

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF SUPPORT TO DEVELOP TEACHER EFFICACY
IN STATE FUNDED PRESCHOOL CLASSROOMS

by

Jennifer Stark

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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APPROVED BY:

Dr. Nicole Baker, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Dr. Grania Holman, Ed.D., Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study was to understand the support for teachers in state funded preschool classrooms through the teachers' lived experiences. The theory guiding this study is Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as it relates to the role of teacher efficacy in preschool programs and its impact on improving learning environments for children. This study includes a central question and three sub-questions focusing on the support, coaching, and professional learning opportunities provided to educators to improve the learning environment for children in state-funded early childhood classrooms. The setting will include South Carolina state-funded prekindergarten classrooms. The participants will provide insight into their lived experiences as early childhood educators in a state-funded preschool program and the support they receive to develop teacher efficacy. This study will utilize the phenomenological research model. Collecting data for this study will focus on three collection approaches. The three data collection approaches used for this study will include individual interviews, observations, and focus groups. By triangulating the data, a variety of data will help explain the differing aspects of the study. The main ideas from the triangulated data will be used to confirm the finds and minimize the biases.

Keywords: preschool, state-funded, professional development, coaching, teacher efficacy

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the teachers who work to better the lives of our earliest learners each and every day.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank everyone who was a part of this journey. My family, friends, and those at Liberty University who supported me during this time.

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List of Abbreviations

Child Development Education Pilot Program (CDEPP)

Child Early Reading and Development Education Program (CERDEP)

Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO)

English Language Arts (ELA)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Office of Early Learning and Literacy (OELL)

Professional Learning Opportunities (PLO)

South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The quality of state-funded preschool programs has been a focus over the past several decades. South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster has asked legislators to expand CERDEP to continue improving early childhood education for impoverished students (Adcox, 2020). To create quality state-funded preschool programs, teacher effectiveness has been a part of the discussion. Federal and state legislation continues to focus on the importance of school readiness. While there has been a focus on state-funded preschool programs and students ready for school, the goal has yet to be reached. A single program is not enough to close the achievement gap, and programs vary in magnitude, consistency, and duration, and there are considerable variations in public preschool programs, including some half-day and full-day program options (Morgan, 2019; Reynolds et al., 2019; Shapiro, 2021). South Carolina began to focus on early student success with Act 284, Read to Succeed. With the support from legislation, the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) created the Office of Early Learning and Literacy (OELL) specifically to support districts, schools, and teachers with the successful implementation of quality preschool classrooms. To assist districts and schools with professional development and coaching, the South Carolina Department of Education OELL staff provides assistance and support (CERDEP Guidelines, 2023). The focus continues to be on supporting teachers, developing teacher efficacy, and improving learning environments for children.

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study was to describe the lived experiences of early childhood educators in the state-funded preschool program in South Carolina and the support they receive to improve the learning environment for children.

Chapter one provided the contextual background, the research problem, and the study's purpose, identified the research's significance, introduced the research questions, and finally, offered relevant definitions.

Background

The following subsection provides the historical context of this study, which provides an early view into early childhood, professional development, and coaching. The second subsection details the social context of the study, with the importance of developing teacher efficacy to improve learning environments for children in state-funded preschool classrooms and its relevance today. The last subsection focuses on the theoretical context of this study, specifically defining the current research and existing literature that supports the need for further research of the support to develop teacher efficacy and its impact on student success in the early years.

Historical Context

Many past theories and practices influence early childhood education today. The origins of early childhood can be traced back to individuals such as Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, and Montessori (Platz & Arellano, 2011). These theories and practices focus on how children learn, school curriculum, and best practices. In the 1900s, the concept of early childhood programs came to the United States from Europe. The theories and practices of Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, and Montessori influenced early childhood programs in the United States. During the late 1800s and 1900s, many mothers joined the workforce, and the shift from maternal care at home to organizations to care for children began (Muelle, 2013). The first public kindergarten program began in Saint Louis, Missouri in 1873. Although there was some hesitation, public school authorities in most states provided kindergarten by 1914 (Allen, 1988).

Many United States presidents have led the way in establishing early childhood programs to support families and students in poverty. In 2001, George H. Bush focused on education reform. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 was signed into law by Bush and is the most noteworthy of congressional attempts to improve student achievement and educational programs (Simpson et al., 2004). With the NCLB act in place, the focus of "Ready to Learn" began with an emphasis on quality preschool programs for disadvantaged children to help them overcome poor nutrition, linguistic and social deprivation and found that these programs were beneficial and supported school readiness (Boyer & Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1991). With the new administration, an emphasis was placed on the need to be ready for kindergarten and school readiness. On December 10, 2015, President Obama signed Every Student Succeeds Act (Act, 2015). Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) focused on early childhood by authorizing funding and policy initiatives aligned with kindergarten to twelfth education to state and local authorities (Pérez, 2018).

States continue to work to provide funding for preschool programs. South Carolina provides The Child Early Reading and Development Education Program (CERDEP), a state-funded full-day four-year-old prekindergarten program for children at risk of unpreparedness to enter kindergarten (Gomez, 2019). CERDEP began under Section 59-156-110, The South Carolina Child Development Education Pilot Program (CDEPP). Since that time, the General Assembly has expanded the authorization and funding for many of the state's at-risk 4-year-olds to have an opportunity to attend a full-day educational program (South Carolina Department of Education). In recent years, South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster has asked legislators to expand CERDEP to continue improving early childhood education for impoverished students

(Adcox, 2020). While there is much emphasis on preschool programs, there is still much work to be done to create quality preschool programs.

The focus on teacher quality began as a part of the NCLB Act. The NCLB involved states developing plans to ensure that all teachers of core academic subjects are highly qualified (Simpson et al., 2004). This focus would lead the way for teachers to be supported, including coaching and professional development. The ESSA emphasized the importance of improving the quality and effectiveness of teachers. The ESSA includes that districts should help develop and train school leaders, coaches, and mentors to accurately provide valuable and timely feedback and inform decision-making about professional development (Act, 2015). Based on South Carolina Act 284, Read to Succeed, coaching and professional development as ways to support teachers in developing teacher efficacy in preschool classrooms became a focus. To assist districts and schools with professional development and coaching, the Office of Early Learning and Literacy (OELL) staff provides assistance and support (CERDEP Guidelines). The OELL supports South Carolina's districts and offers professional learning opportunities (PLOs) for teachers, teaching assistants, reading coaches, and administrators focusing on literacy instructional strategies that impact student learning (South Carolina Department of Education).

Social Context

School readiness has received much attention in recent decades, specifically focusing on preschool programs. The South Carolina Child Development and Education Program (CERDEP) is a state-funded full-day four-year-old prekindergarten program for children at risk of unpreparedness to enter kindergarten (Gomez et al., 2019). Coaching and professional development are ways to support teachers, which is crucial to preparing students for school. Early childhood programs that succeed include these important elements: a strong program

structure, engaging and meaningful learning experiences, a highly skilled and well-supported workforce, comprehensive services for children and families, and continuous quality improvement (Melroy et al., 2019; Pion & Lipsey, 2021). These elements work together to create a solid foundation and engaging learning environment to support the development of children.

Theoretical Context

The quality of state-funded preschool programs has been a focus over the past several decades. Federal and state legislation continues to focus on the importance of school readiness. Local, state, and federal policymakers have increasingly invested in providing teacher professional development, focusing on evidence-based approaches with success in improving child outcomes (Sabol, 2022). While there has been a focus on state-funded preschool programs and students ready for school, the goal has yet to be reached. South Carolina began to focus on early student success with Act 284, Read to Succeed. With the support from legislation, the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) created the Office of Early Learning and Literacy (OELL) specifically to support districts, schools, and teachers with the successful implementation of quality preschool classrooms. To assist districts and schools with professional development and coaching, the South Carolina Department of Education OELL staff provides assistance and support (CERDEP Guidelines, 2023). While current research indicates that support is needed for teachers (Gomez, 2019), more research is needed to discover effective coaching and professional development for developing teacher efficacy and improving learning environments for children in state-funded preschool programs.

Quality early learning experiences are contingent on well-prepared teachers and supported by ongoing coaching and professional development (Shannon et al., 2021; Weisenfeld, 2021). Local, state, and federal policymakers have increasingly invested in providing teachers

with professional development, focusing on evidence-based approaches with success in improving child outcomes (Sabol, 2022). Research indicates that positive effects of coaching include teachers' knowledge gains, instructional competencies, and positive development outcomes for children, which include language and literacy, social and emotional development, and academic skills (Yang et al., 2022). A teacher's personal belief of being able to promote student learning and their impact supported by credible evidence and influenced by job resources and demands defines teacher efficacy (Martin & Mulvihill, 2019; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2019). Bandura's social cognitive theory (1977) has been used to determine behavior, personal and cognitive influences, and environmental events and has emphasized adult learners' self-efficacy. Self-efficacy helps in changes in coping behavior by self-reactive influences, self-reflectiveness, quality of functioning and the meaning and purpose of one's life pursuits with social cognitive theory focusing on direct personal agency, proxy agency that relies on others to act and collective agency exercised through socially coordinative and interdependent effort (Bandura, 1982; 2001). Using Bronfenbrenner's theory (1981) will look at how teachers think about different factors that influence and improve the learning environment. Within the context of teacher efficacy in the preschool classroom, this theory focuses on Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on studying the environment and its effect on a child.

Problem Statement

The problem is the need for quality early learning experiences that are contingent on well-prepared teachers supported by ongoing coaching and professional development (Shannon et al., 2021). Gomez (2019) indicates in a recent report that the Office of Early Learning and Literacy (OELL) should work to provide more specific professional development guidelines, common competencies need to be consistent, professional development needs to be more

sustained, and long-term opportunities need to be provided. A single program is not enough to close the achievement gap, and programs vary in magnitude, consistency, and duration, and there are considerable variations in public preschool programs, including some half-day and full-day program options (Morgan, 2019; Reynolds et al., 2019; Shapiro, 2021). Cash and Pianta (2023) found that the association between teachers' skills and children's gains in language and literacy is influenced by effective interactions. Griffard et al. (2022) found variability in preschool program quality and the results of student outcomes include uncoordinated delivery systems, which need to be addressed by streamlining program requirements and standards across program types.

In this study, teachers' lived experiences in state-funded preschool classrooms determined if effective support is given to develop teacher efficacy and improve the learning environment for children. Coaching continues as an approach to teacher professional development and is used to address inequities in student achievement, but the challenge is that coaching models differ in just how to transform or make the needed changes instructional (Stoetzel & Taylor-Marshall, 2022). Professional development and coaching design need to be clarified (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). This study determined if teachers receive effective support to develop teacher efficacy and improve learning environments for children in state-funded preschool classrooms.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study was to describe the lived experiences of educators to determine the support needed to improve the learning environment for children in South Carolina public preschool classrooms. At this stage in the research, effective support will be generally defined as coaching and professional development used to develop teacher efficacy and improve the learning environment for children. The theory

guiding this study was Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which finds that many interacting systems impact human development and behavior.

Significance of the Study

This qualitative transcendental phenomenology study focused on the most effective support for educators in improving learning environments for children in state-funded preschool classrooms. This study could make empirical, theoretical, and practical contributions to early learning and the support offered to develop teacher efficacy and improve learning environments.

Theoretical

The findings from this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study could have theoretical significance because it expands the research on effective coaching and professional development for educators in developing teacher efficacy. Quality early learning experiences are contingent on well-prepared teachers who are supported by ongoing coaching and professional development (Shannon et al., 2021; Weisenfeld, 2021). A qualitative study focusing on the support educators receive to improve learning environments for children in state-funded preschool classrooms could determine the most effective coaching and professional development method.

Empirical

The findings from this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study could have empirical significance because the findings could add to the literature on the importance of well-prepared early learning teachers supported by ongoing coaching and professional development (Shannon et al., 2021). There is agreement that professional development and coaching are essential for educators. However, there is little consensus on how professional development and coaching work, how it fosters teacher learning, and how it is expected to alter teaching practices

(Kennedy, 2016; Rojas et al., 2020). A qualitative study focusing on the lived experiences of teachers and the support they receive to improve learning environments for children in state-funded preschool classrooms is missing from the literature.

Practical

The findings from this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study could have practical significance because it could help other states and districts focus on effective support for teachers in developing teacher efficacy and improving learning environments for children. Professional development that is supported through active learning, collaboration, coaching and support from an expert, and time for reflection and feedback allows teachers to learn and reflect on knowledge and skills (Choi & Kang, 2019; Gomez et al., 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Mora-Ruano et al., 2019; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, S, 2022). Instructional programs could benefit from this study in developing quality state-funded preschool programs.

Research Questions

This qualitative transcendental phenomenology study described the support received by educators to improve the learning environment for children in the state-funded preschool program in South Carolina. This study included a central question and three sub-questions focusing on the support, coaching, and professional learning opportunities provided to educators to improve the learning environment for children in state-funded early childhood classrooms.

Central Research Question

What are the shared lived experiences among early childhood educators who receive support through coaching and professional development from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy to improve the learning environment for children in the state-funded preschool program in South Carolina?

Sub-Question One

What support from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy do educators describe has been most helpful in improving the learning environment for children in state-funded preschool classrooms?

Sub-Question Two

How do educators describe the coaching sessions provided during visits from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy in improving the learning environment for children in state funded preschool classrooms?

Sub-Question Three

How do educators describe the professional learning opportunities given by the Office of Early Learning and Literacy to improve the learning environment for children in state funded preschool classrooms?

Definitions

Terms pertinent to the study are listed and defined in this section. All definitions are supported by the literature.

1. *CERDEP* - The Child Early Reading and Development Education Program is a state-funded full-day four-year-old prekindergarten program for children at risk of not being prepared to enter kindergarten (Gomez, 2019).
2. *Coaching* - Coaching includes several components: goal setting, observations, and on-site coaching with the dual aim of personal support and professional learning (Jacobson et al., 2020; Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019; Yang et al., 2022).
3. *Professional Development* Teacher professional development is teachers' learning: how they learn to learn and apply their knowledge to support student learning (Postholm,

2012).

4. *State-funded Preschool* -State-funded preschool programs support the learning and enhance the development of young children to better prepare at-risk students for school readiness (Barnett et al., 2018).
5. *Teacher efficacy*- Teacher efficacy is a teacher's personal belief of being able to promote student learning and their impact supported by credible evidence and influenced by job resources and demands (Martin & Mulvihill, 2019; Skaalvik& Skaalvik, 2019).

Summary

The focus on school readiness began with President George W. Bush in 2001. He focused on all students being ready when they entered school and continued with President Barack Obama focusing on preschool. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) have had a profound impact on early childhood education in public preschool settings with a greater emphasis on assessments for young children, creating early learning standards, and focusing on quality (Pérez, 2018). South Carolina began to focus on early student success with Act 284, Read to Succeed. With the support from legislation, the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) created the Office of Early Learning and Literacy (OELL) specifically to support districts, schools, and teachers with the successful implementation of quality preschool classrooms.

In recent years, the focus has been on how to create teacher efficacy and help teachers feel supported in improving the learning environment for children. The focus on teacher quality began as a part of the NCLB Act. This focus would lead the way for teachers to be supported, including coaching and professional development. ESSA emphasizes the importance of improving the quality and effectiveness of teachers. To assist districts and schools with

professional development and coaching, the South Carolina Department of Education OELL staff provides assistance and support (CERDEP Guidelines). The focus continues to be on supporting teachers, developing teacher efficacy, and improving the learning environment for children.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore the support received to improve the learning environment for children in state funded preschool classrooms. This chapter offers a review of the research on this topic. Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is discussed in the first section, followed by a review of recent literature on the benefits of state-funded preschool programs, the learning environment of preschool programs and challenges of state-funded preschool programs. Lastly, the literature surrounding support for teacher efficacy, including coaching and professional development, will be addressed. A gap in the literature identified that there needs to be more research on the most effective coaching and professional development for developing teacher efficacy and improving learning environments for children in state-funded preschool programs.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which finds that many interacting systems impact human development and behavior: microsystems, mesosystems, ecosystems, macro systems, and the chronosystem. The theory of ecological systems studies human development through a scientific model involving the interaction of four nuclei: the process, the person, the context, and the time. Children from low-income families are less likely to enroll in preschool and more likely to attend low-quality early education programs (Morgan, 2019; Odom, 2019). Life circumstances, which include growing up in poverty, having a home language other than English, and having identified disabilities, can influence children to be at risk for poor performance in preschools and subsequently in the elementary school grades (Odom, 2019). The theory focuses on the quality

and context of a child's environment and human development as it occurs (Koller et al., 2019; Shelton, 2019).

Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory will help guide the research and play a key role in defining teacher efficacy and improving learning environments for children in preschool programs. Microsystems are the complex interrelations with the immediate setting, the environments that affect a child's development (Bronfenbrenner 1981, 1994). The microsystems influence an individual's social interaction. Bronfenbrenner (1981) discovered that various settings offer different and distinctive patterns from humans, and there is a systematic difference in behavior. The important elements of a high-quality preschool program include sufficient learning time, well-prepared teachers who provide engaging interactions and classroom environments that support learning; ongoing support for teachers, including coaching, with program assessments that measure the quality of classroom interactions and provide actionable feedback for teachers to improve instruction and these elements are present in the programs that demonstrated the strongest and most persistent impacts on children (Melroy et al., 2019).

According to Bronfenbrenner's theory, a person exists in interconnected systems; this occurs as the developing person ages constructs an understanding of the experiences in the ecological setting and is the basis of the development (Koller et al., 2019; Shelton, 2019). Teachers who are prepared and have support in early learning settings influence children's development and academic success. Teachers who create high-quality early learning programs impact learning by sustaining gains. Teachers must develop the skills needed to face critical issues and barriers while problem-solving and remaining resilient (Choi & Kang, 2019; Martin & Mulvihill, 2019). Engaging teachers in self-reflection and vicarious experiences, including

learning from others and being provided feedback, allows them to be more confident in their practice. (Choi, & Kang, 2019, Martin & Mulvihill, 2019; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, 2022).

Bronfenbrenner (1981) found that human development is a product of human interaction with the environment and is based on behavioral science.

Bronfenbrenner's work found that children grow and develop in society, and the people, places, objects, and ideas they encounter form how they learn and develop (Killam & Degges-White, 2017). According to Bronfenbrenner (1981), a place is where interaction occurs face to face, and those settings include such places as home and school. Bronfenbrenner sees human beings as participants in the world who are constantly interacting with the environment, and these interactions are reciprocal: the world interacts with them (Killam & Degges-White, 2017; Koller et al., 2019; Shelton, 2019). Within the context of teacher efficacy in the preschool classroom, this theory focuses on Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on studying the environment and its effect on a child. Bronfenbrenner's theory (1981) will look at how teachers think about different factors that influence and improve the learning environment for children. By collecting data through individual interviews, observations, and focus groups, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory identifies effective support for teachers in improving learning environments for children. The framework can help teachers think about different factors that influence and improve the learning environments for children.

Related Literature

Support to develop teacher efficacy and improve the learning environment in state-funded preschool programs is crucial to student academic success. Quality early learning experiences are contingent on well-prepared teachers supported by ongoing coaching and professional development (Shannon et al., 2021). To develop teacher efficiency, a growth

mindset is needed so teachers will pursue lifelong learning and enhance their professional knowledge and competence (Choi & Kang, 2019; Martin & Mulvihill, 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, S, 2022). Coaching, as a professional development tool, effectively enhances a wide range of teacher and child outcomes when it is more specific and goal oriented (Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019; Shannon et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022; Zang & Cook, 2019). Coaching includes several components such as goal setting, observations, and on-site coaching with the dual aim of personal support and professional learning (Jacobson et al., 2020; Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019; Yang et al., 2022). Professional development that is supported through active learning, collaboration, coaching and support from an expert, and time for reflection and feedback allows teachers to learn and reflect on knowledge and skills (Choi & Kang, 2019; Gomez et al., 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Mora-Ruano et al., 2019; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, S, 2022).

Despite the agreement that professional development and coaching are essential for educators, there is little consensus on how professional development and coaching work, how it fosters teacher learning, and how it is expected to alter teaching practices (Rojas et al., 2020). When held as mandatory meetings by the district or school, professional development is ineffective and does not improve learning because teachers need more time to follow up and practice the new skill (Arteaga et al., 2019; Knight & Skrtic, 2021). Local, state, and federal policymakers have increasingly invested in providing teachers with professional development, focusing on evidence-based approaches with success in improving child outcomes (Sabol, 2022). A teacher's personal belief of being able to promote student learning and their impact supported by credible evidence and influenced by job resources and demands defines teacher efficacy (Martin & Mulvihill, 2019; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2019). While current research indicates that

support is needed for teachers, further studies are needed to discover effective coaching and professional development for developing teacher efficacy to improve learning environments in state-funded preschool programs.

State Funded Preschool Programs

Preschool education programs for students who live in poverty have been an area of focus for the federal and state governments (Nold et al., 2021). Funds through Title I and early childhood programming partially address the need for children of poverty to receive some preschool educational programming, and states who offer preschool educational programming generally focus on children who live in poverty (Nold et al., 2021). Gomez et al. (2019) define the South Carolina Child Development and Education Program (CERDEP) as a state-funded full-day four-year-old prekindergarten program for children at risk of not being prepared to enter kindergarten. Preschool programs that show the most significant gains included teachers who engage learners with rigorous, developmentally appropriate pedagogical strategies, participants who had strong and consistent efficacy beliefs in their abilities, and classroom observations confirmed the teachers' assessments of their strengths and weaknesses in literacy instruction (Barker et al., 2022).

Early childhood programs that succeed include these critical elements: a strong program structure, engaging and meaningful learning experiences, a highly skilled and well-supported workforce, comprehensive services for children and families, and continuous quality improvement (Melroy et al., 2019; Pion & Lipsey, 2021). These elements work together to create a solid foundation and engaging learning environment to support the development of children. Pion and Lipsey (2021) found that state-funded preschool programs positively affect children who attend versus children who do not attend preschool programs with an emphasis on strong

cognitive schools that support school readiness. The state-funded preschool program, CERDEP, is beneficial to students in kindergarten readiness based on the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee report to the General Assembly. Forty-one percent of students in the CERDEP program during the 2022-23 school year scored Demonstrating Readiness on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment compared to twenty-seven percent of non-CERDEP students in poverty (May et al., 2023). Students who attend preschool are better prepared for kindergarten in cognitive skills (Weiland et al., 2021).

Benefits of Preschool Programs

Many children ages birth to six years spend and receive their formal pre-primary education outside of the home in preschool programs, with enrollment increasing over the last 50 years (Dietrichson et al., 2020). Early childhood programs benefit the most disadvantaged children, but the success of the program requires ongoing alignment and attention to child and community conditions. Publicly funded early childhood programs are a powerful instrument for the promotion of social equity (Hahn & Barnett, 2023; Slicker & Hustedt, 2019). Evidence suggests that children who attend preschool programs reduce the income-based gaps in school readiness (Slicker & Hustedt, 2019).

Family Support in Preschool Programs

A critical component of a high-quality early childhood program is family engagement activities, and educators believe family engagement helps families, children, and classrooms succeed (Froiland, 2021; Snell et al., 2020). Educators' views and understanding of communication and partnerships with families define the role of families within the educational community (Froiland, 2021; Snell, 2020). Educators must understand families to effectively design, target, and implement successful family engagement in early learning (Snell et al., 2022).

Effective family engagement recognizes that a parent is a child's first teacher. Programs that encourage frequent interaction with schools and teachers to build relationships, address the needs of the child and family, sustain family engagement and increase academic success in early learning (Epstein & Boone, 2022; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Reynolds, 2019).

Family engagement from high-quality early learning programs impacts learning by sustaining gains (Barnett et al., 2020; Varshney et al., 2020). High-quality family engagement includes using parents as volunteers, attending meetings, and parent-teacher communication (Barnett et al., 2020). Activities which include age-appropriate play-based activities delivered by early childhood teachers, with families, parents, teachers, and children participating together, are needed to support success in the transition to school and promote academic success (Jose et al., 2020). Different models for family engagement are used to involve families in their children's education (Gross et al., 2020; Jose et al., 2020). Educators' views and understanding of communication and partnerships with families define the role of families within the educational community (Snell et al., 2020). Educators must understand families to effectively design, target, and implement successful family engagement programs that support school readiness and success (Snell et al., 2020).

Families of young children benefit from participating in programs with schools and early learning centers by reporting less stress and improving parenting practices (Barnett et al., 2020; Gedal Douglass et al., 2021; Jeon et al., 2020; Mahoney et al., 2022). Programs whereby young children and their families receive an array of services and focus on parental school involvement and school readiness skills have expanded rapidly to promote the healthy development of young children. (Gedal Douglass et al., 2021; Jeon et al., 2020). Students whose families are involved in learning are less likely to drop out, have better attendance, and read at or above grade level

(Nguyen et al., 2021). Educators and families who work to collaborate enhance students' language and reading skills by providing choices of engaging, high-quality, award-winning, current text selections while giving families more equitable access to rich literacy experiences with their children (Nguyen et al., 2021; Simone et al., 2022). School leaders and teachers who support family engagement in early learning recognize the importance of valuing the perspectives, culture, and differences of students and families and determine that families focus on how well their child is doing and activities that can support learning at home (Kennedy et al., 2021; Sander-Smith et al., 2020; Sonnenschein et al., 2021). Family engagement should focus on an evidence-based approach supporting student learning with the teachers and families forming a solid partnership to increase early literacy skills (Ball et al., 2021; Baxter & Nolan, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2021; Reynolds, 2019).

School Readiness in Preschool Programs

School readiness is the child's level of development across multiple domains, including physical well-being, motor development, social and emotional development, language and speech development, language and literacy, general knowledge, and cognition that are needed for optimal performance in school and to infuse their day with these skills (Conkbayir, 2023; Kokkalia et al., 2019). School readiness includes the readiness of the child, the school's abstract readiness for the child, the ability of the family to support the optimal development of the child and the importance of experiences in early brain development must not be ignored and needs to be considered as a part of the conceptualization of school readiness (Williams et al., 2019). It is important for schools to be child ready and not force students to be ready for school (Conkbayir, 2023). Educators and developmental experts agree that a certain set of skills is needed as essential tools to further development and achievement in schools.

Families, educators, legislators, and researchers have recently focused on how young children are best prepared to enter and succeed in school, and this has been a guide for the concept of school readiness (Kokkalia et al., 2019; Slicker & Hustedt, 2019; Williams et al., 2019). Social and emotional skills are essential for preschool children's later school success. As young children enter school, they must successfully navigate new relationships, rules, and academic environments that will cause a range of emotions (Harrington et al., 2020; Ştefan et al., 2022). Early childhood is considered the formative period for the development of children's social and emotional skills and has the greatest potential to promote children's well-being and the development of the whole child (Bodrova et al., 2023; Conkbayir, 2023). Emotional regulation affects academic school readiness for children because if children can regulate emotions, they experience fewer distractions, allowing them to maximize the benefits of preschool and prepare them for later school success (Conkbayir, 2023; Harrington et al., 2020; Im et al., 2019).

Improving language and literacy skills in preschoolers can lead to better life outcomes (Chaitow et al., 2022). The ages of birth to five are critical for building literacy skills that precede learning to read and write, and early childhood programs are able to support emergent literacy development through coaching and mentoring (Elek et al., 2022; Zhang & Cook, 2019). Neumann et al. (2019) found that early identification, targeted instruction, monitoring of children's learning, and data-driven instruction are critical components to closing achievement gaps. Evidence-based curricula and coaching support implemented in one public school system significantly improved multiple school readiness domains (Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013). Teachers need to create and be intentional with the implementation of a social literacy environment through child-to-peer interactions and child-to-teacher interactions that are rich in conversation and include activities such as literacy games, read-aloud, shared reading

experiences, writing activities, and integrated activities that focus on reading, writing, and literacy (Bracefield & Woodgate, 2020; Hilmawan et al., 2020). Teacher quality is important in fostering classroom learning outcomes and school readiness (Sabol, 2022).

The Learning Environment in Preschool Programs

Early childhood educators play a vital role in ensuring children receive a high-quality preschool curriculum which supports oral language and literacy (Weadman et al., 2023). Educators help young learners build character and understanding, become good thinkers, and develop the needed skills to make good decisions and work collaboratively by developing strong oral language and emergent literacy skills (Angel, 2023; Weadman et al., 2023). Teacher knowledge of oral language and emergent literacy is associated with positive gains on children's vocabulary and literacy, print knowledge, print concepts, letter naming and phonological awareness (Levin et al., 2023; Weadman et al., 2023).

A high-quality preschool classroom environment is created by teacher-child interactions that support an active learning culture that engages children's thinking and supports an enormous amount of inquiry, regulation of own behavior, and expanding language to new and complex levels (Slicker & Hustedt, 2019). Creativity is a competency for early childhood children and needs to be supported by teachers fostering and increasing the creative process through the integration of the curriculum (Fadhilah et al., 2022). Research shows that children from all backgrounds benefit from diverse learning environments that promote academic preparedness and success in a diverse workforce and society (Slicker & Hustedt, 2019). Strong literacy-rich preschool classrooms are busy places where children learn through play, develop relationships, explore, and learn in a safe and respectful community (Cutler et al., 2023).

Educators have a more profound and comprehensive idea of what young learners can know and do as emerging readers and writers through assessments that can gauge growth on whether early literacy programs are appropriate (Roskos & Lenhart, 2020; Teale et al., 2020). Early childhood instruction that enhances teacher learning and is supported by leaders who create the conditions necessary to teach effective literacy instruction that supports high quality instruction is significant in student growth and performance (Roskos & Lenhart, 2020; Teale et al., 2020). To support readiness for reading and writing skills in preschool, the class environment and activities play a significant role in engaging and preparing students (Senol, 2021; Yang et al., 2023). Research on early literacy skills indicates the importance of encouraging and assessing young learners' writing and print knowledge, which is correlated with reading success when embedded in early literacy experiences that introduce and expose students to written language (Roskos & Lenhart, 2020; Yang et al., 2023).

The importance of a strong early childhood learning environment that supports early learners, families, and educators can only operate with consistency and security, which includes providing high-quality teacher support (Kemp & Treiman, 2023; Norman-Goins, 2022). Learning environments support the development of foundational knowledge and promote attitudes toward learning and school, with preschool general knowledge and enjoyment predicting future school knowledge and enjoyment (Jirout et al., 2023). Researchers have determined that both internal processes and the environment, including early school experiences, influence the individual differences in literacy skills that are present early and remain relatively stable over time (Sénéchal et al., 2023).

Developmentally based early childhood programs focus on the learning of the child through exploration and with language naturally with little effort. However, teachers can also

lead more intentional play through rhymes and repetitive songs, engaging literacy practices, and not a fixed curriculum that forces children to sit through drills and a sequential (Wohlwend, 2023). There are five recommendations for early learning and pre-K assessment found in research. These recommendations are aimed at guiding high-quality learning environments and curriculum. These recommendations include strengthening existing tools and developing new ones that address measures of children's individual learning experiences, cultural responsiveness, and content, implementing new data collection methods, funding for a new testing method, monitoring and promoting curriculum alignment, and allowing open access to tools that support data sharing (Weiland & Rosada, 2022).

Curriculum in Preschool Programs

Implementing an explicit, intentional curriculum in preschool programs is effective when the students are engaged and challenged in the classroom (Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013). Intentional teaching includes planned experiences and spontaneous, purposeful decisions that educators make when responding to children's ideas, interactions, and play that include engaging children in playful experiences, purposefully stepping back to let children lead the learning, providing materials for learning, extending learning through play that promotes language skills and reinforcing vocabulary, and practicing problem-solving and stretching children's thinking (Razak & Jackson, 2022; Parker et al., 2022; Yuniarti, 2020). The Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) measures structural and instructional quality and identifies the importance of understanding literacy environments (Arteaga et al., 2019; Quinn et al., 2022). The primary focus in preschool programs is daily language and literacy activities focusing on vocabulary development, phonemic awareness, letter recognition, listening, and comprehension (Odom et al., 2019).

Early childhood educators support oral language and emergent literacy skills by using strategies that focus on conceptual talk during shared book-reading and purposeful play (Hadley et al., 2023). Oral language skills are important literacy learning, and strong oral language skills are essential to literacy development when oral language development is intentionally grounded in purposeful play, especially for those children who are from disadvantaged areas and are at risk for learning (Hadley et al., 2023; Raban & Scull 2023; Stagnitti et al., 2023). Collaborative skills through play support the needed twenty-first-century core skills among the youngest learners and are paramount if they are going to fit seamlessly into the twenty-first century (Ekeh, 2023). When the focus is on achievement gaps and learning loss, educators must face the challenge of integrating play in early childhood classrooms, document the learning through play, and advocate to help policymakers connect research and evidence to learning through play and how it is an essential part of the early childhood classroom (Alahmari et al., 2023; Schick, 2023).

In a study by Odom et al. (2019), book reading, vocabulary development, and the literacy environment improved student outcomes as measured by the ELLCO. The research found that schools must support all children's development, with the critical need for language skills among preschool-age children, including oral interaction and language application in the reading process. Language and play are children's significant tools for learning about the environment and the world around them and are the most important tools for early literacy learning (Cabell & Hwang, 2023; Phillips, 2023). Language and play are children's significant tools for learning about the environment and the world around them and are the most important tools for early literacy learning (Cabell & Hwang, 2023; Phillips, 2023). Research indicates that educators believe that early learning experiences should be consistent, developmentally sound, emotionally supportive, focusing on differentiating instruction, and building relationships with children and

their families, which are critical in ensuring growth during preschool, which leads to a successful transition to kindergarten (Infurna, 2020; Willams et al., 2019).

Teachers regard play as central to the curriculum and the development of a child's learning by connecting them to opportunities to enhance problem-solving skills, develop flexibility in their decision-making, improve social and emotional development, and support their acquisition of language and numeracy skills (Kroll, 2020; Piek & Strader, 2020). There is not one single definition of play but there is agreement that play for young learners must be pleasurable, process oriented, intrinsically motivated, meaningful, iterative and controlled by the child (Bodfrova et al, 2023). Learning through play is an important strategy to promote twenty first-century skills such as communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking during student engagement. In contrast, students foster cognitive, social, emotional, and active engagement in learning that is experienced as joyful, meaningful, socially interactive, and actively engaging (Conkbayir, 2023; Parker et al.,2022; Yunianti, 2020). Play is important in nurturing children as play develops skills such as cooperating with others, not giving up when faced with a challenge, building patience, and developing an understanding for the need for rules and following the rules (Conkbayir, 2023).

Teachers face the challenge of creating play-based classrooms while focusing on a literacy-rich environment appropriate for preschool (Alahmari et al., 2023; Wohlwend, 2023). Advocating for play in an early childhood classroom means that the educator must comprehensively understand purposeful play (Alahmari et al., 2023). Play enhances language and literacy and is crucial to supporting the whole child's development, including social, emotional, and intellectual development. It needs to be recentered in the academic curriculum,

and educators and leaders need to recognize play as an essential early literacy benefit (Hadley et al., 2020; Wohlwend, 2023).

Challenges of Preschool Programs

Early childhood programs face many challenges. Terminology has maintained an unproductive division in early childhood education, with different labels used to describe different roles, positions, and jobs, with leadership increasingly being seen as a critical role and responsibility of educators, regardless of qualifications (Rodd, 2020). A single program is not enough to close the achievement gap. Programs vary in magnitude, consistency, and duration, and there are considerable variations in public preschool programs, including some half-day and full-day program options (Morgan, 2019; Reynolds et al., 2019; Shapiro, 2021). Program consistency and variation are based on the curriculum used. Different programs use curricula that independent researchers have found to be of high quality, while others use curricula that lack a strong evidence base (Nesbitt & Farran, 2021; Shapiro, 2021). Curricula differ in many aspects, some with a profoundly different vision of how children learn and of the role of the teacher. (Nesbitt & Farran, 2021; Wood & Hedges, 2013). Asking critical questions about the curriculum in early childhood education is necessary to understand how curriculum can be considered alongside pedagogy, assessment, play, and learning (Wood & Hedges, 2013).

The disparity between school and child readiness can be attributable to schools not being prepared to offer the appropriate educational setting for children, not because children cannot learn in an appropriate educational setting where the commitment to promoting universal readiness must address early-life inequities in experiences (Conkbayir, 2023; Williams et al., 2019). Play and its role in designing an effective learning environment need to be understood, with educators acknowledging the power of play and its importance for child development but

disagreement with the role of play as an instructional strategy (Schick, 2022). The loss of play in early childhood classrooms is based on the urgent seriousness of literacy learning and academic work, leaving play as optional and social benefit at best (Wohlwend, 2023).

Many educators must balance play and literacy instruction in the preschool setting because an academic curriculum pushes literacy learning as a serious, urgent academic work and play as optional fun. (Honeyford & Boyd, 2015; Wohlwend, 2023). Young children are exposed in preschool to varied oral and written language opportunities that shape their academic achievement (Quinn et al., 2022). Oral language is important because it supports the emergence of literacy skills and is strongly linked to life-long outcomes and the development of the whole child (Eadie et al., 2022). However, writing is a critical foundation skill, and writing instruction in preschool is limited, infrequent, and narrow (Bingham et al., 2022; Quinn et al., 2022). Cash and Pianta (2023) found that the association between teachers' skills and children's gains in language and literacy is influenced by effective interactions. State-funded preschool programs and achievement in English Language Arts (ELA) are directly correlated when funding targets preschool access to low-income/at-risk students (Pendola et al., 2022).

Early childhood is high on the political agendas of governments, and educators are expected to respond to new initiatives and collaborate as liaisons within and across agencies, causing early childhood educators to work in ways that are unfamiliar (Roddy, 2020). The shift in education to meet testing expectations and kindergarten academic demands does not align well with playful, constructivist instructional approaches in preschool and early childhood teachers feel the ability to act according to professional knowledge and values is constrained, and this is attributed to accountability policies (Allee et al., 2023; Oosterhoff et al., 2020; Schick, 2022). The demands of accountability and academic readiness in preschool have caused decreased

playtime during the school day (Allee et al., 2023; Burgess & Ernst, 2020; Schick, 2022). Early childhood programs are designed to promote children's physical, intellectual, and social competencies to promote school readiness. However, it needs to be clarified how school readiness relates to long-term academic and emotional outcomes (Mariano et al., 2019).

Teachers of low-income students and teachers in high-poverty schools are less effective on average, and the poverty level is one important factor in determining the potential for inequitable access to effective teachers (Isenberg et al., 2022). Children from low-income families are less likely to enroll in preschool and more likely to attend low-quality early education programs (Morgan, 2019; Odom, 2019). Life circumstances, which include growing up in poverty, having a home language other than English, and having identified disabilities, can influence children to be at risk for poor performance in preschools and subsequently in the elementary school grades (Odom, 2019). Other challenges preschool programs face includes adequate funding for programs, salaries, working conditions, and children needing to be academically and socially ready for school (Morgan, 2019; Rojas et al., 2020). Other research addresses the need for families to know that high-quality programs exist and can be beneficial (Archambault et al., 2020).

A critical component of a high-quality early childhood program is family engagement activities, and educators believe family engagement helps families, children, and classrooms succeed (Froiland, 2021; Snell et al., 2020). Educators' views and understanding of communication and partnerships with families define the role of families within the educational community (Froiland, 2021; Snell, 2020). Educators must understand families to effectively design, target, and implement successful family engagement programs (Schueler et al., 2017; Snell et al., 2020). Sustaining family engagement and continuing early learning interventions to

support student success is challenging (Gennetian et al., 2019). Both families and educators share concerns that the lack of communication and limited relationships damage the quality of family engagement in early learning experiences (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Preston, 2022; Sonnenschein et al., 2021).

It is unclear if educators and families hold the same views about what is relevant family engagement activities and their responsibilities for supporting children's learning within family engagement, which can determine if families enjoy the relationships with the schools and communities (Epstein & Boone, 2022; Gross et al., 2019). Cultivating better relationships among families and educators means stakeholders must be aware of multiple perspectives and families' different needs (Preston, 2022). Families want additional information and lack the confidence to proceed on how to engage with their children at home to increase academic achievement at school (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Sonnenschein et al., 2021). Meaningful family engagement with families and understanding how to interact with all families across social and cultural groups is challenging to schools (Sanders-Smith et al., 2020). Communities are unsure how to support families and schools in family engagement to strengthen children's early learning opportunities (Neuman et al., 2020; Sanders-Smith et al., 2020).

The important elements of a high-quality preschool program include sufficient learning time, well-prepared teachers who provide engaging interactions and classroom environments that support learning; ongoing support for teachers, including coaching, with program assessments that measure the quality of classroom interactions and provide actionable feedback for teachers to improve instruction and these elements are present in the programs that demonstrated the strongest and most persistent impacts on children (Melroy et al., 2019; Weisenfeld, 2021). Science research points to the importance of improving implementation to fidelity to improve

and sustain interventions in the K -12 settings. However, more is needed to know about the factors influencing implementation in early childhood classrooms. Understanding these factors is critical to developing and implementing fidelity of interventions and education quality (Clayback et al., 2023). The systems supporting young children's development must be addressed, and conditions must be established to ensure consistent learning environments and experiences across settings before kindergarten (Bornfreund & Ewen, 2021; Odom, 2019). These systems include state policymakers, the Department of Education, health and human service agencies, and local districts. The types of quality indicators in early childhood programs and how the programs, community, and policy features that might be related need to be better understood (Slicker et al., 2023).

Support for Teacher Efficacy

Quality early learning experiences are contingent on well-prepared teachers and supported by ongoing coaching and professional development (Shannon et al., 2021; Weisenfeld, 2021). Gomez et al. (2019) found that the state of South Carolina offers professional development in the form of Professional Learning Opportunities (PLO) through the Office of Early Learning and Literacy (OELL). These opportunities are offered to individual districts and at conferences. There are a variety of professional developments throughout the school year focusing on such topics as high-quality language and literacy practices, assessments, and the South Carolina Early Learning Standards. The PLOs met best practices that support teachers with one-on-one coaching and activities that build educators' assessment skills. (Gomez et al., 2019). The design of professional development and coaching is unclear, and research has identified that programs for effective professional development and coaching are not accessible because of cost or location (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). The findings indicated that the OELL

should work to provide more long-term and sustained professional development that allows teachers to build new skills over time.

Coaching as Support for Teachers

Coaching can be defined as a designed, non-directive learning conversation and must meet the needs of the person being coached with professional distance for powerful coaching (Guccione & Hutchinson., 2021). Coaching, as a professional development tool, effectively enhances a wide range of teacher and child outcomes when it is more specific and goal oriented (Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019; Shannon et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022; Zang & Cook, 2019). Coaching includes several components, such as goal setting, observations, and on-site coaching, with the dual aim of personal support and professional learning (Jacobson et al., 2020; Kutsyuruba & Godden,2019; Yang et al., 2022). Coaching is effective when it is direct, provides support for the specific situation, finds solutions to the problems, and leads the conversation with the teacher (Zugelder, 2019).

Coaching is a short-term intervention to improve performance (Thipatdee et al., 2019). Coaching must include a good quality conversation that supports the teacher in making good decisions, choices, and problem-solving instead of fostering dependency on the coach (Guccione & Hutchinson, 2021). Opportunities for adult learners to receive support to fine-tune, adapt, or generalize skills or strategies through feedback and reflection should be a part of the coaching process. Building relationships is needed to help navigate the resistance and bridge differences between the person coaching and the teacher (Cutrer-Párraga, 2021; Shannon et al., 2021). Research supports the effectiveness of coaching, and professional development when it is provided within the context of the classroom as it enhances target practices and observations of children's responses (Shannon et al., 2021).

The Coach's Role as Support for Teachers

Coaches as leaders can transform schools into learning organizations by reform, instructional alignment and system coherence which leads to setting goals and strategies for success when coaching is authentic and personalized to meet the needs of the educator (Hashim, 2020; Hui et al., 2020; Van Ostrand et al., 2020). Coaches who work with leaders promote coherent instructional improvement and impactful professional development (Miller et al., 2019; Van Ostrand et al., 2020). Coaches as leaders is distinct from consultation because coaching is primarily designed to support teachers in continuous professional development which is individualized, data driven, and helps sustain practice which transforms schools (Van Ostrand et al., 2020). Leadership through coaching has been found to be particularly effective in promoting teacher professional development, enhancing teacher efficacy, and improving student learning outcomes by providing a culture that is supportive for teachers to succeed (Kilag & Sasan, 2023; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, 2023).

Classroom-based coaching can connect knowledge to classroom practice and demonstrate growth in teaching practice and knowledge, supporting them to reach their full potential (Atkinson et al., 2022; Cunningham et al., 2023; Glover et al., 2023). Research indicates that it is crucial that instructional coaches set aside time during sessions for teachers to practice newly learned skills and interventions and apply them in various contexts (Glover et al., 2023; Shannon et al., 2021). Reflective conversations are critical between teachers and coaches in improving classroom instruction. Coaches use models to facilitate reflective conversations with teachers. Feedback and coaching promote learning and growth in teachers, with feedback being successful when the coach and teacher have a respectful and trusting relationship (Atkinson et al., 2022).

This framework consists of observing, describing, processing, analyzing, drawing conclusions, and planning during the coaching cycle (Patfield, 2023; Varghese et al., 2023).

The Benefits of Coaching as Support for Teachers

The benefits of coaching include opportunities for the new skill and knowledge to be used in the classroom, multiple and frequent opportunities to be observed and receive individualized feedback on teaching practices, leads to positive change, self-reflection, and effective in fostering of positive changes in teacher practices and child outcomes (Schachter et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2022). Research indicates that positive effects of coaching include teachers' knowledge gains, instructional competencies, and positive development outcomes for children, which include language and literacy, social and emotional development, and academic skills (Yang et al., 2022).

Reflective conversations are critical between teachers and coaches in improving classroom instruction. Reflective practices lead to improvement in practice for leaders and teachers, with self-reflection as a part of critical success for teacher and school improvement (Damore & Rieckhof, 2021; Yang et al., 2022). Coaches use models to facilitate reflective conversations with teachers. This framework consists of observing, describing, processing, analyzing, drawing conclusions, and planning during the coaching cycle (Patfield, 2023; Varghese et al., 2023). Quality coaching that is modifiable and continuous feedback between coach and teacher is an important attribute in increasing student achievement because as teachers build self-efficacy, they are more confident in their impact on students (Salas-Rodríguez, & Lara, 2023). Relationship-focused coaching is a critical focus in the coaching cycle. It needs to be the focus before moving to approaches focused on processes and procedures because it builds teacher-coach trust and mitigates negative influences of cultural mismatch between teacher-

coach pairing and coach-leveraged principles support in negative ways (Cutrer-Párraga et al., 2021).

Coaching conversations are explicitly or implicitly goal-focused and help educators self-regulate skills to create purposeful, positive change (Greif et al., 2022; Grant, 2020). An important step in the effective implementation of goals includes breaking goals down into concrete behaviors (Greif et al., 2022; Grant, 2020). Goals should be formulated to be specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-focused with a projected accomplishment date (Gibbons et al., 2019). Teacher autonomy is correlated with job satisfaction and the intention to stay in the profession, and professional development goals are linked to improving teacher job satisfaction and retention (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020).

Gomez et al. (2019) found that the Office of Early Learning and Literacy offers coaching to teachers focusing on Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation. The coaching sessions focus on creating plans and goals to improve teachers' practices. Arteaga et al. (2019) found that the ELLCO allowed coaches to determine if the classroom environment was adequate to support children's language and literacy development and, if not, provide suggestions and support to teachers. In a recent study, Taylor et al. (2022) found that it is important to consider the teachers' perspective when coaching. This study also found that coaching should have a profoundly reflective component for teachers to adapt to the needs of the children in the classroom. Explicit modeling is needed in the coaching framework, meeting teachers where they are so they will be comfortable and willing to grow. Increasing student learning and effective instruction is the purpose of professional development and coaching (Pianta et al., 2021).

Professional Development as Support for Teachers

Sims et al. (2021) define teacher professional development as structured, facilitated activities for teachers intended to increase teachers' ability to be successful in the classroom. Professional development that is supported through active learning, collaboration, coaching and support from an expert, and time for reflection and feedback allows teachers to learn and reflect on knowledge and skills (Choi & Kang, 2019; Gomez et al., 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Mora-Ruano et al., 2019; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, S, 2022). Professional development is one way to improve educators' verbal interaction and intentional teaching of language and early literacy skills (Chaitow et al., 2022). School effectiveness includes efficiency, improvement, quality, development, and performance, which is based on student learning outcomes and teacher performance supported by teacher professional development (Choi & Kang, 2019; Keung et al., 2020; Özgenel & Mert, 2019; Olmo-Extremera et al., 2023; Putra & Hariri, 2023; Yang et al., 2022). For professional development to be effective, it needs to meet the needs and interests of teachers (Choi & Kang, 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Olmo-Extremera et al., 2023; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, S, 2022).

Greater demands have been placed on teachers, which presents a challenge to teachers who were educated when teacher education focused on practical teaching rather than academic training (Bregmark, 2020). Research has indicated that teachers' perceptions of their own knowledge are often inaccurate, overestimated, and insufficient for the actual knowledge, and this must be considered when planning professional development and coaching (Bregmark, 2020; Cunningham et al., 2023; Taylor, 2023). Research indicates that students grow when teachers attend specific professional learning opportunities and apply what is learned to daily instruction (Infurna, 2020; Dismone, 2023; Patfield et al., 2023). Teachers learn to implement

high-quality classroom practices and meet students' needs when they are engaged in active professional learning opportunities that emphasize content and pedagogical content knowledge (Cunningham et al., 2023; Fairman et al., 2023; Gerde & Bingham, 2023; Nguyen & Ng, 2020).

Benefits of Professional Development for Teachers

Preschool programs with the greatest gains have teachers who engage their young learners with rigorous, developmentally appropriate pedagogical strategies at the highest levels that are developed and supported by teachers who gain in intensive professional learning (Barker et al., 2021; Schachter et al., 2019). Key factors in professional development being successful include principal support, individualization, and teacher buy-in (Desimone, 2023). Professional development needs to be offered to administrators and district leaders to support teachers with the implementation and fidelity of the appropriate early childhood practices and strategies (Fairman et al., 2023; Nguyen & Ng, 2020; Schick, 2023).

The willingness of educators to change is one of the most significant steps to gain new outcomes. Teacher change is brought about by social support from colleagues and leaders, a stimulating climate for innovation, enthusiasm, and motivation from interest and intrinsic motivation (Tamah & Wirjawan, 2022). Teachers who participate in job-embedded professional development activities, which include coaching or mentoring, teacher networks, and action research, have higher success in creating teacher efficacy, while traditional forms of professional development like seminars, conferences, courses, and workshops have less success in creating teacher efficacy (Gümüş & Bellibaş, 2023; Moore et al., 2021). To meet professional requirements, teachers are expected to participate in professional development for the capacity to teach and meet specific learning needs, manage the classroom effectively, and cooperate with other professionals to build competencies for teachers throughout all stages of careers (Blanton

et al., 2020; Keller-Schneider,2020). Educators display positive feedback about curriculum and content materials used during professional development, supporting the needed change for teacher efficacy (Gupta & Lee, 2020; Moore et al., 2021). Book studies offer effective professional development by focusing on the needs of adult learners and enabling the development of teacher knowledge by meeting the needs of educators in a more powerful way than traditional professional development (Blanton et al., 2020).

Challenges of Professional Development for Teachers

Gomez (2019) found professional development in CERDEP policies detail professional development policies and the amount of professional development teachers must engage in a state-funded preschool classroom. Inservice professional development includes different activities and opportunities for teachers. Teachers in state funded CERDEP classrooms have autonomy over how they complete their professional development. However, due to local control in the public school districts, there may have been more variation in the training and workshop experiences among teachers in state preschool programs; professional development must include individualized coaching. All teachers must have a written individualized professional development plan (Gomez, 2019). Policymakers, school leaders, and teacher educators face the challenge of designing professional development to help all teachers become effective and define the characteristics of effective professional development as instilling new evidenced-based insights, motivating goal-directed behavior, developing different techniques to teach, and embedding new practices (Sims et al., 2021). Gomez (2019) concluded that for professional development to effectively support teacher efficacy, specific professional development guidelines and common competencies need to be consistent, and professional development needs to be more sustained, and long-term opportunities must be provided.

There needs to be well-defined protocols that guide coaches in leading teachers through reflection and practice, support teachers with challenges, and give more clarity on types of professional development (Hindman & Wasik, 2023). Learning outcomes and goals should be clearly stated for any professional learning opportunities, and measurable implementation should be determined to ensure teachers are implementing the newly learned skill in instruction and decision-making (Enis et al., 2020; Gibbons et al., 2019). Research has shown that traditional lectures' short-term professional development does not lead to lasting change. However, observations and continued support in school-wide professional development, small groups, or individualized support are more likely to change teacher behavior and improve student outcomes (Enis et al., 2020).

Teacher Efficacy

Teacher efficacy is a teacher's belief in promoting student learning and its impact supported by credible evidence and influenced by job resources and demands (Martin & Mulvihill, 2019; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2019). Teacher efficacy is a perceived attitude, and attitudes are changed by first changing behavior (Martin & Mulvihill, 2019; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, S, 2022). This interest is found across different educational issues, disciplines, settings, and, most recently, school innovation. (Martin & Mulvihill, 2019; Schwabsky et al., 2020). To build teacher efficiency, a growth mindset is needed so teachers will pursue lifelong learners and enhance their professional knowledge and competence to support student success (Choi & Kang, 2019; Martin & Mulvihill, 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, S, 2022). A teacher's personal belief of being able to promote student learning and their impact supported by credible evidence and influenced by job resources and demands defines teacher efficacy (Martin & Mulvihill, 2019; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2019).

Teacher efficacy is related to positive teacher and student outcomes, which promotes student learning outcomes (Chaitow et al., 2022; Martin & Mulvihill, 2019). Teachers must develop the skills needed to face critical issues and barriers while problem-solving and remaining resilient (Choi & Kang, 2019; Martin & Mulvihill, 2019). Engaging teachers in self-reflection and vicarious experiences, including learning from others and being provided feedback, allows them to be more confident in their practice. (Choi, & Kang, 2019, Martin & Mulvihill, 2019; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, S, 2022). Teacher efficacy can be assessed along with specific teaching domains, which include instructional strategies (Keung et al., 2020; Kunemund et al., 2020). Teachers attend professional development workshops with various levels of content understanding. At the same time, additional tasks increase due to state standards and pressure to promote effective change in student achievement, and expectations are arguably difficult for a teacher to achieve without professional development and support (Gupta & Lee, 2020).

Teacher efficacy is important for cultivating teacher well-being enhancing efficacy and levels of optimism to increase the importance of understanding variables related to student academic, social, emotional, and behavioral growth (Song, 2022; von der Embse & Mankin, 2021). Teacher efficacy impacts and predicts student academic performance, with teachers who are better prepared to cope with challenges and are more effective and successful in their careers (Raman et al., 2022; Song, 2022). The benefits of teachers' emotional intelligence include better professional performance, student performance, job satisfaction, reduced stress and burnout, and better skills to manage difficulties, which create great effectiveness for teaching and classroom management (Valente, 2020). With the demographics of children in the United States shifting, culturally and linguistically, there is an increase in the need for early childhood educators to

develop cultural competence and provide equitable learning experiences, allowing for less teacher burnout and higher teacher efficacy (Siskind et al., 2022).

Teacher efficacy and professional support are directly related to work engagement, fulfilling job demands, teacher education, and professional development (Lipscomb et al., 2021; Oh, 2023). Research suggests that supporting early childhood teachers to do their job effectively and feeling that they can make meaningful differences in children's lives leads to engagement in work with passion, dedication, and positive energy, which leads to developmental benefits for children (Kunduet al.2021; Lipscomb et at., 2021). Teacher burnout negatively affects teacher efficacy, enthusiasm, job satisfaction, and the overall educational organization (Boyer et al., 2020; Oh, 2023). Early childhood educators feel the effects of burnout and its association with reduced ability to effectively teach and engage with students, but training and professional development increase the well-being of teachers while decreasing burnout and stress (Boyer et al., 2020; Moon & Pan, 2022). To improve job performance and teachers' belief in teacher efficacy, it is necessary to prepare policies and present strategic orientation for long-term growth and development (Moon & Pan, 2022).

Teachers' growth is found by observing children's success, receiving support through advice and modeling, being respected, encouraged, and trusted to implement new practices by school leaders, and professional learning that develops the new knowledge and skills for teaching that enables success (Ryan & Hendry, 2023). Research shows that teachers who have a high self-efficacy are more open to new teacher methods, set challenging goals, exhibit a greater level of planning and organization, direct their efforts at solving problems, and adjust teacher strategies when faced with difficulties and challenges (Guskey, 2021; Lazarides & Warner, 2020). Research indicates that school-based and job-embedded professional development, focusing on

student learning through pedagogy and aligned with the curriculum, is linked to improved teacher learning, instructional practices, and student learning outcomes. This professional development should be active rather than passive, intensive and sustained over time, and collaborative, leading to teachers adopting new instructional practices to build teacher efficacy through a growth mindset (Fairman et al., 2023). It is vital for teachers to learn and use feedback to build and improve skills, allowing teachers to be more effective and resilient (Choi & Kang, 2019; Martin & Mulvihill, 2019; Zugelder, 2019). Teacher efficacy can be assessed along with specific teaching domains, which include instructional strategies and professional learning (Keung et al., 2020; Kunemund et al., 2020). Teacher self-efficacy and professional learning play a significant role in successful implementation of education reform (Gordon et al., 2023).

The Gap in the Literature

The design of professional development and coaching is unclear, and research has identified that programs for effective professional development and coaching are not accessible because of cost or location (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). There is a need for quality early learning experiences which are contingent on well-prepared teachers supported by ongoing coaching and professional development (Shannon et al., 2021). Findings from a recent report indicated that the Office of Early Learning and Literacy (OELL) should work to provide more specific professional development guidelines, common competencies need to be consistent, professional development needs to be more sustained, and long-term opportunities need to be provided (Gomez, 2019). Teachers in state funded CERDEP classrooms have autonomy over how they complete their professional development. However, due to local control in the public school districts, there may have been more variation in the training and workshop experiences among teachers in state preschool programs; professional development must include

individualized coaching. All teachers must have a written individualized professional development plan (Gomez, 2019). Policymakers, school leaders, and teacher educators face the challenge of designing professional development to help all teachers become effective and define the characteristics of effective professional development as instilling new evidenced-based insights, motivating goal-directed behavior, developing different techniques to teach, and embedding new practices (Sims et al., 2021). Gomez (2019) concluded that for professional development to effectively support teacher efficacy, specific professional development guidelines, and common competencies need to be consistent, professional development needs to be more sustained, and long-term opportunities must be provided.

Teachers acknowledge that support is needed to increase their teaching knowledge and practice, but there needs to be more assistance, and they do not feel there is a safe space to share frustrations, challenges and difficulties faced in the classroom (Gibbons et al., 2019; Ryan & Hendry, 2023). Teachers' beliefs that the school can be successful are strengthened when the school culture is a place where the teachers feel safe to try new, effective practices (Gibbons et al., 2019; Ryand & Hendry, 2023). Self-efficacy drives teachers to implementation and sustainability with professional learning preceding implementation to ensure educators have the needed skills and knowledge to improve instruction and student performance (Bergmark, 2020; Gibbons et al., 2019). To address the challenge of how to cultivate and enhance teachers' sense of efficacy and growth mindset, the focus must be on changing the teacher's experience by supporting teachers in using strategies that improve student performance and gathering trustworthy evidence for those improvements (Guskey, 2021; Ryan & Hendry, 2023). Despite the agreement that professional development and coaching are essential for educators, there is little consensus on how professional development and coaching work, how it fosters teacher

learning, and how it is expected to alter teaching practices (Rojas et al., 2020). A study on the understanding and exploration of current support for teachers in state-funded preschool programs would be beneficial to determine effective coaching and professional development to improve learning environments for children.

Summary

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory guides the research and plays a key role in defining teacher efficacy and improving the learning environment for children in preschool programs. Bronfenbrenner (1981) discovered that different kinds of settings offer different and distinctive patterns from humans, and there is a systematic difference in behavior. The important elements of a high-quality preschool program include sufficient learning time, well-prepared teachers who provide engaging interactions and classroom environments that support learning; ongoing support for teachers, including coaching, with program assessments that measure the quality of classroom interactions and provide actionable feedback for teachers to improve instruction and these elements are present in the programs that demonstrated the strongest and most persistent impacts on children (Melroy et al., 2019).

Gomez et al. (2019) define the South Carolina Child Development and Education Program (CERDEP) as a state-funded full-day four-year-old prekindergarten program for children who are at risk of not being prepared to enter kindergarten. Quality early learning experiences are contingent on well-prepared teachers supported by ongoing coaching and professional development (Shannon et al., 2021). To build teacher efficiency, a growth mindset is needed so teachers will pursue lifelong learners and enhance their professional knowledge and competence (Choi & Kang, 2019; Martin & Mulvihill, 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, S, 2022). Coaching, as a professional development tool, effectively enhances

a wide range of teacher and child outcomes when it is more specific and goal oriented (Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019; Shannon et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022; Zang & Cook, 2019).

A literature review focused on understanding and exploring current support for teachers in state-funded preschool programs. It has shown that it may be beneficial to further research coaching and professional development to develop teacher efficacy to improve learning environments for children. The findings from this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study could help other states and districts focus on effective support for teachers in developing teacher efficacy and improving learning environments for children. By collecting data through individual interviews, observations, and focus groups, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory can identify effective support for teachers in improving learning environments for children. While current research indicates that support is needed for teachers, further studies are needed to discover effective coaching and professional development for developing teacher efficacy to improve learning environments for children in state-funded preschool programs.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview`

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study was to describe the lived experiences of educators to determine the support needed to improve the learning environment for children at South Carolina public preschool classrooms. The data that was analyzed for this study included interviews, observation notes, and focus groups. This study's 10 to 15 participants are early childhood educators who teach in state-funded preschool classrooms. Chapter three described the study's qualitative transcendental phenomenological design, the central and sub-questions, setting, participants, and the researcher's positionality. This chapter also focused on the interpretive framework, which includes the philosophical, ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions and the researcher's role. In addition, the procedural section described obtaining permissions, the recruitment plan, data collection methods, analysis plans, and data synthesis. This study followed all the guidelines for trustworthiness and discussed how I achieved credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Finally, the chapter discussed ethical consideration.

Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study was to describe the lived experiences of educators to determine the support needed to improve the learning environment for children at South Carolina public preschool classrooms. This qualitative study described the shared ideas and lived experiences educators receive from the support received to improve learning environments. Qualitative studies focus on a single idea (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this qualitative study, the research design is transcendental phenomenology. Moustakas (1994) credits Edmund Husserl with focusing on the data being found in the shared experience at

the beginning of this research design. Husserl focused on the essence or foundation of human knowledge. Moustakas (1994) describes transcendental phenomenology as each experience being considered singularity, in and for itself, and described in its totality in a new way. When using the transcendental phenomenological approach, the researcher must make systematic and disciplined efforts to remove prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

The transcendental phenomenology approach seeks to understand human experience (Moustakas, 1994). Qualitative research is written when researchers want to focus on what participants have in common and understand the context of settings to address the issue or problem in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The lived experiences of educators in state-supported preschool classrooms will determine the support needed to develop teacher efficacy and improve the learning environment for children. The participants provided insight into the support they receive to develop teacher efficacy and improve learning environments for children. A phenomenon can be any experience and seeks to understand what occurs in each experience. A researcher must suspend his/her attitude and beliefs and focus on the experiences of the phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019). It is essential for scholars to learn from these lived experiences. All early childhood educators share the common experience of being in state-funded preschool programs.

Phenomenology is one of the greatest opportunities to gain experience from the experiences of others (Farrell, 2020). Phenomenology research was the best approach for this study because early childhood educators described the common phenomenon in their lived experience from the support they receive to improve the learning environment for children. Creswell and Poth (2018) outline qualitative research with fundamental characteristics such as an

evolving design, the presentation of multiple realities, an instrument for data collection, and a focus on participants' views. Natural settings are needed for qualitative researchers to collect data in the field on site where participants experience the problem under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, 10 to 15 early childhood educators in state-funded preschool classrooms will describe the support they receive and how it develops teacher efficacy to improve student learning environments.

Research Questions

This qualitative transcendental phenomenology study described the support received by educators to improve the learning environment for children in the state-funded preschool program in South Carolina. This study included a central question and three sub-questions focusing on the support, coaching, and professional learning opportunities provided to educators to improve the learning environment for children in state-funded early childhood classrooms.

Central Research Question

What are the shared lived experiences among early childhood educators who receive support through coaching and professional development from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy to improve the learning environment for children in the state-funded preschool program in South Carolina?

Sub-Question One

What support from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy do educators describe has been most helpful in improving the learning environment for children in state-funded preschool classrooms??

Sub-Question Two

How do educators describe the coaching sessions provided during visits from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy in improving the learning environment for children in state funded preschool classrooms?

Sub-Question Three

How do educators describe the professional learning opportunities given by the Office of Early Learning and Literacy to improve the learning environment for children in state funded preschool classrooms?

Setting and Participants

The purpose of this section is twofold. In the first subsection, the site described the location and school system. In the second subsection, the profile of the participants was articulated.

Site (or Setting)

Qualitative researchers collect data from sites because this is where the participants experience the phenomenon (Creswell and Poth, 2018). In this study, the setting included South Carolina state-funded preschool classrooms. The setting was chosen because I reside in the state and work in the Office of Early Learning and Literacy making the setting a convenience setting. These classrooms are referred to as Child Early Reading and Development Education Program (CERDEP) classrooms. CERDEP classrooms are funded for as many of the state's at-risk 4-year-olds to have the opportunity to attend a full-day educational program (CERDEP Guidelines, 2023). Districts have local control of the classrooms and are supported throughout the year by the South Carolina Department of Education, Office of Early Learning and Literacy. There are 800 CERDEP classrooms across the state of South Carolina. Classrooms and teachers are located

across the state, in different districts, and will all have pseudonyms. These classrooms were selected because they receive support from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy, South Carolina Department of Education, throughout the year.

Participants

Participants in this study were 10 to 15 early childhood educators who teach in state-funded preschool classrooms. A general guideline for determining sample size in qualitative research is to study few sites and individuals but collect extensive details and information from those sites and individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Criterion sampling was used to determine if the participants qualify for the study. Criterion sampling is used when it is essential that all participants have experienced the phenomenon and helps with quality assurance (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sampling used in this study will be a typical case. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe typical cases as highlighting what is normal or average. The use of a typical case will determine the common ideas among participants and help develop criteria of what is typical from the support received in improving learning environments for children. The teachers in this study receive visits during the school year and are offered opportunities to attend Professional Learning Opportunities (PLO) to support ways of improving learning environments for children. Participants were selected based on three criteria. First, they were in a CERDEP classroom. Second, the teacher held a valid South Carolina teacher's certification in Early Childhood. Finally, the participant attended at least one Professional Learning Opportunity (PLO) offered by the Office of Early Learning and Literacy during the school year. This study did not require participants to be of any gender, race, or age. Participants were able to discontinue involvement in the study at any time without penalty or consequences.

Recruitment Plan

Multiple factors, including sample size, should be considered during research to increase the validity of qualitative studies (Mwita, 2022). In qualitative research the signals of saturation are determined by evaluating the adequacy and the comprehensiveness of the results (Morse, 1995). Data saturation is reached when there is enough information to replicate the study and when further coding is no longer needed (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Recruitment for this study included working with districts to recruit 10 to 15 educators who teach in CERDEP classrooms in South Carolina. I must receive IRB approval first from all stakeholders. Once approval was received, I began to recruit. The recruitment process began with communication with the district's early childhood contact. I worked with the district contact to recruit educators for the study. I will communicate through email and phone. Once educators were recruited, the interviews were scheduled and held virtually.

To recruit teachers for this study, an email was sent to the early learning coordinators in districts with a letter explaining the study, guidelines for meeting the study requirements and a support request. The early learning coordinators were sent the letter and email to all CERDEP teachers, asking them to email me with interest in the study. Sample size principles and guidelines have been developed to enable researchers to set and justify the acceptability of the sample size as an important marker of the quality of qualitative research (Vasileiou et.al, 2018). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), it is important to find people or places to study, gain access, and establish rapport with participants for good data. To recruit participants, I focused on intentionally collaborating and building relationships with educators in CERDEP classrooms.

Researcher's Positionality

The motivation behind this research was to understand how educators in state-funded preschool classrooms describe the support and professional development that helps develop teacher efficacy in improving learning environments for children. Early childhood classrooms have substantial benefits, but the quality and curriculum in practice must support the children in their learning and development in a variety of ways (Archambault et al., 2020; Woods & Hedges, 2016). Educators in state-funded preschool classrooms receive support and feedback and are offered Professional Learning Opportunities (PLO) to develop teacher efficacy in improving learning environments for children. Qualitative researchers' emphasis is the importance of beliefs and theories to inform research. Therefore, it is critical to develop the framework and philosophical assumptions for a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretive framework and the philosophical assumption support the importance of the lived experiences of educators. This study is important to me because it focuses on the importance of well-prepared teachers in CERDEP classrooms and the impact of improving the learning environments for children in this program.

Interpretive Framework

Constructivism is the interpretive framework for this study because I seek to understand the lives of the educators supported in preschool state-funded classrooms. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that constructivism seeks to understand the world in which we live and work. The lived experiences of the educators will help define what support, feedback, and professional learning opportunities help develop teacher efficacy in improving learning environments for children. The transcendental phenomenology approach seeks to understand human experience (Moustakas, 1994) just as constructivism seeks to understand the world in which we live and

work (Creswell & Poth 2018). Qualitative research is written when researchers want to focus on what participants have in common and understand the context of settings to address the issue or problem in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The support needed to develop teacher efficacy and improve the learning environment for children of these teachers will be shared through the experiences of these educators. The participants will provide insight into their lived experiences as early childhood educators and the support they receive to develop teacher efficacy and improve learning environments for children.

Philosophical Assumptions

The interpretive framework influences philosophical assumptions and outlines the direction of the researcher's goals, outcomes, and decisions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Philosophical assumptions influence how we view and evaluate a problem. Other influences include the researcher's background and previous knowledge. Assumptions can change over time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the researcher has different experiences or gains more knowledge, assumptions may change.

Ontological Assumption

The ontological assumption focuses on the nature of reality, and multiple realities are constructed through lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There are two views, the world view, and the spiritual view. The worldview is the reality of what we see, while the spiritual view focuses on our relationship with God. This study focuses on the participants' reality of being educators in a state-funded preschool classroom. There may be multiple realities as participants share their lived experiences, and there will be multiple data sources.

Epistemological Assumption

The epistemological assumption focuses on how reality is known and constructed on knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I will focus on the information from interviews, observations, and focus groups to gain the information essential to this study. Direct quotes and field notes will support the accuracy of descriptions of the lived experiences of the educators. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that subject evidence is assembled based on interviews and conducting studies in the "field" to understand what the participants are saying is important. As the researcher, it is important to have both interviews and be in the field to gain knowledge and evidence for the study.

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption focuses on values and bias in the study. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that the researcher acknowledges that the research is value-laden and that biases are present. As the researcher, I am biased in creating high-quality preschool state-funded classrooms through support, feedback, and professional learning opportunities. I understand the importance and impact of early learning, as it is the foundation for children to be successful. This study will seek to determine how educators feel about the support, feedback, and professional learning opportunities, but my values and bias will not alter the participants' perspectives.

Researcher's Role

This study is important to me because I want to support teachers in creating and improving the learning environments for our youngest learners. Over the last 20 years, I have worked in different capacities in education. I have taught multiple grades, including kindergarten, first, and second. As a teacher, I served as a Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) mentor for teachers. I served as the Early Learning Coordinator for a large district. My role in

this district was to ensure that the district's CERDEP classrooms were following the state guidelines. I also worked with a nonprofit that partnered with the South Carolina Department of Education, ensuring that at-risk families received additional support at home to increase student language and literacy skills. I served as a Learning Engagement Coach for Families with the South Carolina Department of Education, Office of Early Learning and Literacy, supporting families with language and literacy skills. My current role is Education Associate for CERDEP classrooms for the South Carolina Department of Education, Office of Early Learning and Literacy. I travel to different districts and support teachers in state-funded preschool classrooms, providing feedback and support to educators in improving learning environments for children.

In this study, I assumed the role of the human instrument (Moustakas, 1994). I collected and analyzed the data and identify the themes and findings. The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). I was conscious of my biases and open-minded to the results. There are strengths and areas of concern when the researcher is the human instrument. One strength of being a human instrument is that the researcher can immediately respond and adapt (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). An area of concern for a researcher as a human instrument is always self-monitoring because the biases may shape the collection and interpretation of the data (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). I wrote my thoughts and ideas in a researcher's journal to help with my biases. Another way to help with biases was to partner with the participants. Partnering with the participants, being flexible, and being willing to change with the developments helps with the biases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I do not have any authority over these districts or educators in the classrooms. Additionally, I do not support the district or educators in which I was previously employed.

Procedures

This study was conducted as qualitative research. Qualitative transcendental phenomenology research was chosen because the study focuses on the participants' lived experiences, and the data is non-numerical. Moustakas (1994) describes transcendental phenomenology as each experience being considered singularity, in and for itself, and described in its totality in a new way. When using the transcendental phenomenological approach, the researcher must make systematic and disciplined efforts to remove prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). I received IRB approval from all stakeholders. The IRB is located in the appendix (Appendix A). Once approval was received, I began recruitment. The recruitment process began with communication with the district's early childhood contact. I worked with the district contact to recruit educators for the study. I communicated through email and phone. Once educators were recruited, the interviews were scheduled and held virtually. The consent form is in the appendix (Appendix G).

The participants provided insight into the support they receive to develop teacher efficacy and improve the learning environments for children. This study will utilize the phenomenological research model. The questions in the research will utilize open-ended questions and comments. When formulating questions for the research Moustakas (1994) found that the researcher must have a topic and question rooted in meaning and value with social significance. The question must be clear and concise. The key terms should be defined, discussed, and clarified so that the purpose of the study is evident. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that Moustakas offers practical instructions that are helpful in extracting themes common across interviews. According to Moustakas (1994), the questions should seek the meaning of the human experience; seeks to discover the qualitative instead of the quantitative behavior; sustains

personal and passionate involvement; does not predict or determine causal relationships; and gives vivid and accurate descriptions of the experience rather than measurements and data. According to Moustakas (1994), beginning the interview with a social conversation can create a trusting and relaxed atmosphere. Collecting data for this study will focus on three collection approaches. This study's three data collection approaches will include individual interviews, observations, and focus groups. Moustakas (1994) states that the researcher should cross-validate and triangulate different data using multiple methods in a study.

The three approaches selected triangulated the needed data to validate the research. Interviews allowed the researcher to ask open-ended questions. The interview questions were given to the participants via virtual meetings. The researcher recorded the meetings and began the meeting with a social conversation to build trust. Observations allowed the researcher to gain information from the field in the natural setting. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), observation is a key tool in qualitative research. The visits were unscheduled so that the information would be authentic. The visits occurred once, with follow-up visits if needed. Focus groups allowed for discussions at the end of the research study. The focus group consisted of 10 participants in the study. The researcher led the group by asking questions to prompt discussion among the participants. The meeting was held virtually because the participants are located across the state and in many different districts.

Moustakas (1994) states that the researcher needs procedures and methods that satisfy the requirements of scientific evidence in phenomenological investigations. He states that the procedures and methods need to be organized, disciplined, and systematic. Moustakas (1994) states that after the researcher organizes, presents, and analyzes the data, the researcher must summarize the study and consider the limitations. Eddles-Hirsh (2015) found that among novice

researchers, there is uncertainty on how to use phenomenology as a framework because phenomenology is a philosophy, a foundation for qualitative research, and a research method; therefore, it is essential for the researcher to state the approach they have adopted because it will impact their selection of methodological procedures. After I complete the summarization and consider the limitations, I will outline future research to help gain more knowledge on the topic. It is vital that the researcher describes the outcomes and implications of the study, along with personal and professional values (Moustakas, 1994).

Data Collection Plan

This qualitative transcendental phenomenology study described the lived experiences of early childhood educators in the state-funded preschool program in South Carolina and the support they receive to improve the learning environment for children. Moustakas (1994) states that the researcher needs to have procedures and methods that satisfy scientific evidence requirements in phenomenological investigations. Phenomenological reduction will be used during data collection and data analysis. Phenomenological reduction is the method of going back to the experience and suspending intellectual judgment and bracketing (Nonaka & Yamaguchi, 2022). This method helped in removing prejudices and biases and see the experience just as it is revealed. Collecting data for this study focused on three collection approaches. This study's three data collection approaches included individual interviews, observations, and focus groups. Moustakas (1994) states that the researcher should cross-validate and triangulate different data using multiple methods in a study. The three approaches selected will triangulate the needed data to validate the research.

Individual Interviews

This approach allowed me to ask open-ended questions. The interview questions addressed the central research question: What are the shared lived experiences among early childhood educators who receive support through coaching and professional development from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy to improve the learning environment for children in the state-funded preschool program in South Carolina? The interview questions were given to the participants through a virtual meeting. I recorded the meetings and began the meeting with a social conversation to build trust. According to Moustakas (1994), beginning the interview with a social conversation can create a trusting and relaxed atmosphere. I will record, transcribe, and read the interviews frequently to gather the needed data. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that interviews must be recorded, transcribed, and read frequently. The interview included thirteen questions that allowed the participants to tell their stories. When formulating questions for the research Moustakas (1994) found that the researcher must have a topic and question rooted in meaning and value with social significance. The question must be clear and concise.

Table 1

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to me. CRQ
2. Please describe your classroom role and experience. CRQ
3. How would you describe your experience teaching in a CERDEP classroom? CRQ
4. How does the Office of Early Learning and Literacy support you during the school year?

SQ1

5. How does the support you receive from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy help you plan instruction? SQ1
6. Describe your experience from the support you received from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy. SQ1
7. How does coaching from the OELL Education Associate help you improve the learning environment in your classroom? SQ2
8. What changes have you made in your classroom based on the coaching visit? SQ2
9. What has been a challenge that you received support on during the coaching visit? SQ2
10. What Professional Learning Opportunities (PLO) have you attended that are offered by the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE)? SQ3
11. After attending the PLO, how did you reflect on the information provided? SQ3
12. What new strategy or idea have you implemented to improve the learning environment after attending a PLO? SQ3
13. What other information would you like to share? CRQ

Questions one through three help the participants feel comfortable and build a rapport. The design of these questions is to build a relationship and create a relaxing environment. Interview questions that build relationships at the front end of the interview allow for the researcher to invite the interviewee to open up and talk (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interview questions are open-ended and designed to get to know the participant and understand their background. These questions also establish the participants' reasons for being educators.

Questions four through six focus on the types of support received from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy. The questions allow the participants to describe the support they receive.

These questions help establish what the educators feel are important aspects of the support provided for improving the learning environment for children. Engaging teachers in self-reflection and vicarious experiences, including learning from others and being provided feedback, allows them to be more confident in their practice. (Choi, & Kang, 2019, Martin & Mulvihill, 2019; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, S, 2022). Teachers' growth is found by observing children's success, receiving support through advice and modeling, being respected, encouraged, and trusted to implement new practices by school leaders, and professional learning that develops the new knowledge and skills for teaching that enables success (Ryan & Hendry, 2023).

Questions seven through nine focus on the coaching sessions teachers receive to support guiding them in improving the learning environment for children. These open-ended questions allow the participants to share how they feel about the coaching session provided during the visit from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy. Classroom-based coaching can connect knowledge to classroom practice and demonstrate growth in teaching practice and knowledge, supporting them to reach their full potential (Atkinson et al., 2022; Cunningham et al., 2023; Glover et al., 2023). Quality coaching that is modifiable and continuous feedback between coach and teacher is an important attribute in increasing student achievement because as teachers build self-efficacy, they are more confident in their impact on students (Salas-Rodríguez, & Lara, 2023). It is vital for teachers to learn and use feedback to build and improve skills, allowing teachers to be more effective and resilient (Choi & Kang, 2019; Martin & Mulvihill, 2019; Zugelder, 2019).

Questions 10 through 12 focus on the Professional Learning Opportunities (Professional Development) offered by the Office of Early Learning and Literacy. These open-ended questions

allow the participants to share how they feel about the Office of Early Learning and Literacy professional development sessions. Professional development that is supported through active learning, collaboration, coaching and support from an expert, and time for reflection and feedback allows teachers to learn and reflect on knowledge and skills (Choi & Kang, 2019; Gomez et al., 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Mora-Ruano et al., 2019; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, S, 2022). Professional development is one way to improve educators' verbal interaction and intentional teaching of language and early literacy skills (Chaitow et al., 2022).

Question thirteen allows the participants to share any other information that they feel is important. It is a way to wrap up the interview, allowing for follow-up questions. Open-ended interview questions allow for participants to contribute as much details as they desire, express their viewpoints, experiences and allow for probing questions as a way to follow up (Roberts, 2020).

Observations

This approach allowed me to gain information from the field in a natural setting. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that observation is crucial in qualitative research. I spent time in each classroom taking notes from observations of the learning environment and the teacher, which will be both descriptive and reflective. The visits were unscheduled so that the information was authentic. The visits occurred once and lasted approximately one hour, with follow-up visits if needed. Data will be recorded using the Office of Early Learning and Literacy observation tool, The Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) Checklist (Appendix D). Qualitative research involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach to the world (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Observations are appropriate for the research because they allowed me to gather authentic notes and data from the natural setting to answer the central

research question. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), researchers are a key instrument in collecting data by examining documents and observing behavior.

Focus Groups

Focus groups in qualitative research are a way to collect data and complement the other methods of data collection by providing in-depth information in a relatively short period of time (Gundumogula & Gundumogula, 2020). This approach allowed for discussions at the end of the research study. The focus group consisted of two groups of 5 participants in the study, totaling 10 participants. I led the group by asking questions to prompt discussion among the participants. The meeting was held virtually because the participants are located across the state and in many different districts. Focus Groups are appropriate for this research because they allow the participants to meet and have in-depth discussions, allowing me to create triangulation data. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that focus groups are advantageous when interviewees are similar and cooperative. The collective responses will allow me to record the meeting and gain a different perspective from the interview questions.

Focus groups are appropriate for this research because the responses from the group gave me additional notes and a different perspective from the interview questions. Once the focus group was established, I set up a virtual meeting. The meeting allowed the participants to share their stories after interviews and observations. This allowed me to gather additional information and triangulate data. Moustakas (1994) states that the researcher should cross-validate and triangulate different data using multiple methods in a study. I asked nine questions to allow the focus group participants to expand and give additional details to their stories. I recorded, transcribed, and read the focus group meeting frequently to gather additional data. Focus groups can be used for validation and refinement purposes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus group

discussion is more collaborative in research because focus group discussion inspires a framework for stakeholders and gives them a chance to express feelings and opinions in a group setting (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021).

Table 2

Focus Group Questions

1. What is a celebration from your classroom this year? (CRQ)
2. What is something new you implemented in your class and how did it go?
3. What words would you use to describe the learning environment for children in preschool state-funded classrooms? CRQ
4. How do you plan for student success? SQ1
5. How does your class schedule and daily routine support student success? SQ1
6. What recommendations in the Child Early Reading and Development Education Plan (CERDEP) guidelines support improving the learning environment for children? SQ1
7. How do you use the feedback given during your observation to be reflective in practice? SQ2
8. How do you use PLOs to be reflective in practice? SQ3
9. What else you would like to share? CRQ

Questions one through three establish the relationship and build a rapport. The questions are open-ended and help the participants feel comfortable with the discussion of all the questions.

Question four focuses on the guidelines established by the South Department of Education and how the participants use the guidelines to improve the learning environment for children. This open-ended question allows the participants to describe how they feel

about the state guidelines and the recommendations they feel are most important in improving the learning environment for children.

Questions five through eight focuses on feedback and professional learning opportunities to support educators. These open-ended questions allow the participants to share ways they use feedback and professional learning opportunities to improve instruction.

Question nine allows the participants to share any other information that they feel is important. It is a way to wrap up the focus group, allowing for follow-up questions and discussion among the participants.

Data Analysis

The *époché* gives a clear mind, allowing us to focus on the experience and helps eliminate biases and see what is in front of us (Moustakas, 1994). According to Saldaña (2014), reflecting and analyzing data as it is gathered is a key factor in synthesizing. Descriptive coding was used to summarize and find patterns and themes and analyze and synthesize the data from interviews, field notes, and focus groups. Textual and structural descriptions helped find the meaning of the patterns and themes. Textural and structural descriptions help determine the meaning and essence of the experience, incorporating the themes to formulate and synthesize the experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Focusing on the nouns helped determine the keywords in the patterns and themes. The themes and patterns answered the central research question. The findings were summarized after determining key themes and patterns, addressing the strengths and weaknesses, and determining the need for further research. Moustakas (1994) states that the structural description outlines the essence of the experience. The key themes and patterns found defined and described the essence of the lived experience of the teachers in state-funded preschool classrooms. This was the key element of analyzing and synthesizing the data from the

study. By triangulating the data, a variety of data helped explain the differing aspects of the study. To triangulate the data from interviews, observations, and focus groups, I looked at the themes and synthesized the data. I identified the themes and patterns. Once themes and patterns were identified, I will use chart paper to determine the outliers and the main ideas from the triangulated data. The main ideas from the triangulated data will be used to confirm the finds and minimize the biases.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

The participant interviews were transcribed word for word and read several times. After the interviews were transcribed, the interviews were coded and sorted. Chowdhury (2015) states that coding and sorting qualitative data gives strong evidence that researchers have a better contextual understanding and subjective interpretation. Coding the interviews will include three phases. Coding should be a short list where the researcher focuses on a few categories, makes comparisons, and develops themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The first phase of coding addressed the central research question. This information was highlighted in green. The second phase of coding addressed the learning environment. This information was highlighted in pink. The third phase focused on feedback, support, and professional development for the educators. This information will be coded in yellow. I looked for isolating themes and code these themes in orange. Once the information was highlighted, I looked for themes and chart these themes on chart paper.

Observation Data Analysis Plan

Observation data analysis focused on the notes from observations and the ELLCO checklist. This information was categorized into clusters and placed into similar or comparable codes for further analysis. According to Saldaña (2014), category construction clusters the most

seemingly alike things in the most appropriate groups. Categorizing this research focused on clustering the themes and patterns that answer the central research question, as well as providing feedback and support to educators and professional development. Saldaña (2014) states that when you become familiar with the setting and participants, actively focusing on the things that relate to the topic and questions, patterning can help detect similarities within and regularities among data collection. The themes and patterns were placed on chart paper.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

Jotting was used to help find the patterns and themes from the focus groups. According to Saldaña (2014), a jot is a brief description that will fit on a "sticky note." Jot notes are preliminary patterns, quotes that are vivid, and anomalies in the data (Saldaña, 2014). For the data analysis of focus groups, I continued to look for these themes focusing on the central research question, the learning environment for children, feedback given to educators, and professional learning opportunities. The sticky notes from jotting were coded and placed by theme on the appropriate chart paper. The first coding phase focuses on the central research question and was highlighted in green. The second coding phase focused on the learning environment for children and was highlighted in pink. The third coding phase focused on feedback and support provided to the educator and professional development. For the data analysis of observations, I continued to look for themes that focus on improving the learning environment for children. This was coded in pink. I looked for isolating themes, which were coded in orange.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of a qualitative study is an essential element of evaluation. For the qualitative study to be trustworthy, data will be needed from several sources. The three

approaches selected triangulated the needed data to validate the research, specifically focusing on credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical consideration. Shenton (2004) found that advocates have achieved demonstration and rigor in qualitative research by focusing on these criteria of trustworthiness.

Credibility

According to Stahl and King (2020, p. 26), credibility asks, "How congruent are the findings with reality?" This study's credibility depends on the participants' perspectives and how the researcher interprets the data. This qualitative study will include interviews of all 10 to 15 participants and focus groups, which include two groups of five participants. The interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and coded, identifying themes. Themes were charted, and direct quotes were used to reflect the participants' lived experiences. Direct quotes in a study help illustrate the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Observations were the third data point for this study. The information gathered from the observations triangulated the data. According to Stahl and King (2020), triangulating means using several sources of information to repeatedly establish themes and patterns and test the credibility of the research. Member checking and peer debriefing were also conducted to ensure that credibility is established. Member checking of any sort led to the trust of the researcher (Stahl & King, 2020).

Transferability

Transferability shows that the findings may have applicability in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which is largely achieved through the use of thick descriptions when describing research findings (Geertz, 2008). Transferability refers to the ability for findings from the context of your study to be applied to another context or within the same context at another time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is important to acknowledge that the researcher can only create the

conditions for transferability but cannot assure transferability: this judgment can only be made by the reader of the research. Transferability is strengthened when a thick and rich description enables readers to transfer information to another setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As this study develops, the findings can transfer to other settings and participants. Stahl and King (2020) state that qualitative researchers find that patterns and descriptions from one context can apply to another. It is possible to provide this study in classrooms not state-funded and in other areas of the United States. The steps of the research provide an outline to duplicate this study. While the study can be transferred to other settings, the participants' lived experiences will not be able to be transferred.

Dependability

Dependability is established through an audit of the research process and establishes the value of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Shenton (2004) states that the processes in the study should be reported in detail to enable future researchers to duplicate the work. The transcription will be read multiple times to ensure the participants' stories are accurately told. Other ways to ensure dependability in the study will include member checking and peer debriefing. Stahl and King (2020) state that when the work is checked, the researcher will be more aware of what is recorded as fact and what is set aside as the researcher's interpretive comments of the data.

Member checking allowed the participants to ensure that their stories were told accurately and to ensure dependability. In peer debriefing, the members of the dissertation team reviewed the data and the study for dependability.

Confirmability

Stahl and King (2020) state that confirmability is getting close to objective reality in qualitative research. Confirmability was demonstrated in the research by providing the needed information detailing the steps of data collection and data analysis. Objectivity is demonstrated by using direct quotes from interviews and focus groups. Anecdotal notes from the observations were based on visits from the natural setting. Triangulating the data promoted confirmability. The role of triangulation in confirmability will need to be emphasized (Shenton, 2004). To increase transparency and to ensure confirmability, an audit trail will be presented, outlining the framework underlying this study and the steps of analysis. Audit trails involve maintaining audits of all key stages and theoretical, methodological, and analytical decisions and documenting how thinking evolves throughout the study (Carcary, 2020).

Ethical Considerations

Creswell and Poth (2018) state that ethical considerations are important throughout the research process, including involving participants, gathering personal and emotional data about the participants' experiences, and asking participants to give time to the research project. This section discusses ethical considerations given for this study which included permissions and participant protection.

Permissions

Permissions began with approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University. Once the IRB was obtained, the Team Lead and Director for the Office of Early Learning and Literacy was contacted by phone and email to gain support for this study. Next, district contacts were notified by phone and email, asking for support with the recruitment of participants. Interested participants were contacted by email and received a recruitment letter and

consent form. The recruitment letter outlined the study and provide the needed contact information.

Permission from district leadership was essential when conducting this study. Moustakas states that (1994) human science researchers are guided by the ethical principles of research of human participants. This includes providing the co-researchers with instructions that include obtaining consent, ensuring confidentiality, and delineating the responsibilities of the researcher and the participants with ethical principles. All participants were voluntary and could ask to be excused from the study at any time.

Other Participant Protections

All data was locked in a file cabinet in the home office. I have the only locked file cabinet and home office key. All electronic copies of information were kept on the computer and flash drive. Data from this study will be destroyed after a three-year period based on Liberty University IRB.

All participants were volunteers who signed a consent agreement. Participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The participants were coded by number, and all the collected data from that participant was coded with the given number. All the procedures in this study will follow ethical standards and be approved by the IRB.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study was to describe the lived experiences of early childhood educators in the state-funded preschool program in South Carolina and the support they receive to improve the learning environment for children. This study's 10 to 15 participants are early childhood educators who teach in state-funded preschool classrooms. The data that was analyzed for this study included interviews, observation notes, and

focus groups. The three approaches selected triangulated the needed data to validate the research, specifically focusing on credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical consideration. Shenton (2004) found that advocates have achieved demonstration and rigor in qualitative research by focusing on these criteria of trustworthiness.

This study's credibility depends on the participants' perspectives and how the researcher interprets the data. Stahl and King (2020) state that qualitative researchers find that patterns and descriptions from one context can apply to another. While the study can be transferred to other settings, the lived experiences of the participants will not be able to be transferred. Other ways to ensure dependability in the study will include member checking and peer debriefing. Anecdotal notes from the observations will be based on visits from the natural setting. Triangulating the data will promote confirmability. The role of triangulation in confirmability will need to be emphasized (Shenton, 2004). Ensuring the study's trustworthiness will validate the data and is critical to the evaluation process.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

Chapter four provides the data analysis. This qualitative transcendental phenomenology sought to describe the support received by educators to improve the learning environment for children in the state funded preschool program in South Carolina. First, the participants' demographics are used to give a comprehensive description. Next, the findings from the study are discussed through significant narrative themes. The chapter concludes by synthesizing these elements, allowing for detailed discussion in the subsequent chapter.

Participants

The study involved 10 participants. Each taught in a state funded (CERDEP) classroom, held a valid South Carolina teacher's certification in Early Childhood, and attended at least one Professional Learning Opportunity (PLO) offered by the Office of Early Learning and Literacy during the school year. The criterion was established to ensure the phenomenon would be addressed.

To recruit teachers for this study, an email was sent to the early learning coordinators in the district with a letter explaining the study, guidelines for meeting the study requirements, and a support request. The early learning coordinators sent letters and emails to all CERDEP teachers. The teachers completed an interest survey (Appendix E). Once the survey was complete, an email with the consent form was sent to the selected participants (Appendix F, Appendix G). Once informed consent was received, participants were sent an email to schedule the interview. Each participant was provided a pseudonym to be used for ethical consideration. Observation times were scheduled during the interview, and the focus group date was set. The following are individual descriptions from each of the 10 participants. Pseudonyms were used to

protect their identity.

Table 3
Teacher Participants Demographics

Name	Education	Total Years of Experience	Years in CERDEP
Valerie	Masters	32	1
Cathy	Masters +30	8	1
Penny	Masters	15	2
Maggie	Bachelors	7	2
Monica	Masters	4	1
Kim	Bachelors	2	2
Kate	Bachelors	3	1
Carly	Bachelors	2	1
Haley	Masters	7	1
Charlotte	Masters	23	2

Cathy

Cathy was a Caucasian female in her 40s. She was a full-time teacher in a state funded (CERDEP) classroom. She has a master's +30 degree and is certified in Early Childhood. She has taught for eight years, with one year in a state funded (CERDEP) classroom. Cathy loves the program because it allows at-risk students an opportunity to develop the skills needed to be ready for kindergarten. She describes the literacy-rich environment as the foundation for success for these students. She feels that support throughout the year is essential to the program's success. At the time of the study, she taught at a high-poverty Title I school. Cathy states, "It's good to have

support and have another person in here seeing what's going on, give their suggestions because I think the district is not in here and they don't really understand what our needs are.”

Maggie

Maggie is a Caucasian female in her 30s who is a full-time teacher in a state funded (CERDEP) classroom. She has a bachelor's degree and is certified in Early Childhood. She has taught for seven years, with two years in a state funded (CERDEP) classroom. She likes the program and has shown growth from the previous year. Maggie has taken feedback from visits and made changes to her classroom to meet the needs of her students. She likes the idea of books and writing materials in all interest areas. At the time of the study, she taught at a high-poverty Title I school. Maggie stated, “I like ways to add on to things that we are already doing because it just gives me more ideas and things through another lens, which is nice to have that feedback.”

Kim

Kim was a Caucasian female 35-40 years old. She was a full-time teacher in a state funded (CERDEP) classroom. She has a bachelor's degree and is certified in Early Childhood education. She has taught for two years, with two years in a state funded (CERDEP) classroom. During the interview, Kim discussed not returning to the classroom next year. She struggled during her time in the classroom and felt the district did not support her. At the time of the study, she taught at a high-poverty Title I school. Kim stated, “It’s just nice to have the validation when you come visit because we don't get a lot in this profession and from the district.”

Penny

Penny was a Caucasian female between 55 and 60 years old. She was a full-time teacher in a state funded (CERDEP) classroom. She has a master’s degree and is certified in Early Childhood. She has taught for fifteen years, with two years in a state funded (CERDEP)

classroom. Penny teaches in a rural and small school. She is the only state funded (CERDEP) classroom in the school. The classroom is located on one of the barrier islands on the coast. At the time of the study, she taught at a high-poverty Title I school. Penny stated, “It has been a positive experience with the support; been nice to have the materials and the people come in to help give suggestions.”

Monica

Monica was a Caucasian female with Hispanic ethnicity in her 20s. She was a full-time teacher in a state funded (CERDEP) classroom. She has a master’s degree and is certified in Early Childhood. She has taught for four years, with two years in a state funded (CERDEP) classroom. She finds the experience challenging but positive, and it has helped her be reflective in practice. Monica feels that the students benefit from the literacy-rich environment, and the materials are beneficial. The learning environment has improved and helped students be ready for kindergarten. At the time of the study, she taught at a high-poverty Title I school. Monica stated:

With just the manipulatives and the hands-on activities, even my students who came in a little higher got the letter soup cans with the different manipulatives. I went with the sound, and my students really connected with that. The same thing happened with the numbers, and I saw immense growth with them beginning to recognize the beginning sounds of all types of words and conversations based on those.

Valerie

Valerie is a Caucasian female in her 60s. She was a full-time teacher in a state-funded (CERDEP) classroom. She has a master’s degree and is certified in Early Childhood. She has taught for 32 years, with one year in a state-funded (CERDEP) classroom. Valerie has held many

different positions during her career. She has been a reading specialist and taught different grade levels. She asked to move to preschool because she felt like those experiences would help her prepare students for success. At the time of the study, she taught at a high-poverty Title I school. When discussing the learning environment and the support for her students, Valerie stated:

You're also adjusting and modifying as you need to. As you're seeing the child, if the child has something you are adjusting and modifying, push it harder or if it's a little too hard, you can set back, so you're always thinking ahead and planning.

Haley

Haley was a Caucasian female in her late 20s. She was a full-time teacher in a state funded (CERDEP) classroom. She has a bachelor's degree but is working on her master's. She is certified in Early Childhood. She has taught for two years, with two years in a state funded (CERDEP) classroom. She feels the experience in the program has made her a better teacher. The support and feedback given to her during observations have helped her develop as a strong literacy teacher. The books and writing materials in interest areas support her students' development and help them succeed. At the time of the study, she taught at a high-poverty Title I school. Haley describes the success of her students: "I truly felt and honestly felt that all my kids were where they needed to be and were well prepared for kindergarten. So, I just felt good ending the year and I feel confident sending them on to kindergarten."

Kate

Kate was a Caucasian female between 25-30 years of age. She was a full-time teacher in a state funded (CERDEP) classroom. She has a bachelor's degree and is certified in Early Childhood. She has taught for three years, with one year in a state funded (CERDEP) classroom. Kate describes the experience as positive, and she likes the materials to support student learning.

At the time of the study, she taught at a high-poverty Title I school. Kate describes the changes she made to the learning environment:

I am using some of the materials that we got by implementing them in a different way than I did in my small groups. So, I gave each student or each table an individual bin, and they had different choices to choose from. I found that that helped their vocabulary. It helped them work together and kept them a little more occupied while I was trying to pull my small groups together.

Carly

Carly is a Caucasian female in her 20s who was a full-time teacher in a state funded (CERDEP) classroom. She has a bachelor's degree and is certified in Early Childhood. She has taught for two years, with one year in a state funded (CERDEP) classroom. She feels that she has grown and developed through the support and feedback. Carly likes the materials and the guidelines to support students in a literacy-rich environment. At the time of the study, she taught at a high-poverty Title I school. Carly describes the environment and growth of her students:

At the beginning of the year, having books in all the centers, you know, I felt like my kids didn't really look at them much just because they were so overwhelmed and excited with all the other things. But in the last nine weeks, I noticed them pulling those books more, and they would be working less with the blocks or whatever was in dramatic play. They were curious about the books and wanted me to read them or wanted to read them with each other, which is cool.

Charlotte

Charlotte was an African American female in her late 40s. She was a full-time teacher in a state-funded (CERDEP) classroom. Charlotte's classroom is a blended classroom, where she

supports students with disabilities and students who qualify for state-funded preschool. She has her master's degree and is certified in Early Childhood. She has taught for twenty-three years, with two years in a state-funded (CERDEP) classroom. She discussed the challenges of having a blended classroom, but she knew that all the students were successful because of the learning environment. She likes to focus on the social and emotional needs of the students because she knows the whole child's development is important to their success in school. At the time of the study, she taught at a high-poverty Title I school. Charlotte described her experience as:

We are blessed with an awesome Early Learning Department that supports us tremendously! They provide us with opportunities to learn and grow weekly and are there when we need them. Other grade levels are jealous when we talk about our department and the support given through the SCDE.

Results

The shared experiences that emerged from the data analysis were that teachers in state funded classrooms receive support from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy to improve learning environments for children. The experience is rooted in positive attitudes towards the support received in improving the learning environment through coaching and professional development. The data was triangulated and analyzed. Two themes emerged through coding and data analysis, including an improved learning environment and support from coaching and professional development. These themes had sub-themes that emerged during coding. The sub-themes included the ELLCO and materials for improving the learning environments, as well as coaching and professional learning opportunities for teachers as support was received. Table 4 displays the themes and the aligned sub-themes. There was no outlier in the data.

Table 4*Themes and Sub-Themes*

Theme	Aligned Sub-Themes	
Improvement to The Learning Environment	Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO)	Materials
Support Received Through Coaching and Professional Development	Coaching as Support for Teachers	Professional Learning Opportunities for Teachers

Improvement to the Learning Environment

At the time of the study, the school district that participated was in its second year of participating in the state funded program. During this time, the district expanded the program in schools and classrooms. Of the participants, four were in their second year of a state funded classroom and six were in their first year of participating in a state funded classroom. All the participants stated that one of the biggest factors of being a part of the state funded classroom was the improvement to the learning environment through the ELLCO checklist used during observations and the materials purchased to support the learning needs of the students. In the interview, Maggie discussed the literacy-rich environment and stated:

We have to have lots of writing materials and books, and while at the time I thought I had lots of literacy pieces throughout, I realized that I should have had way more things out. So that's been a great thing for me.

All participants found that the materials and ELLCO checklist were to improve the learning environment. The participants discussed the improvements to the learning environment throughout interviews and the focus group. During observations, there was evidence of the discussion by the materials in learning centers and the ELLCO checklist. During the Focus Group, Cathy discussed the impact of having the proper materials and the ELLCO checklist by saying, "Our 4k classes tested the highest scores and moved the most in the tiers (MTSS)." During the discussion, Kate stated, "I think a lot of that is from all the materials that we had this year; we had many more things to use in our classroom than we have in the past."

Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO)

The ELLCO checklist (Appendix D) is used during observations to determine if the state funded classroom follows the guidelines of a literacy-rich classroom. All participants were observed based on the checklist. Based on the findings, the learning environments in the participant's classrooms met the literacy-rich guidelines. Six participants felt the ELLCO checklist helped them rethink how their classroom is designed and improved the learning environment for children. Based on the observations from the study, the classrooms met all areas on the checklist with support needed in writing and vocabulary. Two participants needed coaching and feedback to improve students' writing, and two needed support with vocabulary during the read-aloud. Six of the participants had classrooms with literacy-rich environments overall. Penny stated, "The first year, there were some great suggestions about adding writing

and different ways to add writing into blocks and the different ways to add writing into dramatic play. So, I definitely took those suggestions.”

Other participants discussed the ELLCO checklist to ensure they have what is needed to support students' growth by improving the learning environment. Maggie stated, “I truly felt that all my kids were where they needed to be and were well prepared for kindergarten. I just felt good ending the year and feel confident about sending them on to kindergarten.”

Materials

Materials used in the state funded preschool classrooms help improve the learning environment for children. Based on the ELLO checklist, books and writing materials should be available to students to support literacy in all interest areas/learning centers. All the participants described the importance of funding for the materials as a reason the learning environments improved. They felt that the materials allowed them multiple resources to help students learn in various ways. Kate stated:

We sat down actually as a team. We read the library ideas and things like that to include student writing around the room, especially in the library, because mostly you would think a library is just books, but we took those ideas of putting the big chart paper and stuff over there for the students to write on. You're not just giving them all the materials to let them go crazy, making sure that they're nice and organized and teaching the students how to organize that stuff and making sure that when they are in the writing center, they're using those vocabulary words or those pictures of the vocabulary words to help them expand their learning.

During the focus group the participants discussed the materials and what having the resources did to support students. Kate stated:

With some of the materials purchased using CERDEP funds, I changed the way I conducted my small groups. I provided each student or table with their own bin containing various choices. This approach improved their vocabulary, encouraged collaboration, and kept them engaged while I worked with other small groups.

Charlotte discussed the ways the materials support student learning by stating:

I truly enjoyed getting the extra supplies, so that was wonderful to be able to get some of the things that I know we run through very quickly and certain things that I can specifically put in centers to support the needs of my students.

All participants felt that the materials helped create and support improving the learning environment. By following the ELLCO checklist and having all the materials, they felt they had made a difference and improved the learning environment.

Support Received through Coaching and Professional Development

The support provided during coaching sessions and professional learning from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy allows teachers to be supported, improve, and build teacher efficacy. Cathy stated:

I think it is always helpful to have someone else, especially that focuses on literacy, you know, give me their feedback because I do not know. I can only do so much, like there is only so much I could do, and to have someone in here to give more opinions on how to help support language learners is a huge, huge help.

Other participants found that the coaching and professional development provided the needed support to build teacher efficacy and create and improve learning environments. Haley stated that coaching was important because it helps with strategies to develop a literacy-rich environment. She stated, “The feedback I received about authentic student writing helped me

rethink the learning centers' materials and provide lessons on how to use the materials.”

Charlotte found that the feedback provided during coaching allowed her to rethink the read-aloud. She stated:

You are asking these high-order questions. You have questions. You are getting the kids to discuss certain things. You are putting certain things or hands-on activities and discoveries so that they can figure it out themselves without me always having to answer. So, I am doing the things, but to have that confirmation, you know, going step by step to see what you observe, I am doing it.

Coaching as Support for Teachers

Coaching sessions from the Education Associate from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy were viewed by all ten participants as positive and helpful in improving and building teacher efficacy. Four participants discussed their relationship with the education associate, as she had visited their classrooms for the second year. They all described the coaching session as helpful, and the feedback provided was valuable and practical to improve the learning environment. Penny, a teacher in the second year of a state-funded classroom, stated, “It has been a positive experience with the support and nice to have the materials again, and the people come in to help give suggestions.” All participants discussed the feedback and suggestions during the debrief as positive and helpful in developing and building their knowledge and teacher efficacy. Maggie stated during her interview and focus group, “Coaching was important because the suggestions and strategies helped her rethink how to approach circle time and the appropriate amount of time for students to sit during this time.” Other participants focused on having more than just the district providing feedback. Kim stated, “An outside person coming in to provide feedback is helpful to the teacher and the district.”

Professional Learning Opportunities as Support for Teachers

Professional development for teachers in state funded classrooms is another aspect of supporting teachers. All participants participated in a Professional Learning Opportunity (PLO) during the school year. Eight of the 10 participants attended the New Teacher CERDEP training. One participant attended a PLO on Support for Challenging Behavior, and another attended Purposeful Play. Penny attended the PLO on challenging behavior and stated, “The strategies provided were helpful and practical in supporting teachers who have students with challenging behavior.” All participants found the PLOs helpful and used strategies to improve the learning environments for children. Carly stated, “The Purposeful Play PLO was provided at the beginning of the year and allowed me to plan intentional learning centers.” One participant stated that her teacher assistant participated in the PLO for new teachers. Maggie stated, “My teacher assistant attended that training this year, and it was nice for her to have that. So she can have some buy-in as well. So that makes a difference. Having them involved in those meetings are learning opportunities.”

Research Question Responses

This section offers the reader concise answers to the research questions to prime them for the discussion in Chapter Five. This section supplies short and direct narrative answers to each research question using the themes developed in the previous section. Participant quotes that are appropriate to support the responses to the research questions.

Central Research Question

What are the shared lived experiences among early childhood educators who receive support through coaching and professional development from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy to improve the learning environment for children in the state funded preschool program

in South Carolina? The central research question addresses the lived experiences of early childhood educators and the support they receive in state funded preschool classrooms. The question was answered through interviews, observations, and focus groups. All the participants felt supported by the Office of Early Learning and Literacy throughout the school year. Monica stated, “The support we receive helps us make the needed changes to improve learning centers and help our students be successful.” All the participants had one or more years of experience in the state funded preschool classroom. They felt that support to improve the learning environment was given through ELLCO and materials. Valerie stated, “The materials provided through CERDEP funds help us, so we are not hunting down materials to support our student's learning. The materials are readily available.” The participants felt that the coaching and feedback from the visit were beneficial, but all of the participants would like more than one visits a year from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy. Kate stated, “I feel like the feedback was very helpful to ensure every student is represented and that there's plenty of shared writing and literacy around the room.”

Sub-Question One

What support from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy do educators describe has been most helpful in improving the learning environment for children in state-funded preschool classrooms? This sub-question addressed the support received by educators, which has been most helpful in improving the learning environment. The participants addressed the materials offered through the state funded preschool program. Kim stated, “The books help support the love of reading by being in all interest areas. There are writing materials in the areas, too. This helps the students see the importance of reading and writing.” This question was critical in addressing the theory used to drive this study; Bronfenbrenner (1981) discovered that various

settings offer different and distinctive patterns from humans, and there is a systematic difference in behavior. Penny stated, “Our learning environment for students has improved because of the support and materials we receive from the state department and our district.” This question was answered through all interviews, observations, and focus group data analysis. Charlotte stated:

I have books in each area. I am more mindful of that and trying to incorporate making sure that they have the writing supplies in all the areas. I keep up with all of the rotations in the centers.

Sub-Question Two

How do educators describe the coaching sessions provided during visits from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy in improving the learning environment for children in state funded preschool classrooms? This sub-question addresses coaching received by educators to improve the learning environment of state-funded classrooms. It was essential to the study because it addressed the feedback and debriefing sessions provided by the Education Associate during the observation. Kim found that during the coaching session, “The feedback was helpful, especially the information on how to improve the writing environment.” The question was answered through the interview and focus group data analysis. During the focus group, the participants discussed the importance of the coaching session. Charlotte stated, “I was really nervous about the visit, but once it started and we debriefed afterward, I found the information to be helpful and validating.” All participants felt that coaching and debriefing were beneficial and helped change and improve the learning environment for children. Research indicates that the positive effects of coaching include teachers' knowledge gains, instructional competencies, and positive development outcomes for children, which include language and literacy, social and emotional development, and academic skills (Yang et al., 2022). Monica stated, “It’s very

helpful to hear coaching feedback; we have our own literacy coaches, but it is sometimes helpful to hear all of those different opinions.” Valerie agreed, stating, “Literacy coaches provide feedback throughout the year, but it does not always support what is needed in a 4K classroom.”

Sub-Question Three

How do educators describe the professional learning opportunities given by the Office of Early Learning and Literacy to improve the learning environment for children in state funded preschool classrooms? This sub question addresses the professional development received by educators to improve the learning environments for children. It was an important question to the study because it addressed the professional learning opportunities educators attended to help develop teacher efficacy in state funded preschool classrooms. Participants discussed the PLOs during the focus group and described the experience as positive. Monica stated, “I attended the PLO at the beginning of the year, and I changed some of the things I planned based on the information I received.” The question was answered through the interview and focus group data analysis. All participants attended a PLO offered by the Office of Early Learning and Literacy. Preschool programs with the greatest gains have teachers who engage their young learners with rigorous, developmentally appropriate pedagogical strategies at the highest levels that are developed and supported by teachers who gain in intensive professional learning (Barker et al., 2021; Schachter et al., 2019). When discussing the New Teacher Training, Haley stated, “It was a revisit for me. It was nice to reflect on what materials I have, thinking about exactly how to lay out my centers and what books I could have, maybe specifically towards those centers I could have.” Kim felt the same way. She stated, “The training was a refresher for me. I moved to a new school and felt that I needed to go back through the training. I learned some different information and it helped me prepare for the year.”

Table 5
Research Questions and Corresponding Themes

Research Question	Corresponding Themes	Participants Quotes	
<p>SRQ What are the shared lived experiences among early childhood educators who receive support through coaching and professional development from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy to improve the learning environment for children in the state-funded preschool program in South Carolina?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support • Materials • Feedback • ELLCO • Language • Writing 	<p>“Well, it just offers so much support with materials. We got a nice box of materials this year and I've used the money for other things. You know, for other things that I've needed and got all new furniture and everything. So it's been definitely a positive.” Penny-Interview</p>	<p>“It's very hard, but there's a lot of joy in it. It's been really rewarding for me to see the growth that many of these students have made this year, growth that they might not get in another learning environment. I feel like in a CERDEP classroom, you're just constantly giving. You should be constantly giving students the opportunity to grow, and that might not look the same for every child you know.” Carly-Interview</p>
<p>SQ1 What support from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy do educators describe has been most helpful in improving the learning environment for children in state-funded preschool classrooms?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom visit • Debrief • Support • ELLCO checklist • Learning Environment 	<p>“The first year, there were some great suggestions about adding writing and different ways to add writing into blocks and the different ways to add writing into dramatic play. So, I definitely took those suggestions.” Penny-Interview</p>	<p>“The feedback was very helpful in making sure every student was represented and that there was plenty of shared writing and literacy around the room.” Kate-Interview</p>

<p>SQ2 How do educators describe the coaching sessions provided during visits from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy in improving the learning environment for children in state-funded preschool classrooms?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback • Support • Debrief • Discussion 	<p>“I mean, I think it's always helpful to have someone else, especially that focuses on literacy, you know, give me their feedback because I don't know. I can only do so much like there's only so much I could do and to have someone in here to give more opinions on how to help support language learners is a huge, huge help.” Cathy-Interview</p>	<p>“It's very helpful just to hear coaching feedback; I know we have our own literacy coaches, but it is sometimes helpful to hear all of those different opinions.” Monica-Interview</p>
<p>SQ3 How do educators describe the professional learning opportunities given by the Office of Early Learning and Literacy to improve the learning environment for children in state-funded preschool classrooms?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support with Literacy Rich Environment • Support with writing • Support with vocabulary • Support with challenging behavior 	<p>“We sat down actually as a team. We read the library ideas and things like that to include student writing around the room, especially in the library, because mostly you would think a library is just books, but we took those ideas of putting the big chart paper and stuff over there for the students to write on. You're not just giving them all the materials to let them go crazy, making sure that they're nice and organized and teaching the students how to organize that stuff and making sure that when they are in the writing center, they're using those vocabulary words or those pictures of the vocabulary words to help them expand their learning.” Kate- Interview</p>	<p>“My teacher assistant went to that training this year and it was just nice for her to also have that as well. So she can have some buy in as well. So that makes a difference. Having them involved in those meetings are learning opportunities.” Maggie-Interview</p>

Summary

In summary, Chapter Four textually describes the participants' demographics. This chapter introduced the study participants and explored their experiences in the South Carolina state funded preschool program. The findings included the data analysis of the results from the shared experiences of support received by educators to improve the learning environment for children in the state-funded preschool program. From the analysis, two themes emerged: improvement to the learning environment and support received through coaching and professional development. Findings from this transcendental phenomenology qualitative research reveal that teachers feel supported by their district and the Office of Early Learning and Literacy. The participants indicated they were supported by the materials and guidelines (ELLCO) needed to improve the learning environments, coaching, and professional development. The materials and ELLCO checklist used to improve learning opportunities were stated as essential ways to improve the learning environments. The participants felt that more coaching and professional development would offer strategies for implementing the materials and ELLCO. The research from this study indicates that while the participants feel supported, they would like more coaching and professional development opportunities. There was no outlier in the data. The chapter concluded with an analysis of the theme, the central research question, and sub-questions.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The quality of state funded preschool programs has been a focus over the past several decades. While there has been a focus on state-funded preschool programs and students ready for school, the goal has yet to be reached. A single program is not enough to close the achievement gap, and programs vary in magnitude, consistency, and duration, and there are considerable variations in public preschool programs, including some half-day and full-day program options (Morgan, 2019; Reynolds et al., 2019; Shapiro, 2021). South Carolina began to focus on early student success with Act 284, Read to Succeed. With the support from legislation, the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) created the Office of Early Learning and Literacy (OELL) specifically to support districts, schools, and teachers with the successful implementation of quality preschool classrooms. To assist districts and schools with professional development and coaching, the South Carolina Department of Education OELL staff provides assistance and support (CERDEP Guidelines, 2023). The focus continues to be on supporting teachers, developing teacher efficacy, and improving learning environments for children. Support to develop teacher efficacy and improve the learning environment in state-funded preschool programs is crucial to student academic success. Quality early learning experiences are contingent on well-prepared teachers supported by ongoing coaching and professional development (Shannon et al., 2021). Coaching, as a professional development tool, effectively enhances a wide range of teacher and child outcomes when it is more specific and goal-oriented (Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019; Shannon et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022; Zang & Cook, 2019). Professional development that is supported through active learning, collaboration, coaching and support from an expert, and time for reflection and feedback allows teachers to learn and reflect

on knowledge and skills (Choi & Kang, 2019; Gomez et al., 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Mora-Ruano et al., 2019; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, S, 2022). Despite the agreement that professional development and coaching are essential for educators, there is little consensus on how professional development and coaching work, how it fosters teacher learning, and how it is expected to alter teaching practices (Rojas et al., 2020). Local, state, and federal policymakers have increasingly invested in providing teachers with professional development, focusing on evidence-based approaches with success in improving child outcomes (Sabol, 2022). The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study was to describe the lived experiences of early childhood educators in the state-funded preschool program in South Carolina and the support they receive to improve the learning environment for children. The theoretical framework for this study was Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which finds that many interacting systems impact human development and behavior: microsystems, mesosystems, ecosystems, macro systems, and the chronosystem. Life circumstances, which include growing up in poverty, having a home language other than English, and having identified disabilities, can influence children to be at risk for poor performance in preschools and subsequently in the elementary school grades (Odom, 2019). The theory focuses on the quality and context of a child's environment and human development as it occurs (Koller et al., 2019; Shelton, 2019). This chapter presents the discussion and interpretation of the findings, including data triangulation, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

This section begins with a comprehensive summary of the study's outcomes and aligns them with the developing themes. This chapter focuses on interpreting these themes and considers them in the theoretical and empirical frameworks. This analysis is grounded in the perspective of the teachers who teach in preschool state-funded classrooms. It is captured through interviews, observations, and focus groups, providing a deep understanding of their experiences. The themes identified reveal the positive experiences and challenges these educators face while working to improve the learning environments for early learners.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Two themes and four sub-themes emerged from this study: (a) Improvement to the Learning Environment, including sub-themes of The Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) and Materials; (b) Support Received Through Coaching and Professional Development including sub-themes of Coaching as a Support for Teachers and Professional Learning Opportunities for Teachers. Teachers felt that the materials and ELLCO checklist provided the basis for creating the learning environment. However, more coaching and professional development were needed to implement strategies and build teacher efficacy. Teacher efficacy and improving the learning environment for children are linked to the amount of coaching and professional development provided to teachers. Teachers feel more comfortable improving learning environments with more coaching and support during the school year. Professional development gives the teachers the confirmation to implement strategies and ideas for student learning.

Findings from this transcendental phenomenology qualitative research reveal that teachers feel supported by their district and the Office of Early Learning and Literacy. The

participants indicated that they were supported by the materials and guidelines (ELLCO) needed to improve the learning environments along with coaching and professional development. The materials and ELLCO checklist used to improve learning opportunities were stated as essential ways to improve the learning environments. The participants felt that more coaching and professional development would offer strategies for implementing the materials and ELLCO. The research from this study indicates that while the participants feel supported, they would like more coaching and professional development opportunities.

All the interview and focus group participants discussed the materials and the ELLCO checklist, which were evident in all the observations. The materials allowed the teachers to use strategies and have hands-on activities for children. With the materials and the ELLCO checklist, the classrooms provided a learning environment that supported children's learning. Play enhances language and literacy and is crucial to supporting the whole child's development, including social, emotional, and intellectual development.

Many participants indicated they would like more coaching and support from the Education Associate who visits once during the school year. They indicated they would like a visit at the beginning of the year and later during the year. The need for more coaching from the Education Associate would help build teacher efficacy and improve the learning environment for children.

During the school year, the participants attended one Professional Learning Opportunity from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy. They indicated that more opportunities to attend the PLOs would be beneficial in learning and implementation of strategies to improve the learning environment. While the participants had the needed materials and the ELLCO checklist to support what is needed to teach, the strategies and ideas through professional development

would be beneficial. The participants indicated that attending the PLOs was challenging because of finding substitutes, location, and times of the PLOs. These participants attended a PLO because the district requested the Office of Early Learning and Literacy to provide assistance.

Critical Discussion of Findings

The findings from this research expand upon the literature by providing in-depth insights from educators in state-funded preschool programs. Educators shared their experiences developing teacher efficacy to improve learning environments, the importance of guidelines, the needed materials, and coaching and professional development. Their stories revealed the need for coaching within the classroom during the school day. This discussion contributes to the understanding of how early childhood educators who receive support through coaching and professional development from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy improve the learning environment for children in the state-funded preschool program in South Carolina.

Alignment of Previous Studies

This study aligns with previous research, highlighting a need for quality early learning experiences contingent on well-prepared teachers supported by ongoing coaching and professional development (Shannon et al., 2021). It reinforces the need for teacher efficacy in improving the learning environment for children and the importance of coaching and professional development. This study confirms the need to create an appropriate learning environment for children by being literacy-rich, meeting the guidelines in the ELLCO checklist, having ample materials, and creating an environment for teachers to feel supported through coaching and professional development.

Improvement to the Learning Environment

Past research shows strong literacy-rich preschool classrooms are busy places where children learn through play, develop relationships, explore, and learn in a safe and respectful community (Cutler et al., 2023). Pion and Lipsey (2021) found that state-funded preschool programs positively affect children who attend versus children who do not attend preschool programs with an emphasis on strong cognitive schools that support school readiness. In a study by Odom et al. (2019), book reading, vocabulary development, and the literacy environment improved student outcomes as measured by the ELLCO. The research found that schools must support all children's development, with the critical need for language skills among preschool-age children, including oral interaction and language application in the reading process.

Language and play are children's significant tools for learning about the environment and the world around them and are the most important tools for early literacy learning (Cabell & Hwang, 2023; Phillips, 2023). Language and play are children's significant tools for learning about the environment and the world around them and are the most important tools for early literacy learning (Cabell & Hwang, 2023; Phillips, 2023). The participants discussed using the ELLCO and the ample materials that were available to them. The materials and checklist allowed the students to be in appropriate learning environments that encouraged learning through play and early literacy benefits.

Support for Teachers

Past research shows that coaching is effective when it is direct, provides support for the specific situation, finds solutions to the problems, and leads the conversation with the teacher (Zugelder, 2019). Professional development that is supported through active learning, collaboration, coaching and support from an expert, and time for reflection and feedback allows

teachers to learn and reflect on knowledge and skills (Choi & Kang, 2019; Gomez et al., 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Mora-Ruano et al., 2019; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, S, 2022). Professional development is one way to improve educators' verbal interaction and intentional teaching of language and early literacy skills (Chaitow et al., 2022). All participants discussed the importance of coaching and feedback to help improve learning environments and develop teacher efficacy. The participants also discussed the importance of attending professional learning opportunities to support the implementation of strategies to improve learning environments.

Divergence of Existing Literature

The researcher's findings reveal a departure from existing literature, which addresses the need for more coaching within the classroom and during the school day. Unlike previous research, which highlights the need for coaching and professional development, the researcher reveals teachers' desire to be coached during the school day and in the classroom. The findings are significant because they focus on immediate feedback and support to address classroom growth areas.

Coaching within the Classroom

Past research indicates a need for quality early learning experiences contingent on well-prepared teachers supported by ongoing coaching and professional development (Shannon et al., 2021). The findings from this research indicate that teachers feel supported through materials and the ELLCO checklist but would like more coaching and professional development opportunities from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy. The participants felt that extra support would continue to build teacher efficacy and improve children's learning environment. Teachers acknowledge that support is needed to increase their teaching knowledge and practice. However,

there needs to be more assistance, and they do not feel there is a safe space to share frustrations, challenges, and difficulties faced in the classroom (Gibbons et al., 2019; Ryan & Hendry, 2023). Teachers' beliefs that the school can be successful are strengthened when the school culture is a place where the teachers feel safe to try new, effective practices (Gibbons et al., 2019; Ryand & Hendry, 2023). The teachers indicated that to help build teacher efficacy, coaching should be done more often during the school day and in the classroom. They feel that immediate feedback and support would be beneficial and help improve the learning environment for children and build teacher efficacy.

Extension of Research

This research expands upon existing research in key areas: improving learning environments and supporting teachers. It highlights the need for educators to create a literacy-rich learning environment for children and emphasizes the importance of supporting teachers through coaching and professional development. It supports the need for teachers to feel supported in the classroom to develop teacher efficacy and improve learning environments.

Improvement of Learning Environments

Developmentally based early childhood programs focus on the child's learning through exploration and with language naturally with little effort. However, teachers can also lead more intentional play through rhymes and repetitive songs, engaging literacy practices, and not a fixed curriculum that forces children to sit through drills and a sequential (Wohlwend, 2023). Learning environments support the development of foundational knowledge and promote attitudes toward learning and school, with preschool general knowledge and enjoyment predicting future school knowledge and enjoyment (Jirout et al., 2023). Researchers have determined that both internal processes and the environment, including early school experiences, influence the individual

differences in literacy skills that are present early and remain relatively stable over time (Sénéchal et al., 2023). The focus on improving learning environments highlights the need for a literacy-rich environment with appropriate materials and guidelines (ELLCO).

Support for Teachers Through Coaching and Professional Development

Classroom-based coaching can connect knowledge to classroom practice and demonstrate growth in teaching practice and knowledge, supporting them to reach their full potential (Atkinson et al., 2022; Cunningham et al., 2023; Glover et al., 2023). Research indicates that it is crucial that instructional coaches set aside time during sessions for teachers to practice newly learned skills and interventions and apply them in various contexts (Glover et al., 2023; Shannon et al., 2021). Reflective conversations are critical between teachers and coaches in improving classroom instruction. School effectiveness includes efficiency, improvement, quality, development, and performance, which is based on student learning outcomes and teacher performance supported by teacher professional development (Choi & Kang, 2019; Keung et al., 2020; Özgenel & Mert, 2019; Olmo-Extremiera et al., 2023; Putra & Hariri, 2023; Yang et al., 2022). For professional development to be effective, it needs to meet the needs and interests of teachers (Choi & Kang, 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Olmo-Extremiera et al., 2023; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, S, 2022). The focus on coaching and professional development highlights the need for support for educators to build teacher efficacy and improve learning environments.

Implications for Policy or Practice

The South Carolina Department of Education, Office of Early Learning and Literacy (OELL) is committed to supporting teachers in state-funded preschool classrooms. To ensure that teachers have the needed support, materials, and the ELLCO checklist are provided, and the OELL provides coaching and PLOs. Coaching is provided during the teacher's yearly visit, and

PLOs are provided regionally or at the district's request. However, this study has indicated that teachers need more support and opportunities for professional development from the OELL.

Implications for Policy

The findings of this research indicate the potential for impact on policy at the state level. Policies directly influence everyday practices and strategies, underlining the necessity for Education Associates to design policies for supportive measures in coaching teachers. The Office of Early Learning and Literacy must focus on a comprehensive approach to coaching teachers within the classroom and during the school day. This will include changing the approach to the teachers supported during the school year with more than one visit. The participants in the study all felt that more than one coaching visit from the Education Associate would allow them to grow over the year and develop the needed skills to improve the learning environment for children. This is evident in the analysis of Sub-Question 1. The findings from this question indicate that the teachers feel supported but would like to receive coaching throughout the day and within the classroom.

Implications for Practice

With the increased focus on expanding and continuing preschool programs in the state, the need to build teacher efficacy and improve children's learning environments may include more coaching and PLOs from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy. The OELL provides the needed guidelines, the ELLCO checklist, and materials to create the learning environment. However, it may be beneficial for the Education Associate to make multiple visits to classrooms to improve teacher efficacy. This was noted through the analysis of Sub-Question 2. The findings from these questions indicated that the teachers liked the support and feedback provided during the yearly visit but would like the Education Associate to visit more than once and

provide feedback and strategies to improve the learning environment. It may also benefit teachers to have more opportunities to attend PLOs from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy. This was indicated from the analysis of Sub-Question 3. The teachers felt they gained ideas and strategies to support and create the learning environment based on the ELLCO checklist. However, they wanted more opportunities to attend different PLOs from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy. It may benefit these teachers and others across the state to receive more coaching and attend PLOs offered by the Office of Early Learning and Literacy.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

The theory that guided this study was Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which finds that many interacting systems impact human development and behavior: microsystems, mesosystems, ecosystems, macro systems, and the chronosystem. Life circumstances, which include growing up in poverty, having a home language other than English, and having identified disabilities, can influence children to be at risk for poor performance in preschools and subsequently in the elementary school grades (Odom, 2019). The theory focuses on the quality and context of a child's environment and human development as it occurs (Koller et al., 2019; Shelton, 2019). This theory was appropriate because it focuses on the quality and context of a child's learning environment.

Empirical Implications

This study supports the correlation between teacher efficacy and improvement in the learning environment for children and the importance of well-prepared early-learning teachers supported by ongoing coaching and professional development (Shannon et al., 2021). There is agreement that professional development and coaching are essential for educators, but there is little consensus on how professional development and coaching work, how it fosters teacher

learning, and how it is expected to alter teaching practices (Kennedy, 2016; Rojas et al., 2020). The data from the study indicates that teachers who are coached and supported build teacher efficacy, and teachers want more help to continue improving the learning environment for children. The data from all three sources indicated that the participants liked the materials through the state-funded preschool program. The guidelines and the ELLCO checklist (Appendix D) guide the learning environment, but coaching and professional development are needed for implementation. Teacher knowledge of oral language and emergent literacy is associated with positive gains in children's vocabulary and literacy, print knowledge, print concepts, letter naming, and phonological awareness (Levin et al., 2023; Weadman et al., 2023). The participants shared positive experiences from the program and felt that at-risk students benefit from being a part of the state funded preschool. Preschool programs that show the most significant gains included teachers who engage learners with rigorous, developmentally appropriate pedagogical strategies, participants who had strong and consistent efficacy beliefs in their abilities, and classroom observations confirmed the teachers' assessments of their strengths and weaknesses in literacy instruction (Barker et al., 2022). Based on the data from interviews and focus groups the participants felt that their experience in the state funded preschool program has been positive for teachers and for students.

The most impactful theme that emerged from the study was the request from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy for more than one visit a year. The participants felt that more than one visit would offer more feedback and suggestions to improve the learning environment for children. The overall experience for the participants was positive because the feedback and suggestions were practical and supported the development of teacher efficacy.

Theoretical Implications

The learning environment of children in state funded preschool classrooms is critical to student success. The learning environment is influenced by teacher efficacy. Bronfenbrenner (1981) discovered that different settings offer different and distinctive patterns from humans, and there is a systematic difference in behavior. The important elements of a high-quality preschool program include sufficient learning time, well-prepared teachers who provide engaging interactions and classroom environments that support learning; ongoing support for teachers, including coaching, with program assessments that measure the quality of classroom interactions and provide actionable feedback for teachers to improve instruction and these elements are present in the programs that demonstrated the strongest and most persistent impacts on children (Melroy et al., 2019). From the data, there is a strong belief that the learning environment for children is supported by materials, guidelines, and the ELLCO, but more coaching and professional development are needed to build teacher efficacy. Many teachers feel that more than one coaching visit is needed from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy during the school year, and more opportunities are needed to attend PLOs. Within the context of teacher efficacy in the preschool classroom, this theory focused on Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on studying the environment and its effect on a child. Bronfenbrenner's theory (1981) looked at how teachers think about different factors that influence and improve the learning environment for children.

Teachers who are prepared and have support in early learning settings influence children's development and academic success. Teachers must develop the skills to face critical issues and barriers while problem-solving and remaining resilient (Choi & Kang, 2019; Martin & Mulvihill, 2019). Engaging teachers in self-reflection and vicarious experiences, including learning from others and being provided feedback, allows them to be more confident in their

practice. (Choi, & Kang, 2019, Martin & Mulvihill, 2019; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, 2022).

Bronfenbrenner (1981) found that human development is a product of human interaction with the environment and is based on behavioral science. Participants agree that creating a learning environment with needed materials and the ELLCO checklist helps support the needs of students. More coaching and professional development are needed to build teacher efficacy and create a learning environment that supports student learning. To develop teacher efficacy, a growth mindset is needed so teachers will pursue lifelong learning and enhance their professional knowledge and competence (Choi & Kang, 2019; Martin & Mulvihill, 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, S, 2022). Coaching, as a professional development tool, effectively enhances a wide range of teacher and child outcomes when it is more specific and goal-oriented (Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019; Shannon et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022; Zang & Cook, 2019). Coaching includes several components such as goal setting, observations, and on-site coaching with the dual aim of personal support and professional learning (Jacobson et al., 2020; Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019; Yang et al., 2022). Professional development that is supported through active learning, collaboration, coaching and support from an expert, and time for reflection and feedback allows teachers to learn and reflect on knowledge and skills (Choi & Kang, 2019; Gomez et al., 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Mora-Ruano et al., 2019; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, S, 2022).

The data from interviews, observations, and the focus group showed that teachers want to be coached and attend professional development to help them create the best learning environment for children. The data triangulation indicated that materials and the ELLCO checklist were evident in the classrooms. However, the participants focused on the need for more

strategies and ideas to build teacher knowledge and develop teacher efficacy. Strong evidence was that teachers want coaching and professional development throughout the school year.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses of the study that cannot be controlled. Delimitations are purposeful decisions the researcher makes to limit or define the study's boundaries. This section describes the rationale behind decisions made to limit or define the scope and focus of the study.

Limitations

As with all research, this study has certain limitations. The first limitation is the number of participants, which was 10. Recruitment of participants was difficult. Several districts did not allow research, which limited the research to one district that was willing to participate. The recruitment from having only one district presented a challenge. This limited the site to only the schools in this district. The sites were determined by the teachers willing to participate, and they were limited to reaching multiple schools across the district. In total, five out of nine sites participated in the study. The location of the district and sites were a limitation because it does not represent all districts and schools in South Carolina. The district that participated was a large district with multiple schools. Many districts in South Carolina are small and rural, with only a few schools participating in the state funded preschool program. Another limitation of the study was that the district and sites were limited to those I support. The study does not include districts across the state supported by other Education Associates.

Delimitations

I had certain delimitations to determine the phenomenon's essence and ensure that the participants had lived experiences. The study focused on lived experiences, which meant

qualitative phenomenology was the methodology and transcendental phenomenology was the specific design. Qualitative studies focus on a single idea (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) credits Edmund Husserl with focusing on the data being found in the shared experience at the beginning of this research design. This was the appropriate design as I sought to determine the lived experiences of educators in state funded preschool classrooms. My experiences as an Education Associate for the Office of Early Learning and Literacy needed to be set aside to allow the experiences of the educators to be expressed in the study.

Further delimitations included the selection of the participants. Participants had to teach in a state-funded preschool (CERDEP) classroom, hold a valid South Carolina teacher's certification in Early Childhood and attend at least one Professional Learning Opportunity (PLO) offered by the Office of Early Learning and Literacy during the school year. The data would reveal the true experience and allow the essence of the shared lived experience to emerge.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations are made for future studies based on the study's findings, limitations, and delimitations. The study would benefit from a wider scope, focusing on districts across the state that range in size and location. To avoid the risk of bias in the data analysis, the researcher may not be affiliated with the OELL or serve the districts as an Education Associate.

Future research should continue on the best way to coach and support teachers within the classroom and during the school day, emphasizing strategies that improve learning environments for young children. This study highlighted the importance of coaching and supporting educators. The participants in the study ranged from novice to veteran teachers, and all the participants wanted more support. Research focusing on supporting teachers at their experience level could help with the time and days spent in the classroom during coaching cycles. Further research

could explore the most effective ways to offer professional development for teachers. This includes examining the impact of different professional development models, such as early release days, peer-led training, and hands-on sessions. All the participants wanted to attend professional development, but district policy and availability were issues discussed. Research to support ways to offer professional development to teachers could be beneficial at the state and district levels.

While qualitative methods are best for experiences, quantitative methods may be beneficial in examining the scores given to teachers on visits to determine the districts, schools, and educators who need additional coaching and professional development to improve the learning environment.

Conclusion

The quality of state-funded preschool programs has been a focus over the past several decades. While there has been a focus on state-funded preschool programs and students ready for school, the goal has yet to be reached. South Carolina began to focus on early student success with Act 284, Read to Succeed. With the support from legislation, the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) created the Office of Early Learning and Literacy (OELL) specifically to support districts, schools, and teachers with the successful implementation of quality preschool classrooms. To assist districts and schools with professional development and coaching, the South Carolina Department of Education OELL staff provides assistance and support (CERDEP Guidelines, 2023). The focus continues to be on supporting teachers, developing teacher efficacy, and improving learning environments for children. Quality early learning experiences are contingent on well-prepared teachers supported by ongoing coaching and professional development (Shannon et al., 2021). Coaching, as a professional development

tool, effectively enhances a wide range of teacher and child outcomes when it is more specific and goal-oriented (Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019; Shannon et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022; Zang & Cook, 2019). The theoretical framework for this study was Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which finds that many interacting systems impact human development and behavior: microsystems, mesosystems, ecosystems, macro systems, and the chronosystem. Life circumstances, which include growing up in poverty, having a home language other than English, and having identified disabilities, can influence children to be at risk for poor performance in preschools and subsequently in the elementary school grades (Odom, 2019). The theory focuses on the quality and context of a child's environment and human development as it occurs (Koller et al., 2019; Shelton, 2019).

Overall, the data revealed that teachers felt supported by the Office of Early Learning and Literacy. The teachers stated they had ample materials to support interactive and hands-on activities in the interest areas. They felt the guidelines and the ELLCO checklist supported the learning environment for children. However, they wanted more coaching and professional development to gain knowledge and develop teacher efficacy for the state funded preschool classroom. The participants felt that more than one coaching visit is needed each year from the Education Associate. More coaching visits would support teachers with the implementation of the guidelines and ELLCO checklist, which helps develop a literacy-rich classroom. Throughout the study, teachers discussed the ample materials, curriculum, and ELLCO checklist as helpful but felt more coaching visits would help with strategies and best practices for implementation.

In conducting this research, I found that the participants want support to develop teacher efficacy and to create the best learning environment for children. Participants want the best for the children in the state funded classrooms and know the importance of the program. This was

reflective of the discussions from the interviews and the focus group. The participants wanted strategies and best practices to support building a literacy-rich environment. The knowledge I gained from this study will help me move forward as I continue to support teachers across the state. I will use the findings for this study to reflect on the way I coach teachers and offer support. I have enjoyed this study, and it reinforces my thoughts on the need for additional coaching and professional development. When teachers have the needed resources and feel supported throughout the school year, learning environments for children improve, and students succeed.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval

6/4/24, 7:52 AM

Mail - Stark, Jennifer - Outlook

[External] IRB-FY23-24-995 - Initial: Initial - Exempt

do-not-reply@cayuse.com <do-not-reply@cayuse.com>

Thu 4/11/2024 9:03 AM

To: Stark, Jennifer <jstark3@liberty.edu>; Baker, Shanna Nicole (Doctor of Education) <snbaker@liberty.edu>

[EXTERNAL EMAIL: Do not click any links or open attachments unless you know the sender and trust the content.]

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

April 11, 2024

Jennifer Stark
Shanna Baker

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-995 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF SUPPORT TO DEVELOP TEACHER EFFICACY IN STATE FUNDED PRESCHOOL CLASSROOMS

Dear Jennifer Stark, Shanna Baker,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application per 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 described in your IRB 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 46:104(d):

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).

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study Details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents, **which you must use to conduct your study**, can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

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

<https://outlook.office.com/mail/inbox/id/AAQkADM4MjU4NWE1LTc4NWYtNDZhYy1hNjEwLTE2YWE0MmQ3NDc2ZAAQABYbJPY9XjVPsqvSIW5otSo...> 1/2

Appendix B

Site Request Letter

Charleston County School District

To Whom It May Concern,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my study is A Phenomenological Study of Support to Develop Teacher Efficacy in State Funded Preschool Classrooms and the purpose of my research is to describe the lived experiences of educators to determine the support needed to improve the learning environment for children in our CERDEP programs.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at Charleston County School District.

Participants must be in a state-funded preschool classroom, hold a valid South Carolina teacher's certification in Early Childhood, and attend at least one Professional Learning Opportunity (PLO) offered by the Office of Early Learning and Literacy during the school year. If willing, participants will be asked to participate in an audio- and video-recorded interview (30 to 60 minutes), allow me to observe their learning environment (60 minutes), and participate in an audio- and video-recorded focus group (30 to 60 minutes). Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval.

Thank you,
Jennifer Stark
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Appendix C

Site Approval Letter



March 29, 2024

Dear Ms. Stark,

Anita Huggins
Superintendent

Michelle Simmons
Chief Academic Officer

This is to inform you that your request for your research study, "A Phenomenological Study of Support to Develop Teacher Efficacy in State Funded Preschool Classrooms" has been reviewed and approved.

Please note that this district-level approval obligates no school or employee to participate. Final study approval and cooperation must come from the school principal or administrator of the unit involved. Please show this letter to the school principal or administrator.

All researchers must adhere to the following guidelines:

- Except in the case of emancipated minors, researchers must obtain signatures of parents or legally authorized representatives (on a consent form) and of the student/minor (on an assent form) prior to a student's participation in the research study. All consent/assent forms must contain the following sentences:
 - "I do not wish (my child) to participate." (This must be an option on the parent consent form.)
 - The school district is neither sponsoring nor conducting this research.
 - There is no penalty for not participating.
 - Participants may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.
- Assent of children who are of sufficient age and maturity should be obtained prior to their participation in research. In all cases, students should be told that they have the right to decline participation.
- Parents or guardians of students participating in your research must be notified of their right to inspect all instructional materials, surveys, and non-secured assessment tools used in conjunction with your research. This notification should include details of how parents can access these materials.
- Student social security numbers should never be used.
- Data directly identifying participants (students, teachers, administrators), such as name, address, telephone number, etc., may not be distributed in any form to outside persons or agencies.

75 Calhoun Street • Charleston, SC 29401 • tel. (843) 937-6300 • www.ccscschools.com

- All personally identifiable information, such as name, social security number, student ID number, address, telephone number, email address must be suppressed in surveys and reports. Reports and publications intended for audiences outside of the district should not identify names of individual schools or the district.
- Any further analyses and use of the collected data beyond the scope of the approved research project, and any extensions and variations of the research project, must be requested through CCSD's Office of Assessment and Evaluation.
- Researchers should forward a copy of the results of the research to CCSD's Office of Assessment and Evaluation.

Respectfully,

Xiushan Jiang, Ph.D.
Director of Assessment & Evaluation, Office of Assessment & Evaluation

Appendix D

The ELLCO Checklist

District Name	
School Name	
Teacher Name	
SCDE Education Associate Name	
Date of Visit	

- Copy of Daily Schedule
- Copy of Lesson Plan
- Documentation CERDEP Eligibility/DIAL scores: Yes No
- Center-based classrooms which follow all CERDEP Guidelines: Yes No
- Verification of Curriculum: Yes No
 - Big Day in Pre-K by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
 - Creative Curriculum, 6th Edition, by Teaching Strategies
 - High Scope by High Scope
 - InvestiGator Club by Robert Leslie
 - World of Wonders by McGraw Hill
 - Montessori
- Teacher has attended training or participated in PLO related to 4K topics:
 - Topics related to teaching children from poverty
 - Strategies and techniques to address the age-appropriate progress of emergent literacy (oral communication, knowledge of print and letters, phonemic and phonological awareness, vocabulary and comprehension development)
- Portfolios are maintained for all students: Yes No
 - 4K Assessments include (readiness, formative assessment, instructional)
 - Anecdotal notes recorded
 - Student Sample Work
- On-site Feedback Provided to Administrator/Teacher: Yes No
- Recommendation for Follow-up visit to be required: Yes No

If a follow up visit is necessary, please identify the purpose:

Books

	Books with a range of difficulty
	Nonfiction books available
	Books available on the current theme (Goal of 7)
	Approximate number of books accessible to children in classroom (Goal of at least 30 in the book area.) (Goal of 100 to 120 classroom total.)
Books in Centers	
	Approximate number of books accessible to children in the science center
	Approximate number of books accessible to children in the dramatic play center
	Approximate number of books accessible to children in the blocks center
	Approximate number of books accessible to children in the other center(s): art, writing, other
Classroom Environment	
	Classroom furnishings are the right size for the children.
	The classroom is arranged for good flow with quiet and noisy areas separated, and opportunities for children to play individually, in small groups, or large groups.
	Classroom is set up so that children can play independently.
	Materials are organized in centers and are ample and accessible to children.
	Current children's work is displayed at child's eye level.
	Daily schedule, routines, and materials allow for self-directed, independent investigations.
	Children understand classroom rules and generally follow them.
	Themes are meaningful studies and scheduled for more than a week.
	Children's language and literacy experience are immersed in the current theme with appropriate concept goals.
	Diversity of all children is honored in conversations, materials, and activities.

Book Reading	
	The schedule includes time for shared book reading and experiences with those books that are related to the curriculum theme.
	Children have reading opportunities both formally and informally individually, in small groups, and large groups.
	Teachers select books appropriate in difficulty, which are rich in content, and of high interest to young children.
	Teachers have prepared for the book reading in advance with meaningful questions and clarifications.
	Teachers encourage active engagement of children and support their comprehension.
	Teachers read with expression and fluency to hold children's attention.
Interactions	
	Teachers support clear expectations of children's behavior in a calm manner with children leading in resolving issues.
	Classroom interactions are positive and respectful.
	Teachers model listening and encourage children to listen to each other.
	Teachers model respect of all children through fair treatment of children while valuing all ideas.
Building Language	
	Teacher introduces and discusses new and challenging words during book readings and classroom activities.
	Teachers show enthusiasm for words through playful interactions with children.
	Teachers give consideration to children whose first language is not English when introducing new words.

Appendix E

Screening Survey

Understanding the support for teachers in CERDEP classrooms

What are the shared lived experiences among early childhood educators who receive support through coaching and professional development from the Office of Early Learning and Literacy to improve the learning environment for children in the state-funded preschool program in South Carolina?

Principal Investigator: Jennifer Stark, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

* Indicates required question

1. Do you teach in a CERDEP Classroom? *

Mark only one oval.

yes
 no

2. Do you hold a valid teaching certification for the state of South Carolina in Early Childhood? *

Mark only one oval.

yes
 no

3. Have you attended a PLO session offered by the Office of Early Learning and Literacy? *

Mark only one oval.

yes
 no

s.google.com/forms/d/1T7LqZpi_KUtljafVr6PmgQwCW77wTBPIfGibwGUcw/edit

:41 AM Understanding the support for teachers in CERDEP classrooms

4. Please provide your first and last name *

5. Please provide your email

Appendix F

Recruitment Letter

Dear Recipient:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my study is to describe the lived experiences of educators to determine the support needed to improve the learning environment for children in our CERDEP programs. I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be in a state- funded preschool classroom, hold a valid South Carolina teacher's certification in Early Childhood, and attend at least one Professional Learning Opportunity (PLO) offered by the Office of Early Learning and Literacy during the school year. If willing, you will be asked to participate in an audio- and video-recorded interview (30 to 60 minutes), allow me to observe your learning environment (60 minutes), and participate in an audio- and video-recorded focus group (30 to 60 minutes). Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please click here: <https://forms.gle/WQiY4U9yyWetHu8W6> to complete the survey. After completing the survey, I will reach out to eligible individuals to schedule an interview at their convenience. Don't hesitate to get in touch with me for more information.

A consent document will be emailed to you if you meet the study criteria one week before the interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me prior to participating in the procedures.

Thank you,
Jennifer Stark
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Appendix G

Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: is A Phenomenological Study of Support to Develop Teacher Efficacy in State Funded Preschool Classrooms

Principal Investigator: Jennifer Stark, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be in a state-funded preschool classroom, hold a valid South Carolina teacher's certification in Early Childhood, and attend at least one Professional Learning Opportunity (PLO) offered by the Office of Early Learning and Literacy during the school year. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to describe the lived experiences of educators to determine the support needed to improve the learning environment for children in our CERDEP programs.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in a semi-structured interview: The interviews will last 30 to 60 minutes and will take place via Teams at the participants' convenience. Interviews will be audio- and video-recorded for transcription and analysis purposes only.
2. Participate in observations to gather information of the current learning environment. The observer will take notes, but no audio or videos will be taken. Information will only be gathered on the teacher and the learning environment. The observation will last 60 minutes.
3. Participate in a focus group: The focus group will last 30 to 60 minutes and will take place via Teams at the participants' convenience. Focus groups will be audio- and video-recorded for transcription and analysis purposes only.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study; however, participants may gain a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon the lived experiences of educators and the support needed to improve the learning environment for children in our CERDEP programs through their participation.

Benefits to society include adding to the body of knowledge support needed to improve the learning environment for children in our CERDEP programs.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Liberty University
IRB-FY23-24-995
Approved on 4-9-2024

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted via teams where others will not easily overhear the conversation and the names of participants will remain confidential.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked file cabinet and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and all paper copies will be shredded.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide 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 choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Jennifer Stark. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Nicole Baker, at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

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 IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered

and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

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 Subject Name

Signature & Date