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Core Principles of Early Childhood Education Through the Lens of California's Transitional Kindergarten Teachers and Administrators

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CORE PRINCIPLES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION THROUGH THE LENS
OF CALIFORNIA'S TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS AND
ADMINISTRATORS

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Educational Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Furwa T. Rizvi

May 2022

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The Designated Dissertation Committee Approves the Dissertation Titled

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Furwa T. Rizvi

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ABSTRACT

CORE PRINCIPLES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION THROUGH THE LENS OF CALIFORNIA'S TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

by Furwa T. Rizvi

California's public-school system recently introduced another grade level, Transitional Kindergarten, as an opportunity to offer universal access to early education for all 4-year-olds. Elementary school teachers and administrators must be well prepared to support and education these young children. This dissertation focuses on four key principles to ensure high-quality learning: Developmentally Appropriate Practices, Social and Emotional Learning, Dual Language Learning, and Early Intervention. To gain a better understanding of teacher and administrator perspectives on these core principles of early childhood education, a comprehensive survey was administered online, with a total of # teacher and # administrator respondents. Results indicate that TK and Kindergarten teachers are fairly knowledgeable and confident with these four core principles of early learning and instruction, but administrators report varied levels of appreciation for Developmentally Appropriate Practice and Play-Based Instruction in the context of their work. It appears that teachers' educational background and experience may influence their perspectives, pointing to specific recommendations for professional development opportunities.

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DEFINITION OF TERMS

For the purpose of clarification, the following terms have been defined as follows:

Developmentally Appropriate Practice. Methods that promote each child’s optimal development and learning through a strengths-based, play-based approach to joyful, engaged learning. Educators implement developmentally appropriate practice by recognizing the multiple assets all young children bring to the early learning program as unique individuals and as members of families and communities (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], n.d.-b)

Dual-Language Learner. This term is used to refer to children learning two or more languages based on the Early Language Development Standards theoretical framework (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment, 2022). DLL support in early years is developmentally appropriate and incorporates support for the child’s home language.

Early Childhood Education. Any part or full-day group program in a center, school, or home that serves children from birth through age eight, including children with special developmental and learning needs (NAEYC, n.d.-b)

Early Intervention. The problem-solving process of developmental delays of a young child (NAEYC, n.d.-b)

Play-Based Learning. Learning that is deeply rooted in play is often considered play-based learning that is child-initiated with teacher support (Mraz et al., 2016)

Social-Emotional Development. Children’s understanding of the world around them and the interaction with others (NAEYC, n.d.-b).

Chapter 1: Core Principles of Early Childhood Education in Early Elementary School

The fact that high-quality early childhood education (ECE) leads to positive developmental outcomes has been well established (Bakken et al., 2017). For example, a five-year longitudinal study following students from kindergarten to 4th grade measured the effects of high-quality ECE on young children, over the course of their educational trajectory. Students who experienced high-quality ECE demonstrated higher academic performance and fewer placements in special education. Programs and experiences for ECE must meet the following high-quality expectations to reap the long-term benefits and promote development. According to the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes and the Council of Chief State School Officers (2017), the term high-quality, in terms of ECE, refers to a program and environment that promotes the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development of young children. High-quality ECE incorporates and addresses elements of social-emotional development, developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), play-based learning, dual language support, and early intervention among children 0-8 years old (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], n.d.-a).

DAP is an individualistic strength-based approach to learning through play-based activities (Moses et al., 2021). Play-based learning builds on children's natural motivation to play in order to learn social and cognitive skills. Social and emotional development includes the social interactions and emotional responses children and adults have in their everyday experiences. Students learning another language in conjunction with English are provided with ample opportunities and support in high-quality ECE programs. Early interventions are additional support for young children with developmental disabilities or delays. High-quality

ECE programming addresses each of these elements to support the whole child and to build a strong foundation for their educational career.

High-Quality ECE Promotes Socio-Emotional Development

A primary focus of early childhood care and curriculum is young children's social and emotional development (Shoshani & Slone, 2017). Unlike the more rigid academic learning environments often seen in kindergarten classrooms, early childhood educators are encouraged to tap into social-emotional, cognitive, and physical realms to support academic success (Grissom, 2004). In fact, learning environments that promote social and emotional skills promote social as well as academic success across all grade levels (Greene, 2016; Heckman et al., 2013). A positive school experience relates to a child's abilities to make good decisions, regulate their emotion, attention, behavior, and understand themselves and others during their early years of schooling. These children with a strong foundation of social and emotional skills are said to be received positively by their peers and teachers. They have increased opportunities for additional academic learning as well due to their competencies of regulating themselves and awareness of the world around them.

During the early years in schooling, children are faced with challenges of sitting still, paying attention, approaching group play, and completing academic tasks. Teachers can support students by having social and emotional skills organized to provide positive social development tasks that appropriately manage emotional arousal and foster interactions with peers. Teachers must be prepared to support young children to provide high-quality early learning environments. When children lack socio-emotional development, there is a heightened risk of disliking school, low performance in academics, grade retention, dropping

out of school, and antisocial behaviors (Denham & Brown, 2010). The significance of DAPs for young children is crucial in maximizing their SEL.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice and Play-Based Learning

Promoting play is a common approach in early childhood contexts to achieve learning goals (Moses, 2022). While ‘play’ has been defined in many different ways, Bredekamp (2004) explains that mature, or high-level, play facilitates learning through the use of language to convey ideas, participating in imaginary situations, roles, and cooperating with classmates. Young children in ECE programs participate in play-based curricula and are expected to explore their environment while making connections with others. Oftentimes, play is misinterpreted as not beneficial to learning. This misunderstanding can devalue the concept of this type of teaching in the eyes of K-8 educators and administrators when observing early learning classrooms. Learning that is deeply rooted in play is often child-initiated, but solicits teacher support. This approach provides children with the opportunity to discover interpersonal and social skills and also promotes their intrinsic motivation to collaborate with others. When children engage in collaborative play, they are learning to self-regulate their needs with their playmates (Mraz et al., 2016). Play-based learning can be DAPs for young children to maximize their social and emotional growth for their future.

Lifter et al. (2011) suggests that educators provide opportunities for children to engage in high-quality play activities by considering what children know at any given time, as well as what they are thinking about. These experiences also incorporate novel encounters with objects, people, and events with information that they already know. These highlights play as a significant factor in children’s overall growth, especially in relation to language, cognitive,

and social development. In fact, studies have shown that there is a correlation between play and children's attachment styles, which appear to be connected to their pretend play skills by relating to objects in a symbolic manner. In addition to DAPs, there is a need to provide adequate support to students who are learning multiple languages.

An Asset-Based Approach to Dual-Language Learning

Dual Language Learners (DLL) are students learning two or more languages at a time (Williams, 2020). These students will ultimately become multilingual, an outcome that researchers are now celebrating as an asset - beneficial to children in the long term. Students between the ages of 3-21 who speak a language other than English, or who are learning in an environment that is predominantly non-English speaking, are considered English Language Learners (EL students; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) reports that EL students comprise 10.1% of the student population in the United States among public schools (and the proportion increases to 19.2% of all students in the state of California). There are 15.9% of kindergarteners who are ELs across the country in public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). These statistics point to the need for support for our DLL. Young English language learners are prone to fall behind because their learning is not supported appropriately in classrooms. Professional Development (PD) can help educators adapt to the personal needs of young children that are DLLs and ELs (Alcalá et al., 2020). In addition to language learners, there are students with developmental delays in the classroom who need highly qualified educators to support them.

The Importance of Early Intervention

A strong social and emotional base in ECE settings provides for fewer behavioral problems in children (Shoshani & Slone, 2017). According to Dawson and Burner's (2011) study, children who are placed in early intervention therapy programs show greater rates of progress than those who do not have access to these services. Children are more likely to show progress in their overall development when entering an intervention earlier in life (Dawson & Burner, 2011; Reichow, 2012). An equitable ECE program can address costly issues such as homelessness, incarceration, and failure to complete high school by improving the social relationships, environment, and experiences of a child (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2020).

Need for Universal Access to High-Quality ECE in the United States

The U.S. Department of Education (n.d.) recently highlighted the need for universal access to high-quality ECE. Although this is a positive development for education, public support and legislator support remain questionable with notable impacts for marginalized students (Nxumalo & Adair, 2019). A collective effort has been made to ensure that all children have access to ECE according to Nxumalo and Adair (2019). The social inequalities that students of color face are meant to be addressed by programs promoting universal access to ECE. However, there are a vast number of stakeholders involved who continue to place blame on the families and communities in lieu of the systemic challenges and social injustices that they face in their early years of schooling. Students' academic progress and learning outcomes from marginalized backgrounds are misrepresented by judgments placed

on students. Relationship building is essential with all student families, especially for ones of color to promote trust and understanding without preconceived notions.

Another facet of inequality is the push for high-stakes testing in early childhood programs, even with the shift towards more accessible ECE. There are teaching practices set in place in some ECE classrooms that bear resemblance to upper-grade levels. When adopting the didactic and content-aligned curriculum seen in grade school classrooms, early childhood educators diminish the roles of curiosity, play, and thinking creatively (Nxumalo & Adair, 2019). The pressures of becoming heavily academic are not developmentally appropriate and manifest as an injustice for young children. Nxumalo and Adair (2019) show that access to high-quality, developmentally appropriate ECE programs is disproportionate among students of color, immigrant children, and students living in poverty. Instead, these students are often placed in early learning environments with an essential focus on academia and strict disciplinary rules.

Every Student Succeeds Act was signed into law by President Barack Obama in December 2015 reauthorized the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act to provide for advancement in addressing inequities for marginalized students (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). This act replaced the No Child Left Behind Act that was signed into law in 2001. Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) has increased funding for early childhood programs at a national level based upon using the Title I, Title II, and the Preschool Development Grant funding. The Preschool Development Grant funding encourages states to utilize their monies towards strengthening the transition from early childhood programs into kindergarten programs for all students (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). The Every

Student Succeeds Act additionally supports the allocation of \$226 million dollars from this grant to support low-income communities to gain access to a high-quality ECE. Transitional Kindergarten (TK) was created by two educators to become the first step in providing universal access to 4- and 5-year old's using public school funding.

The youngest children had struggled in Palo Alto kindergarten classrooms to meet California State Standards (Henderson, 2016). The developmental maturation of these students was the reasoning behind their ability to keep up with their fellow classmates. Two kindergarten Palo Alto teachers decided to bridge the developmental gap for these young learners and pushed for Senator Joe Simitian to introduce the Kindergarten Readiness Act of 2010. This led to the implementation of a new grade level in the public school system in California called TK in the 2012-2013 school year. This classroom provides a high-quality learning environment with a credentialed teacher with at least a bachelor's degree and background knowledge in ECE in comparison to preschool educators. TK allows for an additional year in an elementary school setting to develop their social and emotional needs through DAPs. However, the relatively quick implementation resulted in questions about the resources and PD needed such that teachers and administrators are well prepared to properly incorporate this new grade-level curriculum to support the young learners and provide high-quality ECE learning experiences. The abrupt addition to the public school system may have placed educators in a grade level with insufficient experience. We can explore the present situation and development of TK and ECE programs since their inception.

Currently, the state of California has proposed enveloping ECE in the K-12 public school system through a program called TK. In fact, the California Master Plan has been developed

in accordance with the vision of ensuring high-quality early learning and resources for all children. The plan also states the advancement of equitable outcomes for students and opportunities to thrive physically, emotionally, and educationally in their early years (Alcalá et al., 2020). This awareness provides for a more substantial basis of the significance of TK as a pathway towards equitable universal early learning.

Researchers have attempted to study the impact of Transition Kindergarten programming on underrepresented groups of English Learners (EL) and economically disadvantaged students and found that TK can minimize the difficulties these children often face (Cvijetic, 2015). Language learners and economically disadvantaged students are provided a program at no cost with equitable access when they meet the age requirement of their birthdate that includes turning the age of 5 between the dates of September 2nd and December 2nd.

The expansion of TK to serve thousands of students may assist in early diagnoses of learning difficulties and disorders. TK creates an opportunity to identify children with special education needs earlier in life. Students can also receive early intervention to better meet their individualized learning needs. These developmentally appropriate, strength-based approaches often seen in high-quality ECE settings give students the opportunity to use their interest in play to build their self-confidence. Their cognitive and social skills are further matured in this grade level through their social and emotional development with various opportunities to interact with others and the world around them.

TK can offer high-quality ECE with a credentialed teacher that is publicly accessible for students within a specific age range. TK must therefore be designed to meet students' needs in terms of socioemotional learning, DL support, DAP, and play-based learning. TK is well

poised to meet these needs, but teachers and administrators need to be informed through appropriate PD in order for this to be an effective solution to universal access. TK can also help to bridge the gap for marginalized students and communities. Educators of high-quality care to be well-prepared and equipped to foster the diverse needs of young students in TK. In addition, this grade level can provide the appropriate pathways to Universal Preschool in the future.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

The proposal to increase access to high-quality ECE by expanding California's TK model, effectively folding one year of ECE into the public school system, will only work if teachers and administrators have developed appropriate expertise in ECE. PD and district support should be in place to prepare all teachers and administrators to support TK classrooms. To ensure that TK/K-8 instructors and instruction align with ECE principles and best practices, the following elements of ECE will need to be addressed in these TK settings: social and emotional development, DAP including play-based learning, dual language support, and early intervention. This study identifies the knowledge and values of teachers and administrators that are needed to efficiently implement high-quality TK programming.

To better understand what TK and Kindergarten teachers know about these key ECE principles, and to determine whether these principles are valued by K-12 administrators, this line of research will address the following: (RQ1A) Measure TK and Kindergarten teachers' self-reported knowledge and confidence with core principles of early learning and instruction; as well as the extent to which they believe these core principles are relevant to their TK and Kindergarten classroom instruction. (RQ1B) Determine whether and how TK

and Kindergarten teachers' ratings of knowledge, confidence, and relevance are influenced by their educational background and experience. (RQ2A) Measure elementary school administrators' self-reported knowledge and confidence with core principles of early learning and instruction; as well as the extent to which they believe these core principles are relevant to their role as an elementary school administrator. (RQ2B) Determine whether and how TK and Kindergarten teachers' perspectives align with those of elementary school administrators. (RQ3) Identify the affordances and constraints to facilitating these core principles of early learning and instruction in TK classrooms. These research questions are significant because they will lead to a better understanding of the perceived role of ECE in public school settings.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, the researcher identified and described the four core principles of early learning and instruction based on sources of knowledge from the ECE frameworks. The first principle is DAP which was designed by NAEYC to promote a child's optimal development and learning through a strengths-based and play-based approach to learning that is joyful, engaging, and fun (NAEYC, n.d.-a). As unique individuals and as members of their families and communities, young children bring multiple resources to the early learning program which educators use to implement the DAP.

Second, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) early childhood educators often use the term SEL to refer to a range of skills that children will require to become kindergarten-ready. While teachers should not lose sight of the fact that SEL is a process of acquiring specific skills, not just skills themselves, it is important to keep this in mind (Zinsler et al., 2018). In

the framework of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) model, SEL promotes educational equity and excellence by creating authentic relationships between schools, families, and communities to create learning experiences. These connections are built on trust and collaboration, as well as rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction. SEL has the potential to address various forms of inequity and to empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to a culture of wellness and justice in their communities (CASEL, 2022). Based on the CASEL framework, this core principle may serve as a starting point. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, a transformative lens of SEL is needed to ensure equity for a student population that is becoming more diverse (Jagers et al., 2019).

The third principle is early intervention, which is a system of support provided to young children during their formative years. The Initial Practice-Based Professional Standards for Early Interventionists/Early Childhood Special Educators 2020 are the first set of guidelines explicitly focusing on preparing early intervention/early childhood special educators professionals. From birth to age eight, these specialists work with children and families with developmental delays and disabilities in the home, classroom, and other community settings. This is a framework based on early intervention/early childhood special educators' history as an integrative but unique domain of study, research, policy, and practice (Division for Early Childhood [DEC], 2022a).

A fourth principle pertains to DLL who speak a language in addition to English or are learning a second language. Based on The Early Language Development Standards theoretical framework, these standards describe a developmentally appropriate academic,

instructional, and social language for children from 2.5 to 5.5 years old. Researchers have asserted that play plays a key role in the formation of children's linguistic, cognitive, social, and emotional foundations throughout their lives. An ideal play-based classroom allows significant time each day for children to observe, experiment, problem-solve, discuss, and pretend. Students can use these hands-on experiences to build a solid foundation for success in school and language development (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment, 2022).

In order to address these research questions, this study will adopt an exploratory research approach, generating data through comprehensive surveys. There will be two different surveys consisting of teachers and administration from various regions of California that will complete these surveys electronically. The first survey will include TK and kindergarten teachers who will be asked to share their classroom experiences regarding early learning and instruction. The second group will consist of elementary assistant principals and principals to incorporate their perspectives. Future research will then follow through introducing and monitoring the PD, analyzing evaluative data, and reviewing the process of the intervention for teachers and administrators.

Significance Statement

This line of research will identify the traps and gaps in the proposed TK model as a solution for Universal Preschool in the state of California, so as to anticipate and address teacher and administrator needs to develop appropriate educational pathways for pre-service teachers, curriculum, and practice. This line of inquiry will culminate in the creation of a research-informed series of PD workshops that can be facilitated by the existing workforce

consisting of teachers and administrators. Through this process, we will be able to establish TK as a strong foundation for K-8 education in the public school system. This strong model of high-quality ECE with prepared educators can lead to Universal Preschool in California.

Findings will address the research questions and may also point to various training models within districts and for pre-service teachers specializing in the necessary support for high-quality ECE. Background knowledge and appreciation for best practices in ECE can assist teachers and administrators in K-12 classrooms by providing additional resources and support in SEL, DL students, and intervention. Cross-training K-8 teachers on ECE and TK instruction will allow more teachers and administrators to better support early learners in their classrooms. Findings from this study will help us to understand the expectations of key stakeholders and appreciate the skill sets among both educators and educational leaders.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher is an experienced TK teacher in a California public school that functions as a standalone grade level at their school site. The problem was identified in terms of the disparities between TK and Kindergarten classrooms within the district.

Chapter 2: A Review of Early Childhood Education and Transitional Kindergarten

Before delving into the present study and proposed methodology for addressing the research questions proposed in Chapter 1, this comprehensive review of relevant literature will help to situate the issue at hand and provide ample context by which to understand what TK teachers and administrators know and value about key ECE principles.

First, the research begins with a brief review of the multiple lines of research that demonstrate the benefits of high-quality ECE programming. An analysis of a recent longitudinal study on 5-year-olds showed that children enrolled in high-quality early learning environments receiving balanced attention to both social-emotional development and academics achieved long-term benefits (Bakken et al., 2017). Children from these high-quality ECE programs were followed through to the 5th grade and demonstrated higher developmental outcomes than their peers. Moreover, there were substantial decreases in special education placements and grade retention for students who participated in ECE programming. We also see a significant increase in high school graduation rates for these students. These children in ECE are less likely to need services such as custodial care, special education, welfare support as adults, or be incarcerated (Soria, 2016). These findings converge to suggest that society can address costly issues such as homelessness, incarceration, and failure to complete high school by improving the social relationships, environment, and experiences of their youngest children (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2020).

The significance of the economic returns of investing in quality ECE programs as it leads to positive social outcomes such as better educational performance, increased lifetime wages,

and better overall health of individuals. ECE benefits individuals and society in many ways, which underscores the necessity of extending ECE programs across the country (McCoy et al., 2017). But all of these findings are contingent upon the fact that these ECE programs are deemed high-quality. The Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes and the Council of Chief State School Officers (2017) explains that the quality of early childhood programming is defined by the extent to which a program supports and facilitates children's physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development. It is also necessary to have a nurturing and safe environment to maximize positive developmental outcomes (Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes and the Council of Chief State School Officers, 2017). Wechsler et al. (2016) describe a high-quality ECE by containing the following elements: (a) comprehensive early learning standards, (b) addressing the whole child, (c) DAP, and (d) proper implementation. More specifically, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Williams, 2020), a major influencer in ECE, identifies components of high-quality ECE programming that highlight the need for effective, well-prepared, and compensated educators.

Teachers who implement DAPs, provide opportunities to engage in play-based learning, promote social-emotional learning, and support dual language learning are well poised to offer high-quality early learning environments. DAP celebrates child-initiated activities involving play-based learning but is contingent upon teacher-responsiveness to children's learning interests and needs (Stipek & Johnson, 2021). Social-emotional learning relates to the skills necessary for children to manage their emotions, maintain positive relationships, and make responsible choices (Domitrovich et al., 2017). In Park et al.'s (2017) study, DLL

are defined as children 8 years old or younger who have at least one parent who speaks another language other than English. While these children make up one-third of the student population in the United States, they are less likely to enroll in high-quality ECE programs. Educators are responsible for fostering these foundational needs to provide a high-quality education for young children.

It has been demonstrated that a high-quality ECE program is closely related to higher teacher qualifications (Manning et al., 2017). Generally speaking, teachers with training in child development and early education promote high-quality learning experiences for the children they work with. Conversely, underqualified teachers may in fact negatively impact children's early development. This highlights the need for qualified educators, who can effectively lead young children during the initial stages of their educational careers. Educators with high levels of training can create high-quality early childhood programs to foster an appropriate learning environment for all students. These aspects, when addressed appropriately in ECE settings, can provide for improved developmental outcomes for children. Individual and societal benefits of ECE show the importance of equitable access to ECE programs in the United States (McCoy et al., 2017).

ECE is beneficial for young children and needs to be of high quality. This entails high-quality educators in an accessible program, which is likely to happen through the expansion of TK programs. In California, TK was established for young five-year-olds to have an added year of schooling prior to kindergarten (Ortiz, 2018). Children turning five years old between September 2nd and December 2nd are eligible to enroll in TK. Legislators have recently proposed that TK programs in California serve as a basis for universal preschool available to

all 4-year-olds in the future (Alcalá et al., 2020). If TK programs are successful in implementation, this may constitute a significant next step in providing access to high-quality ECE in California and throughout the country. So, how can we ensure that we are meeting high-quality indicators in TK classrooms? The literature will first review the literature on these key aspects of quality ECE, and then make the argument that these values should be adopted by K-12 educators if we are to make this plan for universal preschool work.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice and Play-Based Learning

Providing opportunities to engage in play, and integrating play-based learning activities is a common approach in early childhood learning to achieve educational goals (Moses, 2022). While EC educators are often pressured to substitute play for more academic activities, this is likely fueled by a fundamental misinterpretation of what playing involves in classroom settings (Bredekamp, 2004). For the purpose of this study, “mature” or high-level play is defined as opportunities by which children learn through the use of language to convey ideas, participation in imaginary situations, and cooperation with classmates. Moreover, play-based learning can set the foundation for lifelong skills throughout a child’s life and educational career. Presuming that play is not essential to increase the development of a child or preparing them for kindergarten can devalue the concept of this type of learning in the eyes of educators, such that instructional formats are more likely to resemble upper-grade levels and learning environments that constrain opportunities to engage in the DAP.

The term DAP was established by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, n.d.-b) as a set of early childhood curricular recommendations.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from

Birth through Age 8 was a formative publication authored by Bredekamp (1986) that introduced DAP to the United States. DAP in Western countries, and across the world, has since become the widely accepted set of standards for ECE (Sanders & Farago, 2018). NAEYC (n.d.-b) encourages early childhood educators to turn away from the societal pressures of increasing academic standards in EC classrooms. Previously researchers argued that the transformative nature of the DAP leads to more culturally responsive instruction and care. In contrast to this, Jagers et al. (2019), recently state that Westernized societies use their own definitions of what constitutes effective approaches to providing success holistically. Moreover, the authors stressed the importance of ensuring greater educational equity for all students of color, regardless of racial or ethnic origin. The nature of adult-child interactions, as well as the materials and environment of early childhood programs, can be developed to meet the developmental age and stage of all children in the class, so as to be fully inclusive (Sanders & Farago, 2018).

Jean Piaget's constructivist theory foreshadows an appreciation for DAP (Flavell, 1963). Piaget believed that a child's way of thinking develops through maturation across several stages. Sanders and Farago (2018) explain that DAP promotes children's readiness to appropriately engage in their learning environment, in turn maximizing the outcomes of their success. In DAP, a learning environment is in tune with a student's biological maturation. However, when the curriculum clearly exceeds or does not meaningfully extend a child's level of understanding, it can negatively impact the child. This may be seen in strictly teacher-driven settings involving rote memorization and mundane worksheets. In early learning classrooms, there should be practices in place that coincide with children's

developmental levels and strengthen their SEL. It is imperative that children receive high-quality ECE programs that reflect their readiness and invoke student-centered inquiry, exploration, and discovery.

Social and Emotional Learning

Kindergarten in California has become a rigid academic learning environment in recent years, even as researchers argue that these young students should be exploring the social-emotional, cognitive, and physical realms of their experiences and environment (Grissom, 2004). Kindergarten was initially intended for children to have a play-based curriculum that promotes exploration and connections with others. Over the years, the curriculum in other grade levels has created higher standards, which forced an increased academic rigor for kindergarten.

Domitrovich et al. (2017) states that SEL is crucial in schools and is associated with social, behavioral, and academic outcomes for young children. This author also argues that SEL serves as a foundation for adulthood outcomes and can lead to cost-effective interventions. In a study conducted by Blair and Diamond (2008), self-regulation, school readiness, and success was found to be a product of ECE programs that successfully connect with children's emotions and motivation. When children are placed in learning environments that promote social and emotional skills, research indicates that it is a predictor of social as well as academic success (Heckman et al., 2013). According to the CASEL (2022), SEL is defined as "the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive

relationships, and make responsible decisions.” This portrays SEL as a lifelong process that helps with the overall development of a mentally healthy human being. High-quality ECE programs must be able to incorporate DAP and play-based learning to enrich their social and emotional growth (Lifter et al., 2011).

As stated by Jagers et al. (2019), CASEL for SEL can be used as a foundation towards a more transformative lens that is equitable for all diverse student populations. Transformative SEL is a way for educators to better articulate how SEL can mitigate educational, economic, and social inequities resulting from the interrelated legacies of racialized cultural oppression in the United States and worldwide. Researchers and practitioners in the field of SEL have the opportunity to use transformative SEL as a method of addressing issues such as power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self-determination. SEL must, in essence, develop in those from underserved communities the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to conduct critical analysis and to collaborate on initiatives to deal with the underlying causes of inequity. SEL through a transformative perspective is designed to promote educational equity, creating a more equitable learning environment for all children and producing equitable outcomes for those who are marginalized.

A study examining the social and emotional development of young children was conducted by analyzing a student-centered approach to measure kindergarten readiness. In Arbizzi’s (2016) study, children entering kindergarten identified important goals for developing their social-emotional learning. Children were taught to understand their own emotions and how to manage impulsive behavior. Another purpose of the program was to prepare the children academically for their next year in kindergarten. Educators in the field

expressed that children need to have a sense of independence, the ability to critically think, and maintain a sense of curiosity in order to be ready for kindergarten (Arbizzi, 2016). The teachers noted that children should enter kindergarten feeling confident, socially competent, and able to pay attention during storytime (Arbizzi, 2016). Teachers also explained how social-emotional learning serves as the foundation for essential problem-solving skills. When children are able to “have that social-emotional foundation; know how to be with kids, know how to interact with others, know how to solve problems but also having that academic component” (Arbizzi, 2016, p. 113) they are preparing themselves for educational success in the future.

Opportunities for Early Intervention

When a child experiences disruption to their development, it can result in lifelong implications (Center on the Developing Child, 2022). ECE programs are well poised to identify and address potential cognitive delays before they advance. In American education, autism has become a familiar term among school districts (Conklin, 2016). Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex developmental brain disorder involved with the impact of the environment and genes. There are challenges in social aspects and behaviors along with the repetition of actions (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The signs and symptoms of ASD are evidenced as early as 1 year of age. The inability to reach developmental milestones, dislike of being touched, and lack of eye contact are some early signs of ASD. These can be noticed when students are placed in a high-quality early learning setting with informed educators.

Children placed in Early Intervention therapy programs demonstrate greater rates of progress than children who do not receive services (Dawson & Burner, 2011). Children with opportunities to engage in Early Intervention are more likely to achieve positive developmental outcomes. Reichow (2012) found that four out of five meta-analyses of early behavior interventions reveal positive outcomes. According to Dawson and Burner (2011), in order to improve peer relations and social competence, interventions for social skills are needed for children with ASD. The researchers also state that reducing anxiety and aggression results from behavior interventions. The importance of Early Intervention addresses students with special needs as well as our increasingly culturally diverse population of EL.

Support for English Language and Dual Language Learners

The need for English and native language support is continually increasing in the United States as the population becomes exceedingly diverse. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), just over 10% of the overall student population in the United States are classified as EL. This rate is increasing dramatically, by over one million students over the last 20 years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). According to the California Department of Education (2021b), there are approximately one million ELs in California public schools. California's public schools provide instruction to 39.5% of these students; 66% of those enrolled as EL are in the elementary grades, or kindergarten through grade six.

In public schools, specialized systems of support must be established in order to facilitate the learning process of DLL students (Cvijetic, 2015; Dawson, 2014). ECE programs can

minimize these challenges, especially among children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. ELs may be less likely to enroll their children in EC programs before they enter kindergarten because, as ELs themselves, they may not be able to understand the process to apply for services (Casto & Sipple, 2011). EC experts believe that learning two languages is beneficial for children at a young age. Many high-quality ECE programs support DLL students by providing stimulating environments and including dual language supports such as imagery and gestures. A child's home language (e.g., the language their family speaks at home) is supported in ECE classrooms by incorporating it in daily routines and songs (Baker, 2019). This is meant to foster their home language as well as create a foundation in the English language. These crucial developmental needs for English and native language support show the reasoning behind the necessity of universal access to high-quality ECE for all children in the United States. ECE is needed to address these crucial aspects of early development and learning (i.e., socioemotional, language development) through the use of play and DAP. But, high-quality ECE can be prohibitively expensive - it is not accessible to all, thereby creating severe equity gaps. States like California are looking to increase access to ECE by offering state-funded TK for all 4-year-olds. Before we look at TK, the following section presents a historical overview of the history of kindergarten in the United States.

History of Kindergarten in the United States

Frederick Froebel, a German teacher, and philosopher in the mid-19th century visualized a learning environment where children could develop without strict academic rigor. Froebel wanted to incorporate culture and kindergarten and named this vision "kindergarten" which translates to "children's garden" in German (Wollons, 2000). The kindergarten framework

was child-centered and play-based, in an effort for children to meet their learning goals (Arbizzi, 2016). Froebelian's kindergarten enrolled children between the ages of 3 and 6 years. The educational environment was hands-on and supported a child's individualized needs (Laird, 2012). The structure of this pedagogical approach was intended to allow children to fearlessly create and discover while engaging in their learning environments.

The first German-language kindergarten in the United States was initially implemented in Watertown, Wisconsin in 1856 by Margaret Schurz (Soria, 2016). Henry Barnard, the Commissioner of Education at the time, supported kindergarten as it assisted children from lower socioeconomic and minority backgrounds, so the program expanded across the country. The first English language kindergarten was launched in the United States by an educator named Elizabeth Peabody in Boston in 1860 (Arbizzi, 2016). The Commissioner of Education believed that kindergarten was a means of social equalization. In the late 19th century, Henry Bernard wanted to give equal opportunity to economically disadvantaged children and children of color to enroll in kindergarten. He wanted children to gain readiness for their elementary educational career during their crucial developmental years. Bernard also felt that kindergarten would facilitate constructive economic growth (Soria, 2016). Froebel wanted the kindergarten classroom to embody his philosophical idea of connections between God, the individual, and nature. The teacher would represent God, the children were the individuals, and the materials in a classroom would symbolize nature (Prochner, 2011). The development of scientific thinking and social norms was focused on the progressive approach in Froebel's pedagogy. Over time, ECE programs developed in parallel with kindergarten to

develop readiness for the grade level as the academics were pushed down to provide a more rigorous curriculum.

History of Early Childhood Education in the United States

Early childhood programs began emerging in the mid to late 20th century as cognitive psychologists focused on the importance of kindergarten readiness. The legislation was passed to legitimize the early education field to expand further allowing early childhood programs to develop. Low-income students from preschool to 3rd grade were given access to intervention programs through Head Start and Project Follow Through in 1968 by the U.S. Office of Education (Cahan, 1989). Head Start was one of the ECE programs that prepared students academically, socially, and emotionally for their entry into kindergarten and continues to exist today (Laird, 2012). Early federal programs for ECE developed into the state preschool systems that are still in place today and created more awareness of early learning needs for children across the country.

According to the Education Coalition (n.d.), President George H. Bush advocated a program called *America 2000* which later became *Goals 2000*. This legislation created standards for early childhood care settings, such as daycares and preschools, in order to ensure children are prepared to enter kindergarten. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, was the motivation enforced by the government to maximize success for students in the American education system (Nail, 2008). Recently, the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) replaced NCLB as it was signed into law by President Barack Obama and reauthorized the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act to provide for equal opportunities for all students. The Every Student Succeeds Act created a national focus on ECE with the

allocation of appropriate funding for these programs. The increased focus of ECE programs highlighted the importance of high-quality ECE for all children, values that may have arguably contributed to the vision for California's TK program.

The Emergence of Transitional Kindergarten

The Kindergarten Readiness Act was set into motion in September 2010 when the California legislature passed Senate Bill 1381 (Greene, 2016). According to Manship et al. (2017) TK was created in 2010 by the Kindergarten Readiness Act. TK offers younger children in California additional time to prepare for school. In years prior, a single kindergarten classroom had students with a wide range of developmental ages from 4 to 6. This created a larger discrepancy in abilities both academic and social/emotional within the kindergarten classroom. Kindergarten began at the age of 4 years old in several states including Connecticut, Michigan, Vermont, and California before this Act (Henderson, 2016), while the entry age for other states was 5 years old. After the Act was passed, California children had to turn age 5 by September 1st to be eligible for enrollment in kindergarten (Greene, 2016). The students with birth dates from September 2nd to December 2nd, no longer qualified for kindergarten, so a new grade level, TK was introduced in the year 2012-2013 (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2019). The intention was to provide young children with a strong foundation and minimize additional support later in upper-grade levels. The once K-12 education format now had a connection to ECE that promoted readiness in elementary school settings.

Proposition 98 mandates that the \$700 million in annual cost savings resulting from having fewer children in kindergarten be used to provide developmentally appropriate TK

programming for those children whose entry to kindergarten would be delayed. According to Friedman-Krauss et al. (2019), there has been a \$364 million increase in California's investment in ECE programs, which equates to an over \$1,000 increase per child. At the same time, national funding for preschool programs has increased - for example, the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) set aside additional funds of \$226 million from the Preschool Development Grant to provide for foundational support of marginalized children and a higher quality ECE. These investments in EC programming are happening in parallel with TK investments and will be key as states across the country seek to create an equitable pathway from preschool through kindergarten programs inclusive of all students (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

According to the California Department of Education (2021b), TK classrooms were to utilize the early childhood method of teaching, with a focus on SEL, in addition to developmentally appropriate academics. California's Preschool Foundations and Frameworks which were adopted through state legislation, highlight the significance of social-emotional skills and self-regulation in early development (California Department of Education, 2021a). Most teachers newly assigned to the TK program have experience in preschool, kindergarten, or first-grade levels (Cadigan et al., 2015). While nearly all of these teachers have earned multiple subject teaching credentials, most are not trained in the ECE curriculum (Greene, 2016). Academic and social-emotional learning is not guaranteed when bridging the gap using TK between ECE and K-12 environments. This is why TK educators must be prepared to provide high-quality learning environments.

Research conducted by the American Institutes for Research suggests,

TK gives students an advantage at kindergarten entry on a range of literacy and mathematics skills, including letter and word identification, phonological awareness, expressive vocabulary, problem-solving, and knowledge of mathematical symbols and concepts. Students who attended TK were also rated as more engaged by their teachers, compared to their peers. (Manship et al., 2017, pp. i-ii)

However, these skills do not align with the ECE principles discussed above (socioemotional learning, DAP & play-based learning, DLL, and Early Intervention). The promotion of TK may nevertheless allow for Early Intervention as it creates opportunities to identify children with special education needs. TK is currently being studied to determine whether participation in this program supports underrepresented groups of ELs and economically disadvantaged students (Cvijetic, 2015). ELs and economically disadvantaged students are provided a program at no cost with equitable access when they meet the age requirement of the TK program. TK provides the groundwork for a child's developmental needs to support them in their elementary education career (California Department of Education, 2013). California's Kindergarten Readiness Act of 2010, suggests that offsetting the entrance to kindergarten by a year will provide more developmentally ready students after TK. Students who attended TK seem to have advantages in kindergarten with higher academic and social-emotional skills (Quick et al., 2017).

According to Quick et al. (2017), there were some changes that occurred during the 3rd year of the implementation of TK. Considerations were made for the size of the classroom and whether the classroom is combined with a kindergarten classroom. There is some debate over the appropriateness of combination TK/K classrooms, noting that these combination classes create clashes due to miscommunication and misunderstandings of each grade level's expectations. The study additionally looked at student achievement across five years, finding

that there was little variation in the impact of TK by classroom or instructional characteristics (Quick et al., 2017). When looking at their experiences in kindergarten the following year, the researchers found that TK had little impact on their executive function skills or problem behaviors, though TK students continue to have an advantage over non-TK students on letter and word identification skills. The authors conclude that the modified curriculum adopted by the Preschool Foundations is not facilitating long-term developmental outcomes for students in TK. This shows that teachers need more training and education in these areas to fully support these 4- and 5-year-olds in TK classrooms.

There is a need to conduct further longitudinal research for TK students advancing into their educational careers. We have yet to see the long-term impacts as students move on through high school, college, and beyond to truly measure the influence of TK on later achievement (Quick et al., 2017).

Transitional Kindergarten as an Opportunity for Universal Preschool

California has recently proposed the integration of ECE in the K-12 public school system through TK, thereby meeting a long-standing need to increase access to ECE and preschool. The California Master Plan is a framework for opportunities to promote physical, emotional, and educational early learning for all students. The plan aligns with the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes and the Council of Chief State School Officers' (2017) definition of a high-quality ECE program for young students points to TK as a bridge towards universal access in the state. The plan is expected to phase in all 4-year-olds, prioritizing children with high needs. Eventually, the plan is to provide universal access to all students ages 3 to 4 (Alcalá et al., 2020).

The Master Plan has outlined four policy goals to ensure gaps in learning are filled with cohesion, sustainability, and high standards. The first goal is to increase access and equity by providing universal access to preschool for all 4-year-olds and low-income 3-year-olds. The second goal is to enhance the competency of educators with incentives, such as funding career pathways with high program standards. The third goal is to increase funding for ECE programs to make them equally accessible for all students. The design and implementation of data systems that track student outcomes so as to improve equity are stated as the fourth goal (Alcalá et al., 2020). The Master Plan also highlights the need for competency-based PD to support educators and govern ECE programs appropriately.

Potential Financial Aspects of Transitional Kindergarten

Human capital theorists and economists share their viewpoints on the benefits of ECE as it is a constructive investment for society (Committee for Economic Development, 2012). It is an advantage to society to be supportive of the development of children's first few years. The investment in ECE allows for a cost-effective future. According to Lamb and Ahnert (2006), the average \$12,356 investment in a child from birth to 5 years is \$70,876 of savings when investing in ECE.

While many believe that poverty is an issue from the past, it remains a modern-day dilemma (Soria, 2016). According to Fowler (2013), there was a 49% growth in poverty rates during the United States' Great Recession in 2007. The Public Policy Institute of California reports that only some children are in deep poverty, while about 50% of children in California live in or close to poverty (Danielson et al., 2019). Only 23.6% of children live above the poverty line in the state (Danielson et al., 2019). The individuals most affected by

poverty, when comparing demographic groups, are children who are at high risk even when compared to senior citizens (Fuentes et al., 2013). Due to the protection of government programs in place for senior citizens, such as Social Security and Medicare, poverty rates are smaller for the older population in comparison to children. In California, poverty rates are linked to families' racial and ethnic backgrounds, such that children in minority groups comprise the youngest and most vulnerable members of society. Moreover, 45% of those raised in poverty grow up to be of low socioeconomic status.

According to Lamb and Ahnert (2006), children raised in financially unstable homes are more likely to be held back a grade during their elementary school years. Teen pregnancy, lower-paying jobs, financial reliance on government programs, special education referrals, high school dropout rates, low academic achievement, and low self-efficacy are all known outcomes of living in an impoverished environment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Children living above the poverty threshold score an average of 60% higher than their peers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds on cognition tests. High-quality ECE programs taught by trained educators can appropriately support children of diverse backgrounds and need (Lamb & Ahnert, 2006).

Preparing TK Educators to Provide High-Quality Care and Education

As mentioned above, the California Department of Education (2021a) passed legislation that required the California Preschool Foundations and Frameworks in TK classrooms in an attempt to promote practices central to high-quality ECE. Unfortunately, many teachers in public schools have not been properly trained to meet these standards. TK teachers must build social-emotional competencies so as to better promote self-regulation and positive

development over the course of these early years of development. While preschool teachers are not typically certified through university programs, TK educators must possess a bachelor's degree along with appropriate ECE units (D'Souza, 2021). Nevertheless, TK teachers often do not have the necessary tools to properly guide their young students to teach students self-confidence and cooperation, along with early academic skills. According to the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (2016), it is difficult to transition ECE to the school district system because most early childhood educators do not have the credentials necessary to teach in the TK/K-12 public school system.

Research by Fong (2016) and Silva (2016) suggests that ECE coursework coupled with multiple subject teaching credentials does not provide the necessary tools to implement DAPs. ECE training simply has not been a concentration for universities in preparing public school educators (Golchert, 2019). Instead, teacher preparation programs often concentrate on content-specific knowledge and approaches towards instruction in teacher-led, didactic learning environments.

Children who are not exposed to the DAPs in TK programs may ultimately suffer academically. Children who enter kindergarten at a later age are more prepared, cognitively ready, to learn and mature (Huang & Invernizzi, 2012). Younger children, on the other hand, do not have the necessary social skills, emotional regulation, and foundations of learning to gain success in classrooms developmentally appropriate for 5-year-olds (Denham et al., 2012; Longobardi & D'Alessandro, 2017). Golchert (2019) explains that detrimental results arise when teachers are not sufficiently prepared to teach. This creates less than desirable

outcomes in society and results in the need for additional resources and interventions later in life.

The American Institutes for Research (2015) reports that 75% of TK classroom teachers enter the profession lacking appropriate pedagogical preparation. Their training does not often include information on early brain development, social-emotional competencies, and DAP. Manship et al. (2015) indicate that only 65% of teachers earned some units towards ECE or childhood development. The potential for the educational gap between credentialed teachers and EC educators is alarming because students are not receiving the appropriate services, education, or care. Public school teachers may not be adequately prepared with training in ECE programs and may not understand how to meet the needs of a preschool-aged child.

These findings, taken together, point to the need to foster communication and collaboration among TK teachers and early childhood educators to successfully support the needs of the young learners. PD programs are an essential way to bridge the gap so as to provide the best learning environments for our youngest children. This is also a positive way to promote kindergarten readiness for TK students.

The literature regarding TK has been limited due to the novelty of the program in California. Future study is needed to fully understand the recent influence this program has had on public schooling. For example, longitudinal studies will need to measure the impact of TK on student achievement through elementary school, high school, and beyond. In the meantime, however, teacher and administrator perceptions can be studied so as to better understand their knowledge and experience in ECE.

Chapter 3: Study Methods

TK programs are relatively new, and remain small with respect to other elementary school grade levels. In this study, both kindergarten and TK teachers were surveyed to gain a broader perspective on early learning and instructional practices in public schools. This chapter provides an overview of the methodology used to address the following research questions:

- **RQ1A)** To what extent are TK and Kindergarten teachers knowledgeable and confident with the four core principles of early learning and instruction identified in Chapter 2. And, do TK and Kindergarten teachers believe these core principles are relevant to their classroom instruction?
- **RQ1B)** Does the educational background and experience of TK and Kindergarten teachers affect their assessments of teachers' knowledge, confidence, and relevance?
- **RO2A)** To what extent are elementary school administrators knowledgeable and confident with these core principles of early learning and instruction? And, do they believe these core principles are relevant to their role as elementary school administrators?
- **RQ2B)** Do elementary school administrators' perspectives align with those of TK and Kindergarten teachers?
- **RQ3)** How can teachers and administrators support early learning and instruction in TK and Kindergarten classrooms? What are the affordances and constraints?

The core principles of early learning and instruction that will serve as the focus of this study were identified through the review of the literature (Chapter 2). Specifically, this study

will survey participants' understanding and appreciation for DAP and Play-Based Instruction; Socioemotional Learning, DLL support, and Early Intervention. DAP and Play-Based Instruction, referred to here as DAP, is rooted in individual strengths and characterized by play-based activities. In addition to stimulating children's natural desire to play, learning that is play-based can aid in their development of social and cognitive skills (Moses et al., 2021). Socioemotional Learning, or SEL, has been shown to facilitate equity and excellence for children and youth by developing authentic relationships between schools, families, and communities (CASEL, 2022). Support for DLLs recognizes the child's home language in addition to providing appropriate support for learning English as a second language (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment, 2022). And finally, early intervention is a system of support that includes specialized professionals who work with children and families with developmental delays and disabilities (DEC, 2022a).

Carefully designed surveys were disseminated among TK and K teachers, as well as elementary school administrators, to bring varying perspectives on the value of ECE principles in TK and K classrooms (Macnaghten & Myers, 2006). The survey also collected self-evaluations of teaching efficacy so as to gain a deeper understanding of educators' knowledge and experiences. The survey concluded with space to discuss affordances and constraints around adopting EC principles in TK programming. Participant responses were recorded online using Qualtrics, a web-based survey tool.

In order to better understand the perspectives of educators in TK and ECE in public schools, the survey asked participants to rate what they know and value about the core ECE principles identified above. The survey also asked participants to reflect on the affordances

and constraints of supporting high-quality early childhood instruction in TK. To understand values, affordances, and constraints at a systems level, similar questions were asked of K-8 administrators about their value of ECE.

Participants

This survey was designed to capture a representative sample of teachers and administrators in California. Participants included 80 teachers of TK and kindergarten classrooms, as well as 15 elementary school administrators in public school settings. The sample included varying levels of expertise, thereby capturing the perspectives of teachers new to the field, as well as teachers who have been working with TK and K students for many years. There were 15 administrators who were either principals or assistant principals, with various levels of experience in instructional and educational leadership.

Sampling Procedures

The recruitment process began with an invitation to participate posted to various social media groups, such as Facebook groups of TK/K educators, Facebook groups of administrators, and LinkedIn posts. The initial invitation provided transparency of what is expected of participants during the study. As a small incentive to participate, survey participants were entered in a raffle for a \$50 Amazon gift card that could be used towards their personal or classroom needs. Prospective participants were asked to pass the invitation along to colleagues and professional networks leading to more participants and administrators from a variety of populations, thereby applying a snowball sampling technique (Noy, 2008).

The purpose of these questions was to ensure eligibility and collect information about their position and experiences to ensure there was a representative sample (including urban, suburban, and title I districts in diverse and highly populated areas). These initial questions were also used to collect information about their positions and experiences, see Appendix A.

Survey Questions

Two surveys of similar nature were developed for this study - one for the kindergarten and TK teachers and one for the administrators. To begin, participants were provided with a general definition of the four key principles (DAP and play-based learning, SEL, DLL, and early intervention). Next, in order to address RQ1A and RQ2A, the survey asked respondents about their knowledge and confidence regarding each of the core principles, and how it is relevant to their instructional or administrative roles. Based on a Likert scale of 1-5, the options were: not at all, slightly, somewhat, fairly, and very. For example, the first of this series of questions asked: How knowledgeable are you about “Developmentally Appropriate Practice” and “Play-Based Instruction”? In addition, further information was requested for each core principle at the end of the dimension questions (e.g., “Please use the space below to elaborate on your responses above, as needed”).

Participants were asked to describe their current role in education and their educational background. This included asking about their teaching credentials and the highest degree they have earned. A question was also asked regarding the number of years they have spent in education in general.

Participants were also asked to identify affordances and constraints as a means to incorporate the principles into the classroom. Specifically, the survey asked: “What specific

resources or supports do you need to provide effective instruction in your TK/K classrooms?” and “What specific factors or barriers interfere with your ability to provide effective instruction in your TK/K classrooms?”. Further, the survey asked about training opportunities, “How might Professional Development (PD) opportunities enhance your ability to provide effective instruction in your TK/K classroom?” The questions were open-ended so that teachers and administrators could express additional comments and ideas. The survey also presented an opportunity for participants to provide any additional information they wished to share. See Appendix A.

Procedures

Participants completed the survey online using Qualtrics (see Appendix A). Respondents were informed that their responses would be kept confidential and used solely for research purposes. The survey took between 20 and 30 minutes to complete. The survey included Likert scale questions to obtain quantitative data evaluating the respondents' level of knowledge and confidence in the core concepts. Furthermore, there were qualitative questions that allowed participants to elaborate on their thinking and allow additional data collection.

Data Collection and Analysis

Survey questions were developed in alignment with the research questions to engage educators in topic-related responses. The quantitative responses were coded using Microsoft Excel and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software was used to analyze the quantitative results of the Likert responses. This program also allowed for the comparison of teachers and administrators using the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test.

Open-ended questions were included in the survey to better understand the affordances and constraints for achieving a high-quality ECE described by teachers and administrators. These questions were designed to capture the views and opinions of participants. In order to analyze qualitative data, a grounded-up approach called inductive coding was employed for both participant groups. Initially, data is retrieved following the development of codes. To simplify the coding process, the responses were first extracted from the survey and entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Responses to each of the qualitative questions were classified into columns and divided by participant group. Following this, the responses were grouped into themes so that codes could be derived. The codes revealed patterns that could be used to identify similarities between the teachers and administrators. Analysis of these patterns was conducted to draw conclusions in response to RQ3. Data that were coded allowed for appropriate conclusions to be drawn from the results.

Chapter 4: Results and Key Findings

This chapter reports the study's results and key findings. The first section describes the characteristics of the participants. Thereafter, the data is reported in relation to each of the research questions. The study's key results and findings are summarized in the last section of this chapter.

Participants

Teachers

A total of 80 TK and kindergarten teachers participated in this study, including 21 kindergarten teachers, 20 TKs, and 39 participants who either taught a combo TK/K class or did not report a specific grade level. Table 1 shows some additional information about the participants, including their ages, years of experience, and professional background.

In this sample, 8% of respondents had earned an associate degree and 30% had a bachelor's degree. Participants with master's degrees constituted 36% of the group, and 3% had earned doctoral degrees. Twenty-four percent of the participants did not report their educational background. Years of experience teaching in their current grade level (either TK or K) ranged from 0 to 35 years, with an average of nine years of experience. In the educational field generally, the years of experience ranged from 3 to 40 years, with an average of 17 years. There were 13 teachers under the age of 30 and 14 teachers between the ages of 31 and 40. In total, 15 of the teachers were between the ages of 41 and 50, while 19 were over 51 years of age. Fourteen teachers provided no age information. This sample includes four Charter/Magnet teachers, two private school teachers, one STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) teacher, and one rural public school teacher.

Table 1
Participant Background Information

Highest Degree	Teachers		Administrators	
	n	%	n	%
AA Degree	6	8%	0	0%
BA Degree	24	30%	0	0%
MA Degree	29	36%	10	67%
Doctorate	2	3%	1	7%
No Report	19	24%	4	27%
Teaching Credential				
Multiple Subjects	37	46%	11	73%
Special Education	6	8%	0	0%
Early Childhood (permit/units)	23	29%	10	67%
Age				
26-30 years old	13	16%	0	0%
31-40 years old	14	18%	2	13%
41-50 years old	15	19%	3	20%
51+ years old	19	24%	6	40%
No Report	19	24%	4	27%
Experience in Grade / Position				
minimum	< 1 year		2 years	
maximum	35 years		25 years	
average	9 years		9 years	
Experience in Education / Field				
minimum	3 years		15 years	
maximum	40 years		43 years	
average	17 years		22 years	

Twenty-seven participants reported that they worked at a Title I school, and 13 reported working in a dual-language program. Just one participant reported teaching at a school with an inclusion program.

Administrators

Among the 15 administrators participating in the study, six were employed in Title I schools. Three administrators reported additional educational characteristics at their school sites - one as a DLL/Immersion program, one in an autism setting, and a third participant identified their setting as “high-achieving”. Ten administrators held master's degrees, and one had a doctorate, while four did not disclose their educational background. Multiple subject

credentials were held by 73% of the participants and Cross-Cultural Language and Academic Development credentials are held by seven principals, three of whom also hold bilingual credentials. Participants with master's degrees accounted for 67% of this sample, though 27% did not report their highest degrees. Eight of the participants have degrees in educational leadership, while the remaining two have degrees in psychology or liberal studies/bilingual education. There were five principals did not report their degree discipline. As for the level of administrative experience reported, six participants had 0-5 years of experience, three had 6-10 years of experience, two had 11-15 years of experience, and three had more than 16 years of administrative experience, with a maximum of 43 years of educational experience. A total of five of them had worked in the education field for between 15 and 20 years, six between 21 and 26 years, and one for over 40 years. The administrators were relatively evenly distributed throughout the age groups (31-40, 41-50, 51-60, and 60+).

Participant responses are shown in Table 2. To address RQ1A and 1B, teachers' knowledge, confidence, and relevance are reported first; followed by evaluations of administrator responses, in response to RQ2A and 2B.

Teacher Survey (RQ1A-B)

Measures of TK and Kindergarten teachers' self-reported knowledge and confidence with core principles of early learning and instruction; as well as the extent to which they believe these core principles are relevant to their instruction (RQ1A) were analyzed first. In fact, teacher responses were consistently high across all questions, with means ranging from 3.67 to 4.74 on a scale extending from 1 to 5. The lower means were associated with teacher

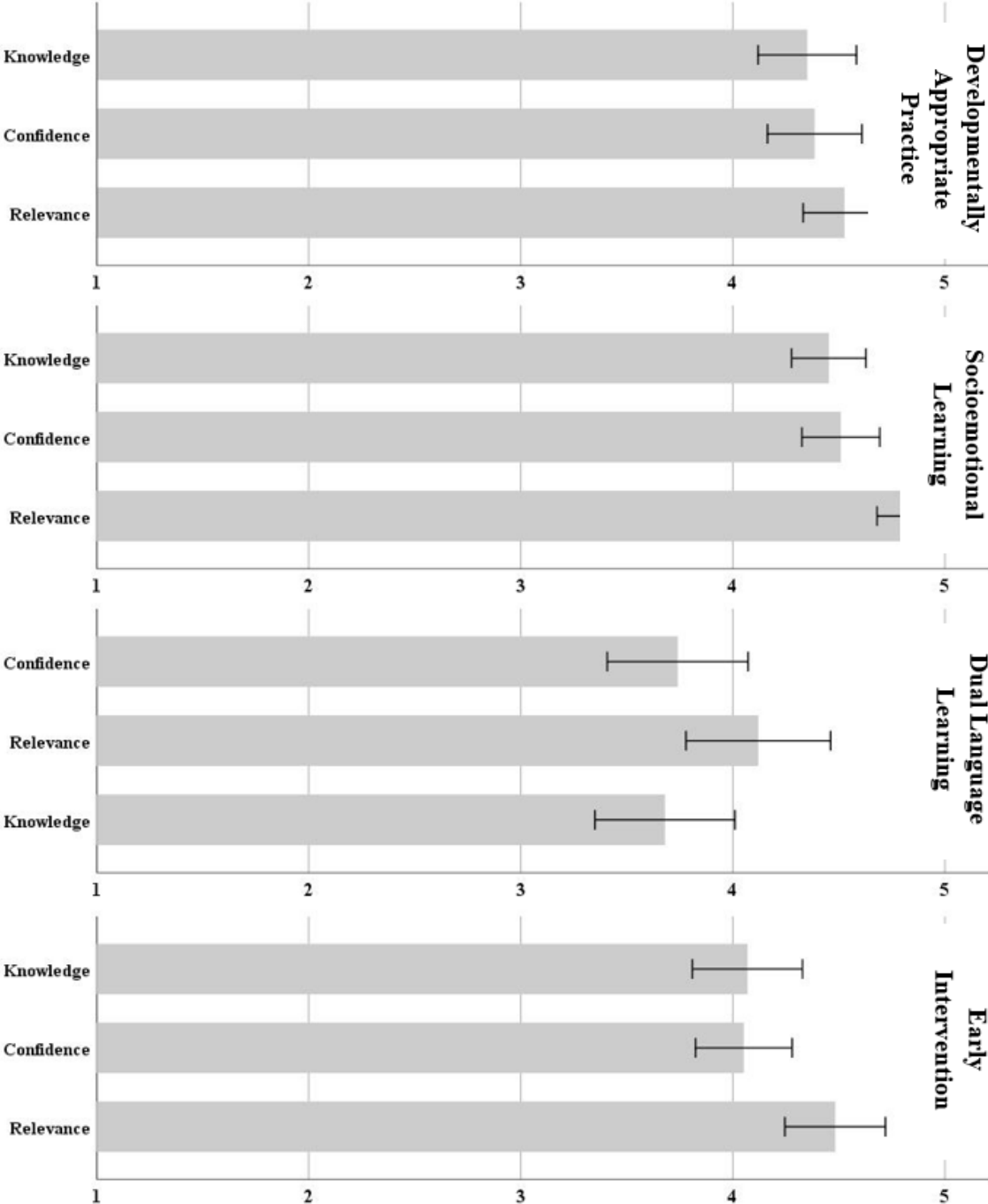
Table 2
Summary of Participant Responses

	Teachers (<i>n</i> = 80)							Administrators (<i>n</i> = 15)						
	1s	2s	3s	4s	5s	M	SD	1s	2s	3s	4s	5s	M	SD
Dev't Appropriate Practice														
Knowledge	1	6	11	38	44	4.17	0.94	0	23	39	31	8	3.23	0.93
Confidence	0	5	11	33	52	4.31	0.85	0	9	18	46	23	3.91	0.94
Relevance	2	2	5	34	58	4.45	0.8	0	9	0	27	64	4.45	0.93
Socioemotional Learning														
Knowledge	0	5	5	49	42	4.28	0.76	0	0	0	62	39	4.38	0.51
Confidence	0	4	6	35	56	4.44	0.76	0	0	0	82	18	4.18	0.41
Relevance	0	0	2	23	75	4.74	0.48	0	0	0	31	69	4.69	0.48
Dual Language Learning														
Knowledge	3	15	15	42	24	3.68	1.11	0	18	18	23	36	3.82	1.17
Confidence	4	20	11	36	29	3.67	1.2	0	42	17	8	33	3.33	1.37
Relevance	5	7	7	31	51	4.16	1.13	9	27	18	9	36	3.36	1.5
Early Intervention														
Knowledge	5	3	7	54	31	4.03	0.98	0	8	0	62	31	4.15	0.8
Confidence	3	3	5	64	25	4.03	0.86	0	8	8	58	25	4	0.85
Relevance	2	5	2	28	64	4.48	0.87	0	8	0	39	54	4.38	0.87

responses to questions asking about DLL supports in particular (3.67 and 3.68 confidence and knowledge, respectively). The highest mean response was 4.74, representing teachers' ratings of SEL relevance in their instruction.

According to Figure 1, teacher ratings of their knowledge and confidence within these domains are more variable. Teachers report a general lack of confidence and knowledge regarding DLL instruction in particular. As mentioned above, average ratings on DLL knowledge and confidence center on 3 “somewhat” and 4 “fairly,” though responses vary, with standard deviations exceeding 1.0. Teachers' confidence in DLL instruction was the lowest at 3.67, followed by their knowledge with 3.68. A teacher expressed, “I am still learning how to implement and incorporate best practices to support my DLL students, but with time I feel that I have enough knowledge to find things that work best for my students”.

Figure 1
Teacher Participant Responses



On the other hand, teachers' self-reported knowledge and confidence in DAP and SEL are relatively high, in the 4 “fairly” range, with standard deviations less than 1.0. In terms of confidence in SEL instruction, teachers had an average response of 4.44, indicating competency in this area.

Teachers consistently report that all four domains are relevant to their instruction, with means ranging from 4 “fairly” to 5 “very”. The lowest mean response, 4.16, was indicated for the relevance of DLL instruction in their classrooms, followed by a mean response of 4.45 for DAP instruction. SEL had the highest mean response based on the relevance of instruction of 4.74, while Early Intervention rated lowest, with a mean response of 4.48. Standard deviations were generally less than one, except for DLL with a standard deviation of 1.13.

In order to determine whether the descriptive trends noted above are statistically significant, an omnibus ANOVA was performed, utilizing teacher ratings of knowledge, relevance, and confidence as the dependent variables, with repeated measures across domains. The findings indicate that teachers score lower on all three dimensions of DLL (knowledge, confidence, and relevance) as compared to DAP and SEL in particular ($p < .05$). This suggests that, in their TK and Kindergarten classrooms, DAPs and Socioemotional Learning are more central to their ability to support students' learning. Figure 1 presents a visual comparison of the domains across each dimension.

An analysis was conducted to determine the influence of TK and kindergarten teachers' educational backgrounds and experiences on their ratings of knowledge, confidence, and relevance (RQ1B). An ANOVA indicates that there is not a significant difference in

responses based on the teachers' position as TK or kindergarten teachers, with a p-value greater than .05. This result illustrates that their educational experience in kindergarten or TK does not influence the ratings of their knowledge, confidence, and relevance in implementing core principles. Furthermore, their educational background, as indicated by the highest degree they earned, did not differ significantly. It is noteworthy, however, that years of experience working at the current grade level (TK or K) correlates with knowledge and confidence regarding Early Intervention. ($r(54)=.46, p<.001$) and early intervention confidence ($r(54)=.47, p<.001$). Furthermore, teachers who have earned a minimum of 24 units in ECE and/or a child development teacher permit reported higher levels of knowledge and confidence in implementing DAPs, $F(1,69)=5.43$ and $F(1,62)=6.89, p=.011$, suggesting that those who receive specialized DAP training and instruction generally possess a higher level of knowledge and confidence when supporting students in their TK and K classrooms.

Administrator Survey (RQ2A-B)

The four core principles were also used to analyze elementary administrators' self-reported knowledge of early learning and instruction and their belief that these principles are relevant to their work as an administrator. Responses to questions regarding their knowledge, relevance, and confidence with respect to the four principal domains (DAP, SEL, DLL, and early intervention) were consistently high. Ratings of DAP knowledge are lower, with a mean of 3.23, followed by DLL confidence with a mean of 3.33. Administrators rank the relevance of SEL instruction, on the other hand, as rather with a mean of 4.69.

Results indicate that administrators believe that the core principles are relevant in their support for instruction, with means centering on 3 “somewhat” to 5 “very”. DLL support is

reported to have the lowest mean of 3.36, indicating that administrators do not find this to be very relevant to their role as a principal. A participant expresses the need for their staff to receive more training:

Many of our current DLL families are listed so due to initial enrollment paperwork, students naturally progress through acquiring proficiency as English is also spoken at home. For the smaller subset of students where neither parent speaks English, staff needs additional training on how designated time would improve student outcomes.

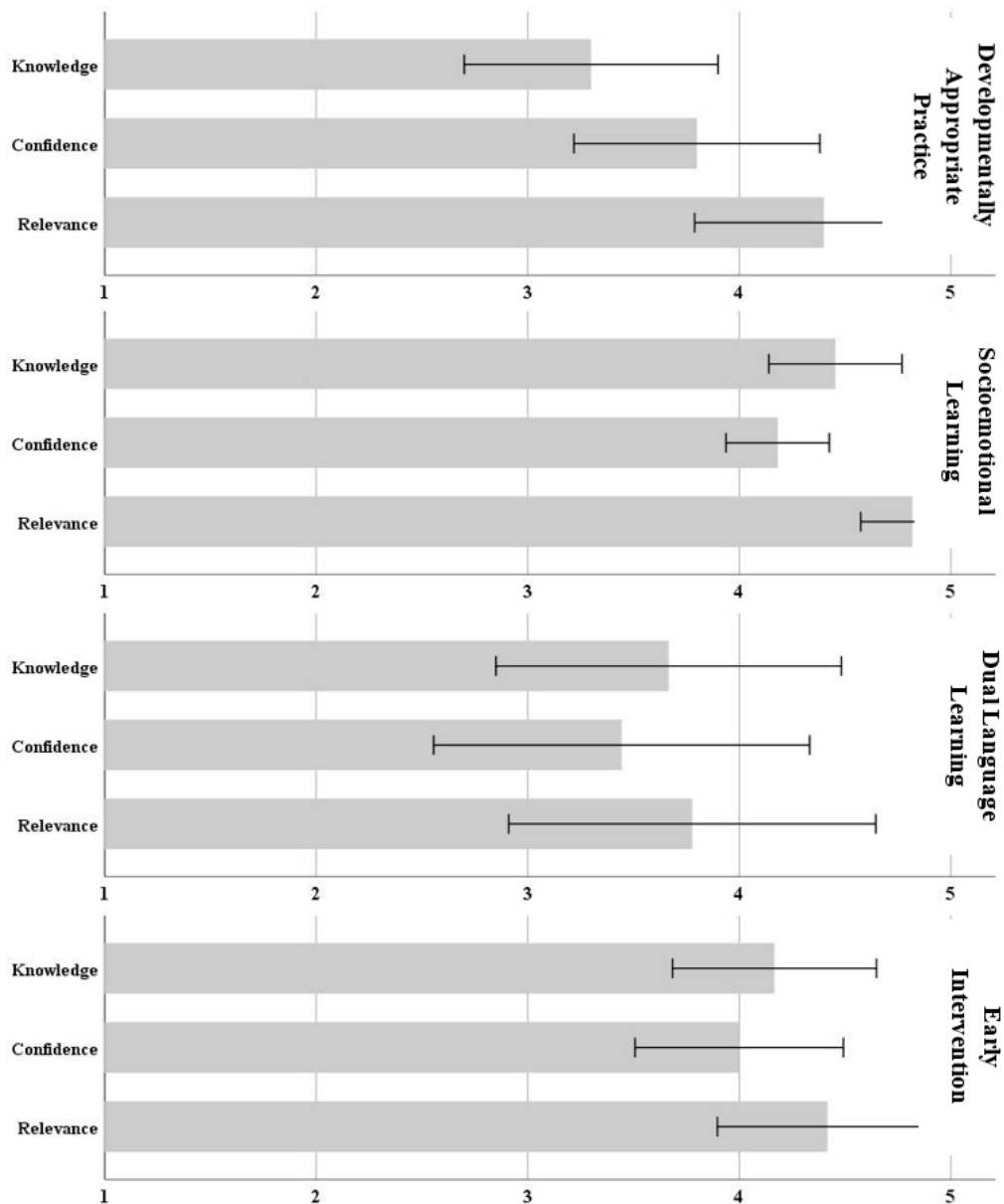
They believe that teachers need to be additionally trained to support students and their families.

Early Intervention follows with a mean of 4.38, showing that it is “fairly” relevant in supporting TK and kindergarten teachers. The relevance of DAP as an administrator resulted in an average of 4.45. The highest mean was the relevance of SEL for administrators with an average of 4.69. The standard deviations ranged from 0.47 for SEL to 1.51 for DLLs.

Administrator ratings of their knowledge and confidence in these domains are somewhat more variable. On average, administrators report less knowledge in DAP and less confidence in DLL instruction in particular. As mentioned above, average ratings on DAP knowledge and DLL confidence center on 3 “somewhat” with standard deviations exceeding 1.0. Their knowledge of DAP was the lowest, as mentioned above, with an average rating of 3.23. On the other hand, administrators' self-reported knowledge and confidence in SEL are relatively high across both dimensions - it appears administrators are fairly confident in supporting their teachers in socioemotional learning with a mean of 4.17. They also report being knowledgeable in supporting SEL instruction with the highest average of 4.38. With regards to early intervention confidence and knowledge, administrators appear to feel confident in supporting early intervention instruction, with a mean of 4.00, and they are fairly

knowledgeable in this area, with a mean of 4.15. The district is unable to provide appropriate personnel support for Early Intervention. In Figure 2, the responses of the administrators are displayed to show their levels of competencies of the four principles across the three dimensions of self-report (i.e., knowledge, confidence, and relevance).

Figure 2
Administrator Participant Responses



To address RQ2B, administrators' and teachers' perspectives were analyzed to determine how they align with one another. ANOVA analyses do not point to any significant difference in responses across domains by participants' education level (highest degree earned). The p-value is less than .05 showing it to be not statistically significant. Interestingly, unlike the responses among teacher participants that appear to be positively correlated with years of experience working in education, the years of experience that the administrators had accrued in their current position is negatively correlated with both early intervention knowledge and confidence ($r(11)=-.71, p=.015$ and $r(11)=-.81, p=.005$ respectively), as well as the relevance administrators ascribe to Early Intervention, $r(11)=-.72, p=.013$. The biggest difference between administrators and teachers is in DAP knowledge, ($F(1,83)=8.51, p=.005$). Otherwise, it is fairly well aligned (see Figures 1 & 2) but distinctions surface in perspectives documented through qualitative responses, as shown in their reports of affordances and constraints identified in the next section.

Affordances and Constraints (RQ3)

Teacher and administrator participants identified affordances that serve as resources and supports that are needed to implement the core principles, shown in Table 3. An affordance noted by 14 teachers was the need for a more developmentally appropriate curriculum with manipulatives and other play-based materials. A major issue that teachers expressed was a desire for constant and additional assistance in the classroom. Five teachers request PD training that is meaningful and ongoing. They indicated that they would ideally like to receive more developmentally appropriate training that also emphasizes SEL. The teachers also expressed the need for smaller class sizes as well as larger classrooms with a bathroom

Table 3*Resources and Supports Needed to Provide Effective Instruction in TK/K Classrooms*

Teachers	Example	Administrators	Example
Curriculum (n=14) Developmentally appropriate Play-based instruction Manipulatives and materials Hands-on lessons	“Classroom materials such as manipulatives, fine motor activities, art supplies, realia, etc.”	Curriculum (n=2) Quality curriculum and materials TK based curriculum	“Continued quality curriculum for TK.”
Instructional Support/Aide (n=9) Teacher assistants Adult support and supervision Administrative support	“A full-time classroom aide would be helpful so I could pull more small groups for targeted instruction throughout the day.”	Instructional Support/Aide (n=3) Intervention support Instructional coaches	“Resource teacher with early elementary instruction experience.”
Classroom and Facilities (n=3) Fewer students per classroom Additional classroom space Bathrooms inside the classroom	“Smaller class size, classrooms that are equipped with bathrooms, larger classrooms.”	Classroom and Facilities (n=1) Fewer students per classroom	“Smaller class size.”
Professional Development (n=4) Training and PD for TK teachers	“SEL ongoing training and play- based ongoing training.”	Professional Development (n=3) Targeted PD’s to support TK Insight on curriculum	“Honestly, it comes down to funds to attend training and support in implementing the strategies.”
Teachers (cont.)	Example	Administrators (cont.)	Example
Time (n=2) Time for collaboration Time for effective implementation	“Time and collaboration with other colleagues who have early childhood training.”	Time (n=2) Time for implementation	“As all educators know, time is always a huge issue [to implement new teaching strategies].”
Other (n=5) Additional support services	“More access to counseling and speech services... it's hard to get students tested and qualified for services in a timely manner.”	Other (n=3) Additional support services Opportunities for collaboration	“Working on an island or silo is always difficult. Having more than a single TK section (teacher) to collaborate with would be a benefit.”
COVID (n=2) Relief from pandemic restrictions	“Covid restrictions to be lifted enough for me to allow my students to work and play together.”	COVID (n=1) Support for teacher well-being	“The last two years have put a strain on me as well as my teachers...”

attached. Teachers also seek additional resource services, such as counseling and speech that allow students to get tested in a timely manner. A teacher further described this need by stating the following:

Traditionally our TK program does not prioritize Early Intervention involving Spec Ed. The program typically doesn’t allow for the SST [Student Support Team] of students. We can do speech referrals but they usually are not the top priority. It takes a lot to get support for students with needs. For example, one year it took 6 months to get a nonverbal autistic student into the appropriate placement in Spec Ed.

The teacher believes the TK program is not treated seriously as Early Intervention is a central principle of ECE.

Administrators identify instructional support and instructional aides for their teachers as a major affordance to high-quality early education and instruction. Interestingly, administrators believe that teachers benefit from instructional coaches or interventionists, while teacher participants point to a need for full-time assistants in their classrooms. In addition, an administrator expressed, “School psychologist time allocation to the site is grossly low. Paraprofessional positions go unfilled”. They are identifying the need; however, staffing is an issue. Administrators, like teachers, recognize the value of support services and opportunities for collaboration tailored specifically to singleton TK teachers. They also highlight the importance of PD training that is targeted for TK with insight into the curriculum. An administrator noted, “Targeted PD would enhance my abilities by having a presenter model effective instruction and what I as an administrator should be on the lookout for during classroom observations”. This demonstrates that the expectations of the TK and kindergarten classrooms are not understood. Another affordance is the quality curriculum for the teachers, however, participants did not elaborate further on the specifics. Time is also an affordance in this area, among both administrators and teachers, as they seek to implement new strategies to support their young learners.

As shown in Table 4, teachers and administrators responded to the constraints that they are experiencing in order to provide high-quality ECE. These are the specific factors and barriers that interfere with effective instruction within their TK and kindergarten classrooms. The barrier that both participant groups expressed was that of class sizes, which included the

Table 4
Factors and Barriers that Interfere with Effective Instruction in TK/K Classrooms

Teachers	Example	Administrators	Example
Class Size (n=5)		Class Size (n=4)	
Too many students		Need more space in classrooms	“Better space for our TK/K students to play and a learn.”

Lack of classroom space	“Lack of space and set up in various classrooms can be a real issue.”	Too many students per classroom	
Time (n=5) Not enough planning time Restrictive scheduling	“Never given any time for significant planning.”	Time (n=4) Half day schedules Requirements for instructional minutes	“The number of TK and K instructional minutes make it difficult to get all the necessary instructions finished before students school day ends.” "Lack of funding.”
Budget (n=4) Lack of funding for TK	“Need more funding for TK”	Budget (n=2) Lack of funding for TK	
Staffing (n=2) Need for teacher aides Need for adult support/supervision	“Our students are young... (bathroom accidents, nurse visits, tying shoes)...we would benefit by having an aide all day in our classroom.”	Staffing (n=1) Singleton TK teachers	“Only one T/K teacher at site.”
Other (n=5) Need for curricular support	“Not enough support on curriculum”	Other (n=1) Teacher unions	“School unions.”
Expectations (n= 8) Parent/community expectations Lack of clarity on outcomes	“Lack of education in the community about what TK is and a hyper focus on academics over other areas of need.”		

number of students as well as the lack of space in the classroom. Time was closely followed, with a clearly expressed need for additional lesson planning time to provide better instruction. One teacher noted, “Lack of time takes away from the opportunity to teach social-emotional learning”. While an administrator also stated, “While SEL is critical, there is always the struggle to balance the time spent on SEL and on academics”. There is a focus on academic expectations. The administrators also stated that the length of the school day should be longer than the current half-day schedule in order to provide quality instruction.

Each group of participants pointed to a lack of funding for the TK grade level to allow the core principles to occur in the classrooms. Staffing of additional teacher aides and TK teachers at one school site is also a barrier to collaborating with others. The teachers expressed that another significant barrier is unclear expectations and misunderstandings of TK as a grade level. They believe that parent and community expectations are hyper-focused on preparing students academically. There are misunderstandings among principals demanding academic-based learning in TK and kindergarten classrooms. The teachers feel

that these miscommunications function as a barrier to implementing more DAPs in early learning. A teacher described this feeling further by stating, “The want to have DAP is always in conflict with the administration who push strict academics.”

Finally, COVID-19 was also identified as a constraint by both participant groups, with restrictions and policies interfering with their ability to appropriately implement the four core ECE principles in their instruction.

In Chapter 5, an overall summary of these findings is presented, followed by a discussion of the results with interpretations guided by the research questions. The chapter concludes with considerations for future research along with the conclusions and recommendations for the field.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

TK teachers and administrators in public school systems were surveyed about their understanding of ECE and its value to their instruction. DAP and Play-Based Instruction, SEL, DLL, and Early Intervention were identified as four principal domains of ECE with clear implications for instruction in early elementary school grade levels. Study findings indicate that teachers and administrators working with TK and kindergarten classrooms have differing levels of knowledge and understanding across these key domains, which points to suggestions for PD opportunities.

Teacher Perspectives on Early Learning and Instruction (RQ1A)

This study used a comprehensive survey using the system software, Qualtrics, to measure the perceptions of teachers and administrators and their knowledge and confidence with core ECE principles. Responses indicate that, in general, TK and kindergarten teachers consider themselves to be knowledgeable and confident with these domains; and they find the domains applicable to their instruction. Despite the fact that several participants had earned Cross-Cultural Language and Academic Development credentials ratings of knowledge and confidence in supporting DLL were consistently lower. It is interesting to note that most DLL students are often not enrolled in high-quality ECE programs, even though they constitute a third of the US student population (Park et al., 2017). It is the educators' responsibility to develop the foundational skills of the domains in order to provide young children with a high-quality education.

Most teachers find all four principles to be relevant to their instruction, but point to SEL as the most relevant to their classroom instruction, and teachers have the most confidence in

implementing this type of learning for their students. This is promising considering that positive adulthood outcomes have been connected to early SEL (Domitrovich et al., 2017). Teachers report that they are most knowledgeable about DAP and Play-Based Learning. Play-based learning is viewed as a DAP, but it is contingent on teachers catering their services to children's interests and needs (Stipek & Johnson, 2021). Teachers ranked lowest overall when it came to knowledge, confidence, and relevance of their current classroom instructional practices for Dual Language Learning and Early Intervention.

Influence of Teacher Background and Experience (RQ1B)

An analysis was conducted to determine whether and how ratings of knowledge, confidence, and relevance are correlated with teachers' educational background and experience. Findings suggest that educational background (i.e., the highest degree earned) among TK and kindergarten teachers does not significantly impact on their ratings of knowledge, confidence, or relevance. Higher education does not necessarily imply that teachers are more knowledgeable or confident with implementing core principles of early education in their classrooms. As an interesting note, TK has been described as a high-quality ECE program because the teachers must earn at least a Bachelor's degree, such that the TK program is often presented as more competent to teach young learners. However, in order to specialize in ECE, teachers must obtain 24 more credits in ECE in addition to the BA degree. In fact, teacher participants who had earned ECE units and/or the Child Development Permit did appear to impact their knowledge and confidence with DAPs. Furthermore, the more years of experience a teacher has, the better prepared and confident they are to assist students

with Early Intervention, thereby suggesting that, in this case, experience is more impactful than the teachers' education or degree.

Administrator Perspectives on Early Learning and Instruction (RQ2A)

Generally speaking, findings show that administrators are relatively confident that they are able to support their teachers' instruction in terms of these four core principles. They report that SEL is most pertinent in their TK and K classrooms. Their knowledge regarding DAPs was the least well-attested, suggesting that they could use additional support facilitating developmentally appropriate instruction, and establishing appropriate early learning environments, for their youngest learners. That being said, administrative leaders report that all four domains are relevant to TK and kindergarten instruction, DAP and SEL in particular. Early intervention is also ranked fairly high in terms of relevance, indicating a need for Early Intervention supports tailored to the TK and K grade levels. Similar to teachers, administrators found DLL to be the least relevant to their teachers' instruction, and administrators report lower levels of confidence in their ability to support DLL students. Their understanding and confidence regarding SEL is relatively high, suggesting these administrative leaders are well prepared to provide adequate support in this area. Administrators are also fairly confident with principles of Early Intervention, with responses indicating that they believe they are capable of providing assistance to teachers for students with potential developmental delays.

Alignment among Teacher and Administrator Perspectives (RQ2B)

Administrators and teachers responded to the survey with varying perspectives. While higher educational levels do not necessarily translate into better ability to support young

students in TK and kindergarten classrooms, teachers reported higher knowledge and confidence with these core early learning principles as they gained additional experience. Confidence levels among administrators, however, seems to be inversely related to their experience in their current position, especially with regards to their ability to support students with developmental delays. This may be because the principal might be more detached from the students and classroom environment. It is ironic that teachers typically send students to the principal's office when they need behavioral intervention, given that it appears principals are less confident in Early Intervention. Findings also indicate that teachers are more knowledgeable and confident with DAP as compared to administrators.

Qualitative responses demonstrate the similarities and differences in what teachers and administrators identify as key affordances to quality early learning and instruction. Classroom aides or instructional support are requested by teachers and administrators. Administrators stress the importance of instructional coaches, while teachers explain that they need more classroom assistants. Despite their differing views, all participants agree that classrooms should be larger with appropriate student-to-teacher ratios. A lack of understanding of the TK curriculum by the administration was a major concern for teachers when it came to student learning expectations. Teachers discussed the misunderstandings they had with their administrators. A teacher remarked, “Administrators [are] not familiar with DAP and the value of play-based learning” and another mentions that their administration focuses only “on language arts and math.” At the same time, administrators requested more information about TK and K curriculum sharing, for example, “We would benefit from targeted professional development aimed at supporting TK and K faculty.” This

shows that administrators are not as knowledgeable or confident as their teaching staff about what is required to ensure students' success in early learning classrooms.

Affordances and Constraints (RQ3)

TK and kindergarten teachers identified several affordances that can facilitate the implementation of these core principles. An affordance noted by many of the teacher participants was a developmentally appropriate curriculum with manipulatives and other play-based materials, noting that students require play-based materials to support their learning. In addition to high quality curriculum, teachers and administrators identified the need for teacher assistants, as well as additional support services, such as counseling and speech therapy, with professionals who are well prepared in ECE. A major issue that teachers expressed was a desire for constant and additional assistance in the classroom. Teachers also request PD training that is meaningful and ongoing. They indicate that they seek more developmental-appropriate training that also emphasizes SEL.

Administrators emphasized the importance of having instructional aides along with intervention support. Clearly, TK and kindergarten instruction would be enriched by the assistance of an instructional coach with experience in ECE. The principals shared that they are seeking PD so that they could gain an understanding of the curriculum for TK. Additionally, they request that training be well versed in the developmentally appropriate activities for young students. Survey participants are also interested in knowing what they should expect in TK and K classrooms, as well as what they should be looking for during observations. In addition, they assert that time is a significant factor in the implementation of

new strategies as they emerge from PD. Administrators need additional teachers to support the needs of TK students at their schools and a larger budget to serve the needs of teachers.

Implications and Recommendations

Given that administrators and teachers report varying degrees of comfort and experience with these elements of ECE, there should be a variety of PD opportunities designed exclusively for teachers and administrators that are tailored to different levels of knowledge and experience. Teacher-specific PD can be provided, noting that teachers have specific needs to support the learning and development of their young learners. In addition, teachers can also understand the differences of the TK and kindergarten curriculums. In order to support administrators, based on the study's results, it is imperative that they become familiar with the expectations of the curriculum and the differences between a TK classroom and a kindergarten classroom.

Educators will be supported if training is aligned with the conceptual frameworks of the four core principles of ECE. Williams (2020) highlights the importance of effective, well-trained, and compensated educators. Developing DAPs is a strategy designed by the NAEYC to empower young children by promoting high levels of play and engagement in learning to ensure their optimal development and learning (NAEYC, n.d.-a). The CASEL (2022) framework can help educators foundationally support students as they acquire and apply knowledge, attitudes, and skills required to deal with emotions to set and achieve positive goals. However, SEL must be implemented through a transformative lens to appropriately accommodate educational equity and learning for all students (Jagers et al., 2019). The proposed trainings can also provide support for Early Intervention by aligning it with the

Initial Practice-Based Professional Standards for early intervention/early childhood special educators (DEC, 2022b). In early childhood classrooms, DLL can be supported by the Early Language Development Standards theoretical framework, which describes developmentally appropriate academic, instructional, and social language.

It is imperative to note that professional skills development is a positive step, but it may not be the only part of the solution for ensuring high-quality ECE. Teachers can receive ongoing classroom support in real-time to facilitate the transformation of their lessons to provide a high-quality early learning experience. An instructional coach who is knowledgeable in ECE can support students and teachers, as well as provide administrators with an accurate picture of expectations. Early learning improvements and the implementation of new strategies are not possible to achieve in a single instance, but over an extended period of time with sufficient resources and support.

The expansion of TK results in an urgent need to prepare teachers and administrators. The CA legislature and Governor pledged in the 2014–15 Budget Act to provide all low-income children with ECE and childcare services for at least one year. This is known as the California Preschool Promise (A.B. 22, 2021). As part of California's Master Plan for Early Learning and Care, the government recommends providing universal access to early learning for children ages four and under, low-income three-year-old children, and children with disabilities (Alcalá et al., 2020). Teachers and administrators need to be prepared to provide high-quality ECE for these incoming younger children.

Education has affordances and constraints that need to be addressed in order to provide ample support for our youngest students. Based on the results of the survey, educators can

benefit from a PD program that illustrates DAPs of early learning and instruction. The training could take the form of a series of workshops with time devoted to supporting the implementation of new strategies and practices within the classroom. Administrators can become more familiar with the expectations of their teachers and students. Moreover, as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic and the significant restrictions placed on students and teachers in educational settings, there was concern expressed by the participants regarding standards and policies that weren't responsive to the unprecedented circumstances. Due to the stressful circumstances, a number of teachers and administrators experienced burnout in the education field.

Considerations for Future Research

A number of considerations should be taken into account in future research. First, it should be noted that the sample for this study comprises educators and administrators primarily working in the Bay Area region of CA. Future studies should consider additional mechanisms to reach a diverse audience so as to ensure that the findings are generalizable across the TK and Kindergarten workforce in CA. The number of participants in the survey who were teachers comprised a large sample size of 80 people. However, the number of respondents who were administrators was much smaller with a total of 15. The participation of a greater number of administrators would help to better understand their unique perspectives. The scope of this study is limited to the expansion of universal access to traditional knowledge in only one state, California. As far as ensuring equitable and universal access to high-quality ECE is concerned, there is still much to discover across the country.

Finally, it should be noted that this survey collected self-reports of participants' knowledge and confidence levels, rather than utilizing direct measures of the teachers' instruction or practice. Research in future studies will be able to measure the quality of education by observing teacher practice and instruction in TK classrooms while aligning with ECE frameworks. The California Preschool Learning Foundations Framework can be used to ensure DAPs in ECE classrooms. PD can also be informed by interviews with early childhood teachers to draw on their expert knowledge in these areas. A teacher who has experience in the early stages of learning will be able to bridge the gap between the expectations of preschool students and those of younger students in TK.

Conclusions

With the creation of a new grade level in California's public-school system, it is important to consider how young 4-year-olds will be supported through play-based, developmentally appropriate learning. At present, TK is offered in a number of public schools throughout California and enrollment is expected to increase at a rapid rate over the next few years such that all 4-year-olds in the state will be eligible to participate. TK is designed to provide students with a high-quality early learning experience with a highly qualified teacher who specializes in ECE. In light of the increased expansion rate, pre-service teachers, current TK and kindergarten teachers, as well as administrators will need to be able to support students. To meet the child's holistic needs, TK will need to embrace DAPs, SEL, dual language support, and early intervention. In order to learn and apply these principles to students appropriately, educators and administrators are seeking additional support. Findings from this line of work can help increase stakeholder awareness of the importance of TK as a

mechanism for universal access to developmentally appropriate, high-quality early learning and instruction in California.

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Appendix: Surveys

Question 1. What is your current position?

TK Teacher
Kindergarten Teacher
Administrator
Other...

Question 2. How many years of experience do you have in this position?

1-3 years
4-6 years
7 or more years

Question 3. How many years have you been teaching overall?

1-3 years
4-6 years
7 or more years

Developmentally-Appropriate Practice and Play-Based Instruction

For the purposes of this study, “Developmentally-Appropriate Practice” is defined as methods that promote each child’s optimal development and learning through a strengths-based, play-based approach to joyful, engaged learning. Educators implement developmentally appropriate practice by recognizing the multiple assets all young children bring to the early learning program as unique individuals and as members of families and communities (NAEYC). Play-based instruction is a form of developmentally appropriate practice that is child-led involving open-ended play.

How *valuable/relevant* is this [practice] in your TK/K classrooms/instruction?

How *comfortable and/or confident* are you in your ability to provide developmentally appropriate practice and play-based learning?

Social and Emotional Learning

For the purposes of this study, “Social and Emotional Learning” is defined as is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, CASEL, 2022)

How *valuable/relevant* is this [practice] in your TK/K classrooms/instruction?

How *comfortable and/or confident* are you in your ability to provide social and emotional learning for students?

Dual Language Learners

For the purposes of this study, “Dual Language Learners” are defined as any young child who is learning two or more languages.

How *valuable/relevant* are these learners in your TK/K classrooms/instruction?

How *comfortable and/or confident* are you in your ability to provide an equitable learning environment for dual language learners?

Early Intervention

For the purposes of this study, “Early Intervention” is defined as Early intervention is a federally supported program for families who have a child under 36 months of age with a developmental delay or disability.

How *valuable/relevant* is this practice in your TK/K classrooms/instruction?

How *comfortable and/or confident* are you in your ability to provide support for students that need interventions?

Have you been provided training to support ECE classrooms, if so, what support have you received?

What resources or supports would you need to provide an effective learning environment in your TK/K classrooms?

What currently are the barriers against creating an effective learning environment as an educator?

Do you think that a future PD workshop on ECE can benefit you and your teachers? Why or why not?

Is there anything else you would like to share?
