enrich and strengthen the teaching skills needed to help struggling students (Polly et al., 2017).

Implications of Language Barrier for English Language Learners (ELL)

Evidence collected from the participants revealed the considerable impact of language deficits that impedes students' learning for English Language Learners and for students with a disability that frustrates both the students and teachers. Often, students referred for special education testing eligibility result from the impact of the language barrier. Conversely, ELL and students with special needs thrive in the early childhood setting when formal language and communication accommodations and support are provided.

Students enrolled in preschool with observable evidence of not having English as their primary language are not identified as ELL until they enter kindergarten. Therefore, preschool teachers in the ECC setting are not adequately trained to teach these students. They rely only upon having a Spanish speaker in the classroom to translate for them during lessons and activities. However, not all classrooms have access to a Spanish-speaking adult, not to mention the other students that speak French, Creole, and other languages. Consequently, preschool teachers' lack of the skills to meet the ELL students' language deficits impact the potential to maximize students' learning. Therefore, it is implied that the presence of an ESOL teacher in the building to support students and teachers in the teaching and learning processes in the classroom is essential to address those language barriers and allow students to reach their potential. Aligned with related literature, teachers need to be trained to use multiple modalities in teaching ELL students that focus on representations and expressions. To promote the optimal language development of all young children, including monolingual English speakers and ELLs, adults in ECE classrooms should use a wide array of language facilitation techniques (Sawyer et al., 2018). Consequently, the use of pictures and objects to introduce new vocabulary and academic

content, scaffolding to expand executive functions, and optimizing learning opportunities with the help of manipulatives and display of information via visuals and realia.

Another implication is embedding culturally sensitive lessons and activities in teachers' lesson planning and implementation to promote students' sense of belongingness. Such practice will ensure that teachers use various teaching methods that are unbiased and beneficial to students in the class, thus allowing every student to learn in their way (Mantzicopouloset al., 2018).

Implications of Language Barriers for Students with Disability

Pre-school students' language deficit due to their disability requires teachers to use different communication techniques to address their students' learning styles and needs. Many of these students receive language-related services based on their Individualized Education Plan and what the classroom teachers provide in the classroom. Nevertheless, teachers need to be equipped to implement the strategies recommended by the specialists to ensure that they are implementing those strategies with fidelity and consistency. Therefore, it is implied that pieces of training for teachers and paraprofessionals on the proper use of assistive communication technology and the use of varying models of student response and self-expression such as but not limited to core vocabulary board, sentence strips, behavior, and academic support visuals and tiered activities with the use of manipulative. Aligned with the related literature; Within the zone of instruction and learning, rich verbal interactions accompanied by reinforcing environmental cues are known to improve language development (Bouchard et al., 2010; Abel et al., 2015). Consequently, teachers and other adults in the classroom who utilize the strategies mentioned earlier with sufficient knowledge and setting up the learning environment that would cater to

students' language acquisition will optimize teaching and learning in the classroom and other school settings.

Empirical Implications

Due to the researcher's lack of awareness, going through different channels to get the correct information about the district's research and evaluation policies for employees in obtaining permission to conduct research in the three early childhood centers impacted the timeline for the data collection on this research study. Therefore, it is implied that future researchers should be knowledgeable about the participating district's policies about research processes for employees before entering the IRB process to ensure that such policies would coincide with their data collection timeline and aligning of resources.

Limitations and Delimitations

The first limitation of this study was collecting data from the participants through interviews and focus group sessions. Due to the COVID pandemic, data collection only allows for virtual interviews. Additionally, the scheduling of the interviews and focus group sessions was a challenge because of the additional workload on teachers to ensure that teaching and learning are taking place even during this unprecedented situation. Several emails and phone calls were necessary to get participants' consent. Snowball sampling method was utilized where the initial participants invited other potential participants that meet the criteria to participate in the study.

The second limitation was obtaining permission from the school district to conduct interviews with the participants. The researcher's lack of awareness of the district's policies on employees conducting research added to the quandaries. Initially, the participants are the teachers from the same school that the researcher is also working as an administrator. Although

the IRB approved the proposal, the school district did not agree to it. To address the situation, the researcher had to restart recruitment from the other three schools with the same setting, which took double the timeline for data collection.

The third limitation was the additional time it requires to secure permission from the school principals. For example, one of the principals was a novice and had surgery and was out of the office for three weeks. As a result, no other administrator in the building gave and signed the principal permission form. The principal finally signed the permission form two weeks after she came back to the office.

Member checking through the second focus group session was conducted during the Spring Break with only four of the ten participants due to conflicts in their schedules. Additionally, participants had already made plans for the break. The timing for this study significantly impacts the level of commitment from the participants; initially, they committed to participating in all three sessions; individual interview, focus group 1, and focus group 2. Although none of the participants withdrew, six opted not to participate in the last focus group session. Even though the participants' level of commitment was less than expected, teachers' interviews produced more data than the researcher has anticipated. In addition, the focus group sessions were great avenues to confirm the data collected from the individual discussion with meaningful responses for the additional questions.

Delimitations of this study include the adjustment of the criteria from three years or more of teaching experience in a preschool setting to two years to allow flexibility in recruiting participants that yielded more participants. An additional delimiting factor was recruiting participants from other three early childhood centers to comply with the school district's

prohibition of involving teachers from the school where the researcher was an administrator to participate in the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

The data gathered from this study emerged the perceived challenges of preschool teachers in preparing students for kindergarten in a school district in Mid Atlantic State. The purpose of this study is to give preschool teachers with more than two years of experience the opportunity to share the challenges in their practice associated with preparing students for kindergarten. This study may give rise to a purposeful conversation among the policymakers in the school district about action steps to strengthen the system in place in supporting the preschool teachers in the ECC setting in preparing students for kindergarten.

Future research would encompass conducting a phenomenological study on preschool teachers housed in an elementary public school setting embracing challenges in preparing students for kindergarten using the same set of interviews and focus group questions. Doing a phenomenology study with the same data instruments in this research may establish a pattern of challenges preschool teachers embrace in preparing students for kindergarten regardless of the educational setting; otherwise, the result may be different.

An additional recommendation is conducting quantitative research measuring the kindergarten readiness of the preschool students from the ECC and students housed in the elementary public-school setting using the KRA. Comparing the results would determine the gaps in preparing students for kindergarten across different environments and, therefore, may spawn more meaningful conversations among the policymakers in the school district.

A final recommendation for future research is conducting ethnographic research about the language barrier among preschool ELL students and those with special needs and how they

are overcoming challenges in meeting kindergarten expectations. Observing this group of students in a natural learning environment will generate data that would yield to the exploration of other resources and strategies that will better prepare these students for kindergarten.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to describe the preschool teachers embracing challenges in preparing students for kindergarten. The literature review indicated established patterns that align with the theoretical framework by Vygotsky's zone of proximal development that summarizes the importance of proper instructional and educational conditions to maximize student learning and teacher practice. Such patterns are supported by the data gathered in this study and revealed that teachers' challenges are rooted in the students' challenges emanating from their social-emotional deficits and lack of language skills that impede their ability to acquire the skills for kindergarten readiness. Teachers' limited understanding and access to kindergarten expectations are an added challenge in facilitating avenues to develop the critical skills for students to be kindergarten-ready. The purpose of this research was to spark much-needed conversations among policymakers, particularly those who are involved in the early learning department, and determine the impact of these challenges on preschool teachers in preparing students for kindergarten.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval-Exempt

December 17, 2020
Rhodora Alonzo
David Vacchi

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-295 Preschool Teachers' Experiences Embracing
Challenges in Preparing Students for Kindergarten

Dear Rhodora Alonzo, David Vacchi:

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.(iii). 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) if at least one of the following criteria is
met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the
human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects,
and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

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
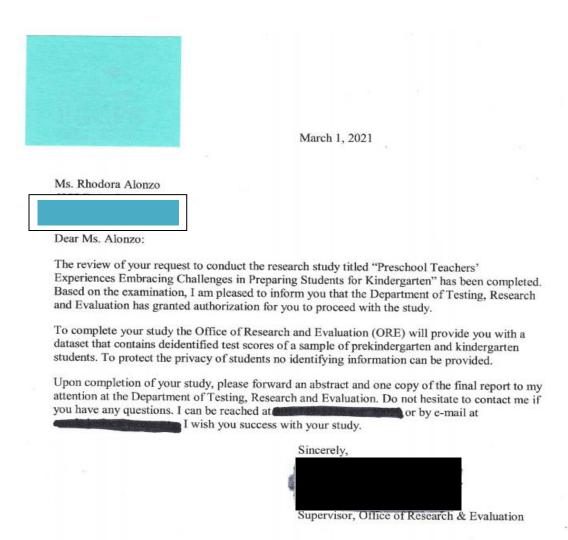submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

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,

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
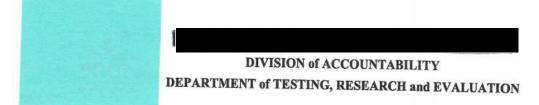**Research Ethics Office**

APPENDIX B

School District Research and Evaluation Approval to Conduct Research

March 1, 2021

Ms. Rhodora Alonzo

Dear Ms. Alonzo:

The review of your request to conduct the research study titled "Preschool Teachers' Experiences Embracing Challenges in Preparing Students for Kindergarten" has been completed. Based on the examination, I am pleased to inform you that the Department of Testing, Research and Evaluation has granted authorization for you to proceed with the study.

To complete your study the Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) will provide you with a dataset that contains deidentified test scores of a sample of prekindergarten and kindergarten students. To protect the privacy of students no identifying information can be provided.

Upon completion of your study, please forward an abstract and one copy of the final report to my attention at the Department of Testing, Research and Evaluation. Do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions. I can be reached at or by e-mail at I wish you success with your study.

Sincerely,

Supervisor, Office of Research & Evaluation

APPENDIX C

Principal Permission To Conduct Research

DIVISION of ACCOUNTABILITY
DEPARTMENT of TESTING, RESEARCH and EVALUATION

Principal Permission to Conduct Research Study[1]

Do not write in this box – DTRE use only		
March 1, 2021	June 30, 2021	RE-2021-047
Authorization Date	Authorization Expiration Date	DRE Application Number

Ms. Rhodora Alonzo has received conditional authorization from the Office of Research and Evaluation to conduct the following research study:

"Preschool Teachers' Experiences Embracing Challenges in Preparing Students for Kindergarten"

in Prince George's County Public Schools. The researcher would like to conduct the study in:

▆▆▆ Early Childhood Center
School

Implementation of this study is contingent upon the researcher securing the **permission** of the principal in the above-listed school in which the study will be conducted.

APPROVED
EXPIRES ON
JUNE 30, 2021
▆▆ - Research Office

▆▆▆▆
DTRE Staff Signature

____ Approved   ____ Disapproved

Remarks:

▆▆▆   ▆▆▆   3/4/21

Principal Name   Signature   Date

Should you have any questions or concerns about this matter, please call the Research and Evaluation office at ▆▆▆ **before** granting permission.

████████████ COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
DIVISION of ACCOUNTABILITY
DEPARTMENT of TESTING, RESEARCH and EVALUATION

Principal Permission to Conduct Research Study[1]

Do not write in this box – DTRE use only		
March 1, 2021	June 30, 2021	RE-2021-047
Authorization Date	Authorization Expiration Date	DRE Application Number

Ms. Rhodora Alonzo   has received conditional authorization from the Office of Research and Evaluation to conduct the following research study:

"Preschool Teachers' Experiences Embracing Challenges in Preparing Students for Kindergarten"

in Prince George's County Public Schools. The researcher would like to conduct the study in:

████████ **Early Childhood Center**
School

Implementation of this study is contingent upon the researcher securing the **permission** of the principal in the above-listed school in which the study will be conducted.

APPROVED
EXPIRES ON
JUNE 30, 2021
████ Research Office

████████████████

DTRE Staff Signature

___X___ Approved   _____ Disapproved

Remarks:

████████████████   3/3/2021
Principal Name   Signature   Date

DIVISION of ACCOUNTABILITY
DEPARTMENT of TESTING, RESEARCH and EVALUATION

Principal Permission to Conduct Research Study[1]

Do not write in this box — DTRE use only		
March 1, 2021	**June 30, 2021**	**RE-2021-047**
Authorization Date	Authorization Expiration Date	DRE Application Number

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███████ **Early Childhood Center**
School

Implementation of this study is contingent upon the researcher securing the **permission** of the principal in the above-listed school in which the study will be conducted.

> APPROVED
> EXPIRES ON
> JUNE 30, 2021
> ███ - Research Office

████████████
DTRE Staff Signature

——✗—— Approved   ———— Disapproved

Remarks:

████████   ████████   3/21/2021
Principal Name   Signature   Date

████████████████████████

APPENDIX D

IRB Approved Participants' Consent Form

APPROVED
EXPIRES ON
JUNE 30, 2021
PGCPS – Research Office

CONSENT FORM
Preschool Teachers' Experiences Embracing Challenges in Preparing
Students for Kindergarten
Rhodora A. Alonzo
Liberty University – School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study on pre-school teachers' experiences embracing challenges in preparing students for kindergarten. The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study aims to describe the lived experiences of the pre-school teachers embracing the challenges in preparing students for kindergarten at a public-school district in Northern Maryland. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a pre-school teacher with over three years of teaching experience in the pre-school setting serving 12-15 students in your classroom. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Rhodora Alonzo, a doctoral student in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study aims to describe the pre-school teachers lived experiences embracing the challenges in preparing students for kindergarten at a public-school district in Northern Maryland. The importance of this study is crucial for the educational community, students, and their families because this study seeks to describe the challenges of the pre-school teachers, which will promote additional research to address the problems.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
1. Participate in a recorded interview for approximately 45-60 minutes about your experiences embracing challenges in preparing students for kindergarten. Interviews will be offered in-person or virtually, based on participant preference.
2. Participate in a focus group discussion for approximately 60 minutes to clarify data collected from the document analysis on the ELA and KRA data. Virtual focus group sessions will be available to provide participants the flexibility. Data collected will be kept confidential.
3. Participate in member checking for approximately 30 minutes to ensure that responses are accurately captured.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. The researcher is a stakeholder of the school and is a mandatory reporter. Any indication of child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others will be reported to the appropriate agency.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society include understanding the importance of this study as crucial for the educational community, students, and families. This study will describe the challenges of the pre-school teachers which will promote additional research to address the problems.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. Participants will be presented under pseudonyms to protect privacy. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Data will be collected through audio and video recordings. Data will be stored in a password-protected location for a minimum of three years. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the files. I may share the data I collect for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you, if applicable, before sharing the data.

Limits of Confidentiality: I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Conflicts of Interest Disclosure: The researcher serves as an Assistant Principal at the school being studied and is conducting the research as a researcher. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and no action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate in this study. In particular, the participants' performance evaluation will not be impacted by their participation in this study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University, the researcher, or the school district. More importantly, there will be no repercussions to your performance evaluation as a result of participating or not participating. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected from the interviews and focus group sessions will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Rhodora Alonzo. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ralonzo@loberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Vacchi, at dvacchi@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____   _____
Printed Name and Signature of Participant   Date

12/17/2020

_____   _____
Signature of Investigator   Date

APPENDIX E

IRB Approved Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about your academic journey up until your current role as a teacher here.

2. What was your work experience prior to being a pre-school teacher?

3. Please describe a regular workday with your students.

4. Please describe your experiences in managing your challenges in preparing students for kindergarten.

5. What motivational factors keep you teaching pre-kindergarten students?

6. Please describe the other adults or support you have in the classroom, including related service providers.

7. Describe your perception of the alignment of the pre-school and kindergarten programs in the district.

8. Based on your previous years of experience with being a pre-school teacher, please describe your students' challenges in meeting kindergarten readiness indicators.

9. Describe your intervention strategies in addressing your students' different learning styles and needs to help them meet kindergarten readiness indicators.

10. Please describe your students' parents/family involvement in their child's education?

11. Please describe how you establish a positive classroom climate that may improve student academic and social-emotional levels of performance?

12. In your opinion, what are the three most significant factors that impact students' transition to kindergarten?

APPENDIX F

IRB Approved Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Discussions Questions:

1.   What is the most rewarding aspect of being a pre-k teacher?

2.   What is the most frustrating part of being a pre-k teacher?

3.   How do you cope with workplace frustration?

4.   What is your biggest challenge in preparing your students academically for kindergarten?

5.   What is your biggest challenge with your students as you prepare them for social-

emotional skill readiness for kindergarten.

6.   How do you communicate these challenges with the parents/families?

7.   How do parents receive information conveyed about the challenges in preparing their

children for kindergarten?

8.   How do you prepare your students as they transition to kindergarten?

9.   How do you provide your students information to the receiving schools about their

academic performance and social-emotional skills?

10.   In your perception, what are the primary factors that impact students' scores on the

KRA?

APPENDIX G

Sample Transcript Of Interviews

Q - So, based on your years of experience with being a preschool teacher, can you describe your students' challenges in meeting kindergarten Readiness? So, you talk about your challenges, so what about your students' challenges?

A - Like I said, the most I think consequential challenges that some of these students have is their behavior. The others who have what it feels to be academic challenges,

You can pretty much influence those beliefs that the kids have during their early childhood years if you just get them to that spot where they begin to believe that they can learn.

So to me that is not the very psychological aspects to be addressed. But it is the behavior, and it takes time, and you can pretty much experience or kind of feel that given the child's environment at home and in his other surrounding experiences a child would have difficulty, you know behaving in such a way that he could functionally adopts in a Kinder environment. So those are the things that tend to be more challenging.

During articulation, you have to kind of warn the receiving teacher, but for those that have academic challenges, at least from what we feel we have kind of redirected the child. All you have to do is tell the teacher to keep on doing this, keep on doing that and he loves this, and he likes to do this, and this one can follow, and the teacher picks up on that then you can see. It is like telling the teacher make them happen and then he will you know get on with it. But behavior is challenging because the receiving teacher do not know how he or she would respond to those kinds of manifestations.

APPENDIX H

Sample Transcript Of Focus Group Interviews

Q – Our school district has been consistently, if not, the lowest is on the top three lowest, in the KRA data. What do you think are the primary factors that would impact students' scores on the KRA?

AP – As a pre-k teacher, we are more concentrated on how the student cope can up with the social, emotional wellbeing of the child. While in kindergarten? How can they cope up to be at par with the students who already knows all this cognitive part, to meet the common core standards? So, I think that is the difference. Where do we concentrate? The concentration of pre-k, I think, is different from the concentration or the priority of the kindergarten, which are reading readiness, the math skills, those things for us, we only have like a certain number of items, although I believe that is important, but we are taking more time to make sure that the students can follow directions, make sure the student understand the concepts of self-regulation and other social skills. So, there is the disconnect.

TB - I was saying that I feel like there is a disconnect between pre-K teachers, even knowing what is on the KRA and knowing more about it. I have never been exposed to it. I do not know what is on it. So, I do not know how to prepare my students for that test. So how is the student going to do well on the test in the fall if their teacher from the spring does not even know how to prepare them for it.

JDV - The same thing with me, I am not intimately familiar with the KRA

TC - Another factor I see we observed children at play in the pre-k environment and it is so natural, that is how we gather our data. And then during the KRA, they are more expected to sit down, answer testing questions. So, it is grabbing that space. And for me, where the disconnect is the format. ELA and KRA are administered differently, and they are expecting good scores.

TB – That is my question as well. What is the format? Because we do not test our children. We observe the children, and we collect data based on observations. And then we give them levels on those observations. But those observations can be one teacher might make a level four might be a different level for another teacher. It is all kind of what, how the teacher understands the rubrics. So, are we giving them a play-based curriculum and observing them? And then they go to kindergarten and they are expected to take a test or like, I don't even know what the format of

the KRA would be.

And so if the formats are different than there would be a disconnect with the different levels also, that's how a child performs playing with blocks and counting the men on the wall might be different than how he counts a picture on a piece of paper and a test.

GS - I am not aware what is in the KRA is, so probably what I am just thinking that it would be helpful to bring up our district KRA data if pre-k teachers are made aware how to prepare the students for the test. It is not that we are going to be doing all of it, but somehow integrate the key parts in the pre-school setting, so we, preschool teachers, will be able to teach them also to our students. So that is what the other teachers have mentioned earlier that mostly we are more on social-emotional rather than academic part. So, I think that is where the disconnect is.

I mean, at least we will know how to prepare these kids for the KRA. It is not teaching to the test, but at least there should be some alignment.