

LET THEM BE LITTLE: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL
STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS
DURING AN ERA OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM

by

Rachel Denise Whites

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of kindergarten teachers who taught through an era of federally mandated, standards-based educational reforms. This study was guided by two theories as each contributes to an explanation as to how educational reform has strayed far from the central purpose for kindergartens. Piaget's theory of cognitive development sought to explain how a child constructs a mental model of the world and postulated that there are four distinct stages of human development from birth to adulthood. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory stated that children learn through play and the social interactions that occur when they play. Kindergarten teachers in the southeastern United States were selected as participants to gather their lived experiences with the phenomenon of teaching kindergarten during a shift from a social-emotional and play-based model to a standards-based, academically focused model. Data were collected via individual interviews, focus groups, and letter writing by participants and analyzed using the methods described by Moustakas. Five major themes were revealed: pre-shift environment and pedagogy, post-shift environment and pedagogy, academic standards, accountability, and collateral damage. These themes, in alignment with the research questions, described the experiences of kindergarten teachers during an era of sweeping educational reform. Overall, the most substantial finding from this study was that the collateral damage, or unintended negative consequences, occurred because of educational reform. These negative consequences affected educators, students, and almost every aspect of the classroom, which is contrary to the perceived intent of the legislation.

Keywords: kindergarten, educational reform, play, readiness, retention, executive function

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Dedication

For all the kindergarteners out there—play your heart out and love life! To the adults in their life—let them be little.

“If you want to be creative, stay in part a child, with the creativity and invention that characterizes children before they are deformed by adult society.”

~Jean Piaget

“A child’s greatest achievements are possible in play . . .”

~Lev Vygotsky

I would also like to dedicate this to my own children and all the students that have come through my classroom. Never forget I am your biggest advocate, and I love you very much.

Acknowledgments

The first acknowledgement I would like to make is to all the educators who participated and helped make the completion of this dissertation possible. I also have an incredible work family who has always supported me no matter what the situation was. I am so grateful to all of them.

I must acknowledge my son, Jackson, who had a very negative kindergarten experience, which affected his overall attitude towards school. His experience inspired me to conduct this research topic in the hopes that I could make certain no other child would have to endure what he did.

I could not have an acknowledgement page without mention of my dissertation chair, Dr. Gail Collins. Two of my 6 years pursuing a doctoral degree at Liberty have exclusively been working with her. Her standards and expectations are high. It was a rocky start, and I didn't even think I would ever make it to this point. She allowed me to make the decision to not quit as I cried during a WebEx meeting, and she has been there during the entire process to answer my questions and keep me on track to finish. I never had to wait for a response from her. I really appreciate how she been there with kind words and prayers as I pushed through with so much adversity in my professional and personal life working against me.

I must acknowledge my daughter, Ava, who was 3 years old when I began this journey. I observed as she progressed through PreK and kindergarten at the school where I teach, and I made certain she had as good an experience as possible. Ava could always sense when I was stressed or overwhelmed and would crawl into my lap, hug me tightly, and call me her "beautiful best friend mommy." Her love and affection helped me through some difficult times. Thank you so much, Ava, you'll always be my "Sweet Sweet."

My experience as a student also contributed to the motivation for the research topic. My kindergarten experience was nothing short of perfect. My teacher, Mrs. Norma Moore, was the kindest person I had ever met, and I wanted to be just like her. My experience took a turn after kindergarten with one unpleasant teacher after another and only one or two good ones until I reached high school. Once I got into high school though, there was another string of teachers convincing me that I wasn't smart enough and would never attend a university, so I didn't – at first. When I married a Marine and moved away, I tried my hand with a few courses at Hawai'i Pacific University at the age of 21, a time when my classmates were graduating college. I did very well, earned a B.S. in Business Administration with majors in both Management and Marketing, and graduated Cum Laude in only 2½ years. I moved to California, and after stints in both advertising and financial services, I decided to pursue that career that I dreamed of as a 5-year-old. I enrolled at the University of La Verne and earned my teaching credential. I continued my education with ULV and earned a Master of Education, graduating Magna Cum Laude. I then moved back to Tennessee, and after 12 years, I decided it was time to pursue a doctorate. Six years later, I have finally finished this educational goal. I am currently in my 22nd year of teaching. I said all that to say this – I acknowledge myself. I came from what would be considered a working-class or lower middle-class family with no connections. Everything I have done, as it pertains to my career and education, has been completely my doing, and I have never had any help or a leg up from anyone. My successful career as an educator was all due to my hard work. A doctorate is a terminal degree, and I have reached the apex of education. I acknowledge that I did this all on my own, and for that, I am proud.

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List of Abbreviations

Central Research Question (CRQ)

Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Fine Motor Skills (FMS)

Level of Effectiveness (LOE)

More Knowledgeable Other (MKO)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Race to the Top (RTTT)

Stanford Achievement Test, Version 10 (SAT-10)

Sub-Question (SQ)

Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of kindergarten teachers who taught through an era of federally mandated, standards-based educational reforms. This chapter examines the historical, social, and theoretical background of kindergarten since its inception in the early 19th century. The problem, purpose, significance of the research, and the research questions are presented along with the connection between me and the topics that were investigated. This chapter ends with a list of terms applicable to this study and a summary of the chapter.

Background

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) and its more notable predecessor, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), have caused an “academic shakedown” that has pushed academic content standards usually reserved for older grade levels down to both kindergarten and preschool. This shoving down of standards is so pronounced that what is now expected of 5 year olds is contrary to the purpose of kindergarten itself (Hatch, 2002). This shift has changed how kindergarten teachers teach, what the definition of kindergarten readiness means to teachers, and the entire dynamic of the kindergarten classroom (Repko-Erwin, 2017). These changes have turned kindergarten on its head and changed its intended purpose into a setting that is not conducive to creating lifelong learners of our youngest students. Kindertartens may not be developmentally ready for sophisticated content usually taught in a higher grade level, and an emphasis on academics may come at the detriment of children’s social–emotional growth. Kindergarten teachers are now concerned about an increased concentration on instruction that would emphasize academic content, displace play, and adversely affect children’s self-control,

interpersonal skills, and attention span (Le et al., 2019).

Historical Context

Kindergarten was created with a specific mission in mind of readying the youngest of students for an academic-based classroom through play and inquiry. That mission has been restructured so much by bureaucracy that it scarcely looks like kindergarten anymore.

Kindergarten is not a grade level. Instead, it is a very special place in the school for students to become ready for school (Catsambis & Buttarro, 2012). To understand the fundamental nature and principles of kindergarten, it is important to know its history, intended purpose, and how this German institution made it across the Atlantic Ocean in the 19th century to enter the realm of U.S. public schools and become the mainstay it is today.

Educational philosopher Friedrich Fröbel (1782–1852) dedicated his life to the education of the youngest children (Allen, 2017). Wheelock (2017) explained, “Froebel gave his life, his time, his comfort, his few worldly goods to the service of an Idea . . . so compelling that it enlisted the enthusiasm and devotion . . . of others who came to see and to believe” (p. 189) what early education should look like. He claimed that education involved the unfurling of the child’s capabilities. These capabilities were universally and completely human but also “realized and expressed in a wholly particular, peculiar, unique manner” (Fröbel & Hailmann, 1896, p. 18) by every single child.

Fröbel knew that if his theories were to be supported, he would have to earn support with both American and German elitists. The educational setting could not be a nursery school for impoverished children or a school that taught academic subjects. He was able fill that gap and strike a balance between the two and opened his first institutional setting in 1837 in Blankenburg, Germany, to carry out his educational experiment. He gave this institution the

name “kindergarten,” which in German means “garden of children” because he symbolically connected children and flowers, suggesting that both needed only a favorable setting to cultivate their inborn, God-given potential (Allen, 2017, pp. 26–27). He believed nature and humans are connected to one another at a spiritual level (Frost & Sutterby, 2017). The children who attended could be of either sex, any socioeconomic background, and up to school age because kindergarten was not meant to be academic. The kindergarten was meant to be a bridge between being a toddler and beginning formal academic schooling.

When the kindergarten movement made it to the United States, it brought with it Fröbel’s emphasis on the significance of nature (Frost & Sutterby, 2017). Women who were trained as kindergarten teachers by Fröbel were known as *kindergarteners*. Many of Fröbel’s kindergarteners opened their own private kindergarten schools in different parts of the country. The very first public school kindergarten was opened in a Saint Louis, Missouri, public school in 1873 (Allen, 2017, pp. 49–56). Passe (2010) wrote that “the goal was not so much teach reading and writing but to develop overall cognitive and social–emotional skills—the beginning of considering the whole child” (p. 43).

As time progressed, child psychologists such as John Dewey, Herbert Spencer, and G. Stanley Hall of the late 19th century and early 20th century added to the ideals of Fröbel, suggesting that children require spontaneous free play and opportunities for physical growth, but to steer clear of the rote learning that made school boring and lacked meaning for students (Frost & Sutterby, 2017). Students rejected education and its pedagogy of cramming them with textbooks. The one common theme between all the new kindergarten pedagogies on both continents was that they were against this type of classroom and the damage it could do to the youngest of learners. Through the decades since then, Fröbel’s kindergarten has remained mostly

intact, serving as a bridge between home or nursery school and academic learning with developmentally appropriate practices, investigation, play, and gentle discipline (Allen, 2017).

Gracey (1975) authored a now classic article about the significance of kindergarten. He explained that kindergarten is a year of preparation *for* school and a place that promotes children's desire to learn and the attainment of skills necessary for later in life, including their capability to get along with their peers. Gracey used the term "academic boot camp" to describe what kindergarten is, writing that it is akin to military boot camp in which recruits go through a basic training and socialization. The educational and social functions of kindergarten are to provide a setting for students to learn their role in the school. Kindergarteners should develop obedience towards adults in the school and interpersonal skills with their peers and adults and experience an academic orientation that will get them ready for formal instruction in first grade. Kindergarten is supposed to excite students in the prospect of learning so that they can begin their educational career in first grade motivated and interested in learning. In addition, a day in kindergarten should be similar in structure to the rest of their schooling with the exclusion that academic subjects should be replaced with kindergarten activities (Catsambis & Buttaro, 2012).

At the turn of the 21st century, immense changes to education arrived in American public schools with the 2001 passage of NCLB that were contrary to the fundamental model of kindergarten. Never had students in kindergarten been prescribed rigorous content standards to master or been administered criterion-referenced, end-of-year examinations until this time (Dombkowski, 2001; Gullo & Hughes, 2011; Russell, 2011). Tennessee uses the Stanford Achievement Test, 10th edition, also known as the SAT-10. Teachers transitioned to teaching to a test and teaching students how to take the test (Saeki et al., 2018). In recent years, many school systems have transitioned to a portfolio measurement in which kindergarten teachers make

videos of students throughout the year to show their progress. The video compilations, or portfolios, are very stressful for the teachers to assemble. Portfolios are uploaded to the state's system of teacher accountability, TN Compass, where they are used to determine a teacher's level of effectiveness (LOE). Tennessee is the setting for this study. Each school system in Tennessee chooses which cumulative assessment they wish to use. In Grades 3–12, they use the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) & end-of-course exams (EOCs) that have been produced by Pearson. The school system in which the participants in this study worked administered the SAT-10 for K–2 during the entire shift until recently when they switched to a portfolio measurement for K–1 (M. Merritt, personal communication, December 13, 2021).

Social Context

The changed kindergarten has had long-reaching social impacts that affect individuals throughout their lifetime. One problem that has emerged is that students are denied the opportunity to learn social and behavioral norms that were typically learned in kindergarten (Goble et al., 2016). Students are now expected to come to school ready with these skills. Without these skills, they have a difficult time adapting to the academic setting the kindergarten classroom has become.

Briggs et al. (2018) suggested that if teachers do not “buy-in” to the changes, go along with them to the best of their ability, and/or put their personal feelings aside, they cannot possibly expect to be successful teaching more rigorous content to younger students. Critics of an academically focused kindergarten contradict this, arguing that students of this age are not developmentally ready to take on rigorous content standards that have been pushed down from higher grades (Bassok et al., 2016). Repko-Erwin (2017) wrote that the educational reform is

“pushing young children too hard and too fast” (p. 69) and that consequences of educational reform, whether good or bad, always lands on the shoulders of the students in the end. This is critical to understanding what, if any, damage has been done since educational reforms began in 2002.

If children have not developed social and behavioral skills, they are typically retained because they lack the skills necessary to pay attention to extended instruction in mathematics and literacy. Being retained in kindergarten has a snowball effect (Hughes et al., 2018; Hustedt et al., 2018). Retention has been proven to increase the likelihood that a student will drop out of school by 50%. Despite students showing some increases in academic learning in first and second grade, those gains either recede or disappear, and some students may lag behind their non-retained peers by third and fourth grade (Hughes et al., 2018). Despite the research proving that retention is harmful in the long run, many states still allow students to be retained in grade if they do not master the academic content prescribed at each level (Hughes et al., 2018; Hustedt et al., 2018).

Social and emotional competency matters a great deal in school and in life. Basic skills in areas of social and emotional competency have widespread and long-lasting outcomes, such as academic success, avoiding criminal behaviors, and social and psychological regulation throughout life (Tomlinson, 2009). An additional social issue associated with kindergarten is the prevalence of middle-class families to “redshirt” their children and not allow them to attend state-mandated kindergarten until the state-mandated age of 6. Tennessee, until very recently, mandated that students must be 5 years of age by September 30 to enroll in kindergarten but have rolled back that mandate to state that students must now turn 5 years of age by August 15. Parents who do redshirt feel as though they are saving their children from academic shakedown by keeping them out of public school, but evidence of this cannot be found (Bassok & Reardon,

2013; Dougan & Pijanowski, 2011; Huang, 2015; Raffaele Mendez et al., 2015; Schanzenbach & Larson, 2017). Jaekel et al. (2015) studied approximately 1,000 kindergarten students in a population-based longitudinal study and found no significant difference in the odds that a student of age-appropriate school entry versus a student of delayed school entry would perform above average in areas of attention: math, reading, and writing.

The poverty level in this rural area of Tennessee is high. Approximately 83% of all students qualify for free or reduced lunch. This means that almost 83% of all students live in families whose income is 150% of the federal poverty level or below. It is critical for them to have the traditional kindergarten experience because, often, these students have been raised in an environment where they require a year of adjustment to learn social and emotional skills with peers to be ready to take on the academic challenges presented in first grade.

Teachers continue in this profession because they truly love it. They are resistant to buy-in to what the government is mandating because it is contrary to what they know to be best practices with kindergarten students (Briggs et al., 2018). Decisions are made at the system level as to what and how the teachers will teach. Their autonomy has been taken away, which also interferes with the quality of education the students receive. The expectations placed on kindergarten teachers has changed and has noticeably increased their stress levels. Kindergarten teachers know best practices for their students, and they feel hopeless about changing the current state of kindergarten and the direction they see it taking in the future (Brown et al., 2020).

Theoretical Context

The theories used to support this study are Vygotsky's (1930/1978) sociocultural theory and Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969). Vygotsky viewed human development as a socially facilitated process in which children acquire their own

cultural values, beliefs, and problem-solving approaches through cooperative dialogues with more knowledgeable members of society. Piaget was the first psychologist to develop a systematic analysis of cognitive development in children and suggested that children move through four distinct stages of cognitive development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969). His theory focused not only on understanding how children acquire knowledge but also on understanding what the main features of intelligence are. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is important in this study because he said that children's social context shapes their developing minds (Wertsch, 2007). When considering the direction of today's kindergarten, it is evident that children have had the crucial social aspect of kindergarten traded for one that is mostly academic. In addition, Piaget's theory of cognitive development needs to be considered because he observed that children in the preoperational stage have certain cognitive limitations that make logical thought difficult for them. Despite advances in their imagination and language, logical thought is not yet possible, and kindergarten children require a classroom suited to the preoperational stage instead of academic content for which they are not developmentally ready (Mandler & DeLoache, 2012). In conjunction, these two theories support and justify their use in this study.

Problem Statement

The problem is that academic shoveldown has altered the fundamental nature and purpose of the kindergarten. Over the past 20 years, public school kindergartens in the United States have changed considerably due to educational reform at the federal level (Bassok et al., 2016; Hatch, 2002; Le et al., 2019; Lynch, 2015; Repko-Erwin, 2017). There has been extensive research covering the changes that have occurred in kindergarten classrooms since the 1980s, and more specifically, the 21st century. These changes have removed a developmentally appropriate approach from kindergarten classrooms and replaced it with academic content standards that

have caused more harm than good (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Colgan, 2016; Dombkowski, 2001; Graue, 2009; Gullo & Hughes, 2011; Le et al., 2019; Lynch, 2015; Marcon, 2002; Miller & Almon, 2009; Pondiscio, 2015; Russell, 2011; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997). The case for kindergarten becoming the new first grade has been used as the topic of numerous research studies which conclude with the sentiment that modern-day kindergarten is detrimental to young children (Bassok et al., 2016; Repko-Erwin, 2017). The focus for most of the studies available concerns play, recess, and developmentally appropriate learning being the first casualty of standards-based curriculum in kindergarten, and some consideration has been given within studies to how this shift has affected teachers and teacher attrition (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Brown et al., 2020; Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Gallant, 2009; Goldstein, 2007; Holman, 2016; Marcon, 2002; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997; Smith & Kovacs, 2011; Smyth, 2008). However, the focus of these studies tends to lean towards high school teachers, and there is not much research on how kindergarten has changed from the perspective of the kindergarten teachers and how those changes have impacted the very nature of kindergarten.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of kindergarten teachers who have taught through an era of federally mandated, standards-based educational reforms. The phenomenon is the shift in focus that the kindergarten classroom has experienced over the past 20 years. The theories that guided this study are Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969) and Vygotsky's (1930/1978) sociocultural theory, also known as social constructivism. Piaget sought to explain how a child builds a mental model of the world and suggested that there are four

distinct stages of human development from birth to adulthood. Vygotsky explained that young children learn through play and social interaction. The lived experiences explored during this study provide insight into how teachers have had to shift away from these proven theories to a more academically rigorous pedagogy of direct instruction.

Significance of the Study

Researchers agree that academic content standards and accountability demands are pushing formal instruction, usually reserved for older students, onto the youngest of learners, which has been harmful for kindergarten students (Almon & Miller, 2011; Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Bassok et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Hatch, 2002; Le et al., 2019; Navarro-Cruz & Luschei, 2018; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Repko-Erwin, 2017; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Smyth, 2008). These youngest of learners are not getting the play they need, the rest they need, and the social and emotion development they need during their crucial first year (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Kindergarten has traditionally been a transition between home or day care and beginning school (Graue, 2009), but now students are expected to be “ready” to begin kindergarten with a certain skill set to meet academic content standards (Passe, 2010).

Empirical Significance

When young children are expected to conform to and master a one-size-fits-all set of content standards, this can set them up for failure because children develop different skill sets at different times from each other (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2016; Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Le et al., 2019; Marcon, 2002; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997). Teachers feel pressured to retain them if they do not meet these standards, which lends itself to a host of other problems associated with retention (Lambert et al., 2019; Saeki et al., 2018). Retention itself has been proven repeatedly to be a negative intervention in the long-term. Retention is associated with a 50% increase in school

dropouts, the incidence of lower academic achievement, overrepresentation in special education, and criminal justice system involvement (Hughes et al., 2018).

Students who are economically disadvantaged coming into kindergarten are already considered “at-risk” because they have not had the advantage that middle-class students had with preschool or day care. These students come to school without the background required to succeed with the academic standards in place that they must learn. They come to school not being able to count, know colors and letters, or how to write their names. They are hungry, not getting enough sleep, and not getting proper medical care. The current content standards for kindergarten punish the economically disadvantaged (Bettencourt et al., 2018; Hustedt et al., 2018; Passe, 2010; Schanzenbach & Larson, 2017).

Theoretical Significance

When students’ first school experiences are damaged, it is very difficult to develop children into lifelong learners who enjoy school. It is the earliest experiences that shape a child for the rest of her life (Whitney & Candelaria, 2017). Therefore, it is crucial to makeover kindergarten and push the academic content standards back up to first and second grade. This study adds to the body of literature related to this topic by extrapolating information from the very people in the trenches—the kindergarten teachers themselves. Rich informative evidence directly from the educators who experience the topic on a daily basis have more insight to offer us than any other method.

This study is important to the location for many reasons. Tennessee mandates that all children at least 6 years of age attend kindergarten. Not all states mandate that children must attend kindergarten. According to data from the Tennessee Department of Education, the high school graduation rates for most rural high schools still lags behind the rates for the rest of the

state's more populated areas. The rural areas have more dropouts and see higher rates of unemployment and poverty.

Practical Significance

Jenco (2016), in her article for the American Academy of Pediatrics, reported that students ages 3 to 5 years should get 10 to 13 hours of sleep each day, including naps. Kindergarten used to be a place where students continued to be able to take a nap in the afternoons; however, with standards pushing their way down, nap time became a target for school systems who were looking to take time away from certain parts of the day to make time for more content area instruction. According to a study by Berger et al. (2018), "Results suggest that sleep duration may be an important bioregulatory factor to consider in young children's early academic achievement" (p. 624). All humans require a particular amount of sleep to consolidate information learned during the day into long-term memory stores. As stated by Riggins and Spencer (2020), kindergarten students also need a minimum amount of sleep for information to be merged into long-term memory. Furthermore, for children ages 4 to 6, the hippocampus of the brain is growing rapidly. In the adult brain, people replay the activities of their day while they sleep, but children this age do not have as much "memory" as adults do and must nap to clear up space. Simply put, nap time will boost learning (Jones & Spencer, 2020). Returning to the original kindergarten model could address this issue. Legislators, administrators, and teachers need to understand the link between sleep and academic achievement in our youngest learners. In addition to pushing content standards back up to a more appropriate grade level, naps should be reintroduced to kindergarten so that students have the opportunity to consolidate the information they have learned during the day (Riggins & Spencer, 2020).

Research Questions

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of kindergarten teachers who have taught through an era of federally mandated, standards-based educational reforms. The theoretical framework used to create the research questions were guided by sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1930/1978) and the theory of cognitive development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969). Kindergarten was created to serve as a bridge between home and the beginning of formal schooling, a means by which young children could ready themselves for the academic demands of first grade. Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1930/1978) emphasizes the vital function of social interaction in the development of cognition. Young children require play and social interaction for optimal brain development. This study aims to discover how teachers have managed to include play and social aspects while adhering to academic content standards.

Central Research Question

The central research question asked the following question:

What are the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers as they have taught during a shift to increased academic content?

Many studies have investigated the detrimental effects of rigorous content imposed on kindergarten students (Almon & Miller, 2011; Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Bassok et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Hatch, 2002; Le et al., 2019; Navarro-Cruz & Luschei, 2018; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Repko-Erwin, 2017; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Smyth, 2008). Families worried about the academic demands of kindergarten will often redshirt their children, which has shown no benefit (Huang, 2015). Children are excited to learn at this age and when rigorous academic

standards are imposed, there is a risk that they may lose their zest for learning and/or acquire a negative attitude towards school.

Sub-Question One

How has the pedagogy of the kindergarten classroom fundamentally changed since the educational reforms beginning in 2002?

Pedagogy consists of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Pedagogy for kindergarten has changed from teaching a set of basic skills that did not require mastery to a set of rigid standards. According to Piaget and Inhelder (1966/1969) children who are in the preoperational stage, which typically encompasses those who are ages 2 to 7, may have limitations to their thinking. These limitations could include the inability to decenter, conserve, understand seriation (the inability to understand that objects can be organized into a logical series or order) and to carry out inclusion tasks. Students develop cognitively according to their own schedule or timetable. Some students are ready for the content standards of kindergarten while some are not. Some of the current content standards and assessments are not in alignment with the preoperational stage as described by Piaget and may not be within the realm of a 5 year old's zone of proximal development, as described by Vygotsky (1930/1978).

Sub-Question Two

What are the perceived advantages or disadvantages of fostering and emphasizing academic skills training at the kindergarten level?

Piaget and Inhelder (1966/1969) said that children who are in the preoperational stage of human development require developmentally appropriate instruction and much time to play, explore, and develop socially with peers. Instead of modeling appropriate behavioral skills, teachers have had to shift to a direct instruction model, which is contrary to the learning needs of

children at this age. Bassok et al. (2016) reported that advanced content in kindergarten does lead to advanced cognition in the short term, but gains were washed out by third grade.

Sub-Question Three

What are the perceived advantages or disadvantages of fostering and emphasizing behavioral and social skills training at the kindergarten level?

The first year in the classroom is critical for students. It is a time of learning how to conduct oneself in a classroom, get along with peers, how to behave in different areas of the school, and how to play nicely and share with others (Christakis, 2017). Current research demonstrated that a dangerous trade-off occurs when students are made to learn academic content without first developing the social skills that will be necessary later in their academic endeavors (Almon & Miller, 2011; Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Bassok et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Hatch, 2002; Le et al., 2019; Navarro-Cruz & Luschei, 2018; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Repko-Erwin, 2017; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Smyth, 2008). Adverse effects of an academically challenging curriculum can manifest as early as third grade when children are expected to make the shift from learning to read to reading to learn. Damaging trade-offs are made in kindergarten between academic achievement and social-emotional skills (Christakis, 2017).

Sub-Question Four

How have educators been able to use developmentally appropriate practices in the kindergarten classroom while adhering to academic content standards?

DiCarlo et al. (2012) reported that seven accommodations must be made with children of this age for direct instruction to a whole group to assist preoperational students with a lesson. The first accommodation involves an engaging learning experience in which the teacher

acknowledges and recognizes the contributions children make to the lesson. The second accommodation involves the use of manipulatives and other materials to support and facilitate mathematics and literacy instruction. The third and fourth accommodations involve addressing multiple objectives and relating whole-group activities to other activities because if the complexity level is appropriate, the students are more engaged in the lesson. The fifth accommodation provides that there be enough space made for all the children to sit together. The sixth accommodation is a little bit more difficult to attain because it requires that there be two teachers present, one to teach and one to redirect students. The seventh and final accommodation requires teachers to model how to use manipulatives and materials. Piaget and Inhelder (1966/1969) stressed the significance of learning from observation. Without developmentally appropriate practice and accommodations that keep preoperational students engaged, it is possible that students who are at the preoperational developmental level will neither enjoy learning nor master the prescribed content.

Definitions

Terms pertinent to this research are defined below:

1. *Academic Redshirting* – Academic redshirting is the practice of holding age-eligible children back for a year prior to their enrollment in kindergarten. Parents choose to use this method as they believe it will give their child an academic advantage when beginning school (Huang, 2015).
2. *Academic Shovedown* – Academic shovedown is the pushing down of academic content standards to lower grades. It is suggested that what is expected of kindergarteners now is what used to be reserved for first grade with some second- and third-grade academic content standards interspersed (Saeki et al., 2018).

3. *Accountability Shovedown* – Accountability shovedown is the pushing down of teacher accountability of older students to kindergarten teachers. Early childhood educators have traditionally been the individuals who have gotten the students ready for the academic work that begins in first grade.
4. *Developmentally Appropriate Practices* – Developmentally appropriate practice is a way of teaching that meets young children where they are—which means that teachers must get to know them well—and enables them to reach goals that are both challenging and achievable (Childcare, 2019). However, even when using developmentally appropriate practices with kindergarten students, the content they are expected to learn is out of the scope of their developmental stage in life.
5. *Executive Function* – Executive function is a set of intellectual skills that include working memory, flexible thinking (or cognitive flexibility), and self-control. Executive functioning affects attention, focus, the regulation of emotions, and the understanding of differing points of view. Although executive function continues to develop slowly through adulthood, it develops very quickly in early childhood (Blair, 2016).
6. *Level of Effectiveness* – All full-time, certified teachers in Tennessee public schools receive a level of effectiveness score at the end of each school year. This overall evaluation score includes both qualitative and quantitative measures of teaching quality. The three components of the evaluation are observations, achievement, and growth. These three components come together to comprise an educator’s overall Level of Effectiveness (LOE) score. Educators receive an LOE score ranging from 1 to 5, with a score of 3 being “at expectations.” A score of 5 is considered “significantly above expectations” (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.).

7. *Schema* – Piaget (1936/1952) defined a schema as a “cohesive, repeatable action sequence possessing component actions that are tightly interconnected and governed by a core meaning” (p. 7). Schemas are categories of knowledge that help individuals to understand the world. A schema describes both the cognitive and physical actions involved in knowing and understanding (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969).
8. *Sociocultural Theory* – Sociocultural theory was introduced by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky to explain that human development and cognition occur through socially mediated events. Vygotsky postulated that young children require social play to develop cognition (Vygotsky, 1930/1978).
9. *Zone of Proximal Development* (or ZPD) – The ZPD is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1930/1978, p. 86).

Summary

This study sought to determine if the shift to standards-based instruction has deterred kindergarten from being that bridge between being at home or in nursery school and the academic schooling that begins in first grade (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2016; Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Catsambis & Buttaro, 2012; Lynch, 2015; Pondiscio, 2015). There are many studies that report the damage that has been done to the earliest of learners caused directly by academic shakedown (Almon & Miller, 2011; Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Bassok et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Hatch, 2002; Le et al., 2019; Navarro-Cruz & Luschei, 2018; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Repko-Erwin, 2017; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Smyth, 2008). While there are many studies demonstrating problems relating to teachers’ change in pedagogy in response to this shift,

the perspective of the kindergarten teachers has not been explored to large extent (Briggs et al., 2018; Gallant, 2009; Hustedt et al., 2018; Smith & Kovacs, 2011). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of kindergarten teachers who have taught through an era of federally mandated, standards-based educational reforms.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Over the past 20 years, public school kindergartens in the United States have changed considerably due to educational reform at the federal level (Bassok et al., 2016; Hatch, 2002; Le et al., 2019; Lynch, 2015; Repko-Erwin, 2017). While the content that kindergarteners are expected to learn has changed, kindergarteners themselves have not. Five-year-old children will always exist in a certain level of human development that has been universally documented in medical and psychological texts. Requiring all kindergarten-aged children to acquire a certain set of skills with which they are not developmentally ready is harmful and can lead to other detrimental consequences, such as retention in kindergarten or later in elementary school (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Colgan, 2016; Dombkowski, 2001; Gullo & Hughes, 2011; Graue, 2009; Marcon, 2002; Le et al., 2019; Lynch, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Pondiscio, 2015; Russell, 2011; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997).

Although educational reform may be mandated by politicians, parents, system-level administrators, and teachers have discovered unique methods with which to cope with changing rules and regulations. Parents take into consideration many factors before enrolling their child in school. Federal compulsory attendance law states that by the time children reach 6 years of age, they must be enrolled in school. Many parents choose to “redshirt,” a practice that involves delaying school entry until the child is 6 years of age so that their child can hopefully have an advantage over the younger students and be more capable of meeting the rigorous demands that kindergarten will place on their child (Huang, 2015). System-level administrators such as instructional supervisors take actions such as hiring literacy, math, and reading specialists to train teachers to deliver mandated content to young children effectively. These supervisors are

also spending a considerable amount of money on instructional programs, hoping that one will bring about superior results. Kindergarten teachers must instruct as their system-level supervisors have directed them to, which can lead to a loss of autonomy and a feeling of not being competent enough to plan and develop their own curriculum in a manner that they know to be developmentally appropriate. The related literature of this chapter discusses readiness, academic redshirting, and retention as methods for schools and parents to deal with legislative mandates.

Examining these changes in kindergarten through the lens of the kindergarten teacher is vital to understanding how educationally mandated laws and curricula have affected the kindergarten classroom, whether positively or negatively. Furthermore, evaluating federal mandates such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), Race to the Top Act of 2011 (GovTrack.us, 2020), and Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) for kindergarten provides the groundwork for exploring the shifts experienced in the kindergarten classroom. The related literature of this chapter addresses other federal reform measures and issues relating to kindergarten. Additionally, this phenomenon should be viewed through the scope and lens of Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969) and Vygotsky's (1930/1978) sociocultural theory, which are discussed in the theoretical framework of the next section and are also addressed in the related literature section which describes the importance of play for a child's cognitive development.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the study provided the groundwork and support for the study. When conducting qualitative research, the theoretical framework provides the foundations of the study, aiding the researcher in shaping a clear focus and providing a basis for developing

research questions and data collection methods. Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969) sought to explain how a child constructs a mental model of the world and postulates four distinct stages (sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational) of human development from birth to adulthood. According to Piaget, children are in the preoperational stage from approximately age 2 to 7 or 8 years old (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969). This information focused the study on why children in kindergarten should be taught in a manner that matches their developmental stage in life. Vygotsky (1930/1978) theorized that children learn through play and social interaction. Piaget focused on distinct stages of development and the role of peer interaction. In contrast, Vygotsky focused on cognitive development through play and how peers, teachers, parents, and other adults guide them. Both theorists believed that children learn actively and via hands-on experience. Knowledge from these two theorists helped construct the research questions of this study and its data collection methods, analysis, and discussion.

Friedrich Fröbel (1837) created the kindergarten. His theories on the kindergarten practice led to a global educational movement still recognized as the critical first stage before a child enters formal schooling. Young children in Piaget's *preoperational* stage need this year of big kid school to prepare themselves for the academic demands of first grade (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969). Kindergarteners are busy obtaining and acquiring so many skills at this stage in their lives. Children experience rapid brain growth and development from birth through age 5. They develop cognition of different types, fine motor skills, socialization, language development, personality, and reasoning skills, amongst others. All these skills are critical to normal, healthy development. Unfortunately, many contemporary methods to kindergarten education unintentionally suppress experiential learning and curiosity in young children, which makes

teaching advanced math and science in later grades more challenging (Miller & Almon, 2009). Vygotsky believed that cognition is cultivated through social interactions and that young children are naturally curious and actively engaged in their own learning and the progress and discovery of novel schema and other understandings (Almon & Miller, 2011; Colgan, 2016; Frost & Sutterby, 2017; Lynch, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Therefore, children at this age require much time for play, including free play and guided play, to learn and develop their brains to their fullest potential (Weisberg et al., 2016). The following information will clarify and rationalize the choice of theoretical framework for this study.

Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development

Piaget's (1936/1952) theory of cognitive development is a comprehensive theory about the development of human intelligence and how we strive throughout our lives to make sense of our world. At a psychological conference in California in 1970, he was asked about early achievement, which he referred to as “the American question” of whether it is possible to speed up the acquisition of the cognitive milestones in his stages. Piaget responded with a counter-question: “Is it a good thing to accelerate the learning of these concepts?” (Hall, 1970, p. 31). Piaget further went on to acknowledge that perhaps children were able to perform academic tasks earlier but doubted whether that was the most advantageous or appropriate end goal. He disagreed with the notion that intelligence was static and considered cognitive development as a process that transpires as a result of biological maturing and interaction with a person's environment. His theory is a qualitative, or discontinuous, change in children's thinking ability because it occurs in level stages before children progress to the next stage.

In the 1920s, Piaget was employed at the Binet Institute in Paris, France, where he was employed to develop French versions of English IQ questions. When he tested the questions on children, he was intrigued with the way in which the logic questions were answered incorrectly by the children. This intrigue was the beginning of his study into the cognitive development of children. In the beginning, he had only three participants, which were his own three children. Piaget (1936/1952) wrote that children's intelligence is different from that of an adult's thinking in quality, not quantity, because they perceive the world differently. Children actively build their knowledge about the world and are not passive beings patiently waiting for someone to fill their heads with knowledge. He believed the best method for understanding a child's thinking was to see things from their perspective.

Piaget (1936/1952) recognized four distinct stages of cognitive development in humans. Although biological years of age are associated with each stage, progression through the stages is fluid and differs for each individual child. The first he called sensorimotor, which begins at birth and lasts until a child is 18 to 24 months of age. One goal of the sensorimotor stage is object permanence, a fundamental concept in developmental psychology in which a child understands that objects continue to exist even when they cannot be seen, heard, or otherwise sensed. The second stage is the preoperational stage, which begins at about 2 to 3 years of age and continues until a child is about 7 or 8 years old. One goal of the preoperational stage is symbolic thought, which means the child has developed the ability to use symbols to represent things. This study focuses on children's development in this preoperational stage. Piaget's third stage is the concrete operational stage from about age 7 to 11 in which children can use logical thought or operations (rules) but can only apply that logic to physical objects. If the brain is sufficiently challenged, the fourth and final stage is formal operational that lasts from adolescence through

adulthood with a goal of abstract concepts. During this final stage of development, individuals use symbols to relate to abstract concepts and are able to form hypotheses and grasp abstract concepts and relationships. Individuals in the formal operational stage can execute mathematical calculations in their heads, use inferential reasoning (such as “if Joy is taller than Hope and Hope is taller than Faith, who is the tallest”), and imagine the outcome of specific actions. Formal operational development continues throughout adulthood as individuals learn new concepts and skills and apply them to daily life; however, some individuals never reach this stage of cognitive development.

Piaget (1936/1952) identified four factors that work in tandem to impact shifts in thinking. Those four elements are activity or experience, biological maturation, equilibration, and social experiences or social transmission. Each of these adaptations works together to develop a child’s cognitive ability.

Experience refers to the improving ability of motion and coordination that occurs with practice and play when children think and interact with concrete objects in their environment. A child in the sensorimotor stage learns how to grasp objects such as toys or a cup. In the preoperational stage, children learn balance and introductory physics from playing on a seesaw. They also develop fine motor skills during the preoperational stage by activities such as learning to use scissors and correctly holding a pencil or crayon. As children explore their environment, they examine it, investigate it, and observe it. During these activities, their thinking becomes altered, and their brains organize information into different categories. Reducing this activity in a child of this age will stunt cognitive development potential. Children in the concrete operational stage are ready for more physically demanding tasks such as team sports or art that requires a steadier hand. Older students in the formal operational stage can compete at a high level in team

and individual sports and have honed specific fine motor skills that will help them as they make career choices.

Biological maturation is another of Piaget's four elements that affect cognitive development and refers to the psychological and physical growth that naturally occurs in life. Nothing done in or out of the classroom affects this factor. The considerations that do affect this element are nutrition and care that all children need to be healthy in general. Parents play the most significant role in this factor of cognitive development; however, once beginning school, the school becomes partially responsible for the child's well-being by providing teachers, a nurse, a guidance counselor, and meals.

Piaget also stated that cognitive development is guided by learning from others, particularly peers, through *social transmission* (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969). Kindergarteners interact with their family members, neighbors, church family, school staff, and fellow students every day. In the absence of social transmission, the need would arise to reinvent all the knowledge already provided by culture. All these varied social interactions that children experience develop their cognitive abilities. This knowledge of the importance of social transmission for cognitive development is contrary to the long blocks of instruction time in literacy and mathematics that kindergarteners now experience. They are expected to sit in a chair at a desk or table for 90–120 minutes. During these long blocks of time, children usually rotate through “centers”; however, these learning centers do not allow them the social transmission they so desperately require at this stage in life.

Piaget (1952) also introduced the concept of *schema* and defined it as a “cohesive, repeatable action sequence possessing component actions that are tightly interconnected and governed by a core meaning” (p. 7). Essentially, schemas are what a person already knows.

Schemas are the basic building blocks of intelligent behavior or a way of organizing or sorting knowledge. Schemas are akin to units of knowledge, with each schema relating to one aspect of the world, be it an action, an object, or even an abstract concept. Schemas are categories of knowledge that help individuals to understand the world. A schema describes both the cognitive and physical actions involved in understanding and knowing. For example, a young child sees a dog and is told it is called a dog. The next time the child sees a dog, he or she will be able to use that new schema to identify the animal. A child utilizes schemas to achieve the fourth factor of cognitive development, which is *equilibration*.

In Piaget's theory, the actual alterations in thinking occur via the process of *equilibration*, which is the force that moves cognitive development along. Equilibration brings all three factors of *experience*, *biological maturation*, and *social interaction* together to build schemas and serves as the predisposition to seek out cognitive logic and stability. If a child applies a certain schema to a situation and the schema succeeds, then equilibration is present and exists. If the schema fails to generate a satisfying outcome, disequilibrium occurs and makes the child feel uncomfortable. This discomfort motivates the child to continue to seek out a solution through the processes of accommodation and assimilation. There is a caveat to disequilibrium for the kindergartener, however. The level of disequilibrium must be just right. If disequilibrium is too little, the child will lose interest and not be concerned about changing and developing. If disequilibrium is too much, the child is frustrated and discouraged and will also not change and develop. Developmentally appropriate instruction addresses this issue and allows for children to develop cognitively whether equilibration or disequilibrium occurs.

Children aged from about 2 or 3 (whenever the individual child begins speaking) until age 7 are in a developmental stage that Piaget named the *preoperational* stage of cognitive

development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969). Piaget wrote that children need what he coined *operations* or actions that are carried out and reversed *mentally* rather than physically (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969). He labeled it *preoperational* because children have yet to master these *operations* mentally, which means their thinking is *preoperational*. In the preoperational stage, language development occurs alongside the use of symbols to represent objects. Children actively build up their knowledge about the world. They think in the present and have difficulty thinking in terms of the past or future. Children in this stage can reason logically through processes in a single direction. The only perception they can understand is their own and have trouble understanding another's point of view.

Piaget also identified a dual learning process that works in tandem to play a part at each stage of cognitive development: *assimilation* and *accommodation* (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969). Piaget said that continuous entwining of assimilation and accommodation results in cognitive growth. Assimilation occurs when individuals modify or change new information to match and fit into their existing schemas. When a person encounters new information, an attempt is made to make sense of the new information by trying to relate it (assimilation) to what she already knows (schema). Piaget believed the process of assimilation was subjective because it is based on a person's worldview, which has been shaped by the person's culture. During early childhood, children are continuously assimilating their experiences and new information into their existing knowledge (schemas). This process continues throughout a person's life. The other way Piaget identified for adapting to new experiences and information is accommodation. Recall the earlier situation in which a child learned what a dog was and created a new schema for identifying that animal. If children have never seen a cat, they may call it a dog because it fits their existing schema of what a dog is. The adaptation process of accommodation will correct

mistakes such as these when a child is learning about the world. Accommodation occurs when new experiences or information is introduced that causes individuals to reevaluate their existing schemas, and old ideas are amended or replaced based on new information. For example, an older child has a schema that a certain classmate is very nice. However, this child observes the classmate being mean to another person on the playground. The child uses accommodation to change her existing schema from the classmate is nice to the classmate can be mean. The following section will discuss the work of Lev Vygotsky, the second theoretical framework of this study.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

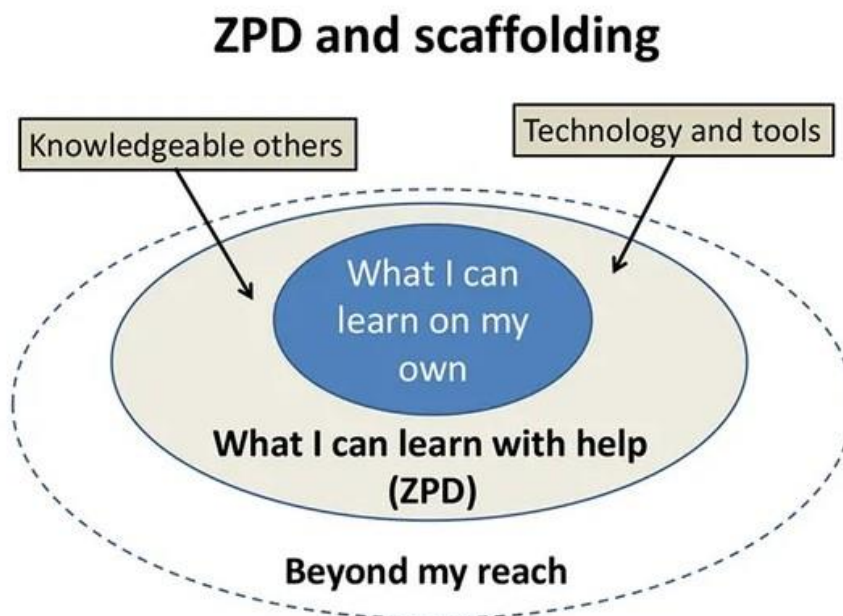
Vygotsky's (1930/1978) sociocultural theory emphasizes the vital role of social interaction and a child's culture in the development of cognition. He believed firmly that culture plays a central role in the process of making meaning for children and that learning is naturally a social process. Resembling Piaget, Vygotsky believed that young children are naturally curious and actively engaged in their own learning as they develop and discover new schema. However, Vygotsky positioned more focus on social influences for the progression of development. According to Vygotsky (1930/1978), much learning by the child happens through social interaction with a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). An MKO can be a teacher, parent, or other person the child can observe. Schaffer (1996) provided an example of a young girl who is given her first jigsaw puzzle. Working by herself, she is unsuccessful in solving the puzzle. Her father, the MKO, joins her and demonstrates strategies for putting together a jigsaw puzzle, such as finding all the outer edge pieces with a flat side, provides a few pieces for the child to fit together herself, and gives her praise and encouragement when she does fit pieces together. As the child becomes more capable, the MKO lets the child work more independently. Vygotsky

said this form of social interaction that includes cooperative or collaborative dialogue between the child and the MKO furthers the child's cognitive development. This type of instruction is developmentally appropriate for a child of 4 to 6 years of age and should be the norm instead of using direct instruction as the predominant method of instruction.

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is the most widely known concept from Vygotsky's (1930/1978) sociocultural theory. At any given point in a child's development, she is on the verge of some sort of problem-solving (Woolfolk, 2019). The child already has a certain amount of knowledge about her world. She only needs an MKO or the proper tools and/or technology to provide her with a *scaffold* to help her extend her cognition to an area she cannot reach independently (see Figure 1). Ever since Kozulin translated Vygotsky's (1930/1978) work from Russian to English, scaffolding has been considered a best practice for the classroom. It aligns perfectly with the differentiation of teaching strategies. Each child will progress at a slightly different developmental rate at this age, and each child will require their own distinct amounts of differentiation and scaffolding from teachers and parents. Nevertheless, if teachers aim to develop higher cognitive functioning in children, this is one of the most proven methods and has been used in U.S. classrooms for over 40 years.

Vygotsky (1930/1978) believed that play is "the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development" (p. 96). He claimed that new developmental accomplishments were possible in play. In Vygotsky's (1930/1978) words, play

creates the zone of proximal development of the child. In play, a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play, it as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development. (p. 102)

Figure 1*Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development*

Note. From *Learning with 'e's: Digital Literacy, Competency and Fluency*, by S. Wheeler, 2018, Slide 24 [PowerPoint presentation] (<https://nnu.dk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Steve-Wheeler.pdf>). Reprinted with permission from S. Wheeler (see Appendix K).

Children are not afforded an occasion for play in the classroom anymore because it has been replaced with instructional blocks of mathematics and literacy (Almon & Miller, 2011; Colgan, 2016; Frost & Sutterby, 2017; Lynch, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Ranz-Smith, 2007). They are only little once, and this opportunity for growth through real play is limited as it only lasts from ages 4 to 6 (Bodrova et al., 2013).

Vygotsky (1930/1978) wrote that private speech, also known as inner speech, is another important concept in developmental psychology. When young children play, they talk to themselves. A child will do this whether she is alone or in a group of other children. Private speech requires neither interaction nor conversation. It is entirely normal to observe children

between the ages of 2 and 7 use private speech. Both Piaget and Vygotsky realized the importance of private speech to development but had differing views on its developmental purposes. Vygotsky discussed the importance of self-directed speech for developing self-regulation while Piaget considered private speech as egocentric behavior that is cognitively immature. Piaget and Vygotsky both noted that children develop the capability to self-regulate using private speech. This little bit of information is critical. Since the amount of time that children are allowed to play in and out of the classroom during the school day is limited, the obvious conclusion is that private speech is impeded in lieu of long instructional blocks in which well-behaved children are expected to sit still and, above all, be quiet.

The theoretical philosophy of Lev Vygotsky (1930/1978) includes *sociodramatic play*, or real play, and its proven importance to optimal cognitive development. Sociodramatic play is play in which children role-play a particular plot. They assign roles to one another and play together, imitating what they know about the aspect of their role. Examples of this include playing store where there is a shop owner, an employee, and customers or firefighters rushing to the scene of a fire to put it out and save people in the building. When children do this, they attempt to enter the world of adults via imitation and exploration of social roles and relations. Vygotsky's (1930/1978) sociocultural theory is vital to this study because he posited that children require structured imaginative play with peers, an opportunity to use inner speech when needed, and free play for proper cognitive development at the age children are typically in kindergarten. The current state of kindergarten in the United States does not foster this type of playful environment (Almon & Miller, 2011; Colgan, 2016; Frost & Sutterby, 2017; Lynch, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Ranz-Smith, 2007).

Related Literature

In this section, I discuss legislative actions that affects students in public school kindergartens. Many changes have occurred over the past 20 years regarding educational reform beginning with the NCLB (2002). Over the years, several other initiatives and legislation have had a major impact on the classrooms of our youngest students. The following sections discuss federal legislative actions aimed at educational reform and other topics of relevance for kindergarten students: executive functioning, fine motor skills, prefrontal cortex development, readiness to begin school, play, language development, academic redshirting, and retention in grade.

Educational Reform Legislation

In 2009, the Alliance for Childhood (the Alliance) published a landmark report, *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need Play in School* (Miller & Almon, 2009). This report outlined in eight chapters that child-initiated play must be restored to kindergarten. Miller and Almon (2009) asserted that NCLB (2002) was detrimental to healthy development, a lifelong love of learning, and the simple joy of living that every child in kindergarten deserves to experience during their first year of school. In addition, they found that although NCLB (2002) definitely had a damaging impact on the governance of public schools in the United States for 14 years, initiatives such as Race to the Top in 2012 and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) also played a role in altering the very face of kindergarten for the worse.

No Child Left Behind

Upon becoming president in 2001, George W. Bush sought to reform the country's educational system right away by signing into law the NCLB (2002), which was reauthorized by Congress in 2008 for an additional 7 years. NCLB (2002) replaced President Lyndon Johnson's

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965) with far-reaching implications for states, administrators, teachers, and students alike (Groen, 2012). The act had a pleasant-sounding name, a name which sounded as if its very content would solve the problems of every student in the United States who had fallen behind or between the cracks. Students' educational gaps are always blamed on the previous grade levels. It was believed that addressing these gaps all the way down to kindergarten would alleviate the achievement gap by increasing the rigor of what students were expected to learn. NCLB (2002) required schools to meet adequate yearly progress for literacy and mathematics achievement or face sanctions (Groen, 2012; Jahng, 2011). It is easy to discern why academic content was shoved down to lower grades, and kindergarten evolved into what it is today.

Common Core State Standards

The state-led effort to create the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) began in 2009 by state leaders, including governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states, two territories, and the District of Columbia, through their membership in the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council for Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). State school chiefs and governors acknowledged the importance of consistent, real-world learning objectives. They initiated this effort to guarantee all students would graduate high school prepared for college, career, and life (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017). Although meaning well, the CCSS standards were only matched with a specific subset of students. CCSS call for kindergarteners to master more than 90 standards in mathematics and literacy with many of the standards for literacy meant to have children reading by the second semester of kindergarten (Almon & Miller, 2011).

Race to the Top and Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System

In 2012, President Barack Obama introduced Race to the Top (RTTT) as a competitive grant program for states to earn additional funding with a total budget of \$4.35 billion (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). RTTT (2012) is important to this study because, in its inception year (also called Phase 1), Tennessee was one of the two states (Delaware was the other) to win funding from RTTT, so Tennessee became tied down to the strings that were attached to RTTT funding. Tennessee was required to adopt the CCSS. Tennessee was also obligated to create a data system to track students' growth and progress so educators could use that information to drive instruction. This obligation created what became known as the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS). School systems in Tennessee began using TVAAS scores as part of a teacher's level of effectiveness (LOE) score (Tennessee Department of Education, 2019) and have continued to use it since winning the first round of funding (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.). Tennessee was required to submit a plan that would outline how the state intended to turn around low-achieving schools (Tennessee Department of Education, 2020a). Finally, developing, recruiting, retaining, and rewarding the most effective teachers and principals was the final obligation for receipt of RTTT funding. In theory, this sounds like a good idea, but it was anything but good in actual practice. Principals were pressuring teachers to teach to the test. Teachers were teaching to the test and pressuring students to master content to do well on a test. The reward part was probably the biggest misstep. School systems could not figure out a fair method for rewarding effective teachers. Some systems chose to do it based on test scores. Some even based it on days of attendance, so if a teacher or one of her children did not get sick, she would get rewarded for not using sick days. No one ever really generated a fair or reasonable

method of rewarding teachers. Programs such as these put pressure on teachers to teach in ways they would not normally teach.

Every Student Succeeds Act

In 2015, when it was time for Congress to determine whether they would reauthorize NCLB (2002), they chose to listen to the teachers' union and other experts who were opposed to its reauthorization. First, however, Congress had to replace it with something. This is when they passed the ESSA (2015). ESSA still required the accountability measures of its predecessor but allowed states the flexibility to determine everything that NCLB determined at the federal level. The overall takeaway from this is that going back as far as President Johnson's ESEA (1965), U.S. presidents and the American public, in general, had the false notion that teaching more to younger students was the sure way to advance our country and give us a leg-up in the global economy. Meanwhile, the stakes have become increasingly higher, and children are no longer allowed to be children (Bidzan-Bluma & Lipowska, 2018; Brown & Barry, 2021; Colliver & Veraksa, 2021). The following sections discusses other issues relating to kindergarten.

Executive Function

Executive function is a critical ability that every human must have to function. Executive function is a term that broadly encompasses general cognitive processes in three areas: working memory, inhibitory control (which includes self-control), and flexible thinking (or cognitive flexibility) (Coelho et al., 2020). Many studies have shown executive function to predict educational results over and above measures of intelligence or poor ability (Blair, 2016). An evident overlap exists between the prerequisites of early education and the abilities that depict executive function, such as retaining information in the mind and working with it continually over short periods of time, inhibiting impulsive or learned incorrect reactions in favor of correct

reactions, seeing things from multiple points of view, and managing attention and emotions (Blair, 2016). According to Cameron et al. (2012), executive function substantially predicts all six academic achievement measures in kindergarten, including general knowledge, mathematics, word reading, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and phonics.

Working Memory

One component of executive function is working memory, defined by Morgan et al. (2019) as “the ability to hold and manipulate information during a brief time” (p. 1802). It allows the brain to hold information, such as multistep directions, for a matter of seconds so that the information input can be held and manipulated temporarily. Working memory aids students in managing information maintenance and processing loads while evading loss as a result of distractions and forgetfulness. Reciprocity exists between executive function and academic ability, consistent with continuing experiments suggesting that working memory is trainable (Blair, 2016). Kytälä et al. (2019) reported statistically significant correlations between good working memory in kindergarten and second-grade academic success. Therefore, it is essential to first train and develop students’ working memory before teaching academic standards. Nguyen and Duncan (2019) conducted a study that analyzed six longitudinal data sets and found that although all three components of executive function are critical to academic success, working memory was the “most predictive of later achievement, particularly for math” (p. 59).

Inhibitory Control

Another component of executive function is inhibitory control, which is defined by Morgan et al. (2019) as “the ability to delay some initial response while attempting to complete a task” (p. 21). Children who are just beginning kindergarten often face increased expectations to regulate their own behavior. Behavioral self-regulation supports young children’s learning and is

a robust predictor of later academic success (Moffett & Morrison, 2020). Specifically, they are required to focus attention during instructional time, sit for a lengthy period of time, work individually on tasks, transition independently between tasks, and follow multiple-step instructions. The combination of all these skills is the behavioral component of executive function. Moffett and Morrison (2020) observed off-task behavior of kindergarten students in their study. They found that students who were off-task by being disengaged with the classroom activities suffered deleterious consequences in their academic success. This disengagement indicated that teachers should identify these behaviors and work to improve executive functioning skills. Until children have mastered self-regulation, they cannot pay attention as needed to be successful in class. Vygotsky (1930/1978) claimed that children could master self-regulation through play. For example, when children pretend to be adults, such as teachers, firefighters, or police officers, they have to follow the rules of the role assigned to them. They must stay in character to be able to play, and this develops self-regulation.

Cognitive Flexibility

The third and final component of executive function is cognitive flexibility. Morgan et al. (2019) defines cognitive flexibility as the “ability to shift attention among distinct but related aspects of a task as well as adapt responses using new information” (p. 1802). Cognitive flexibility enables children to attend to shifting meaning in texts, integrating supplementary knowledge, and simultaneously disregarding or updating previously used knowledge. Gaining greater cognitive flexibility aids children in their learning, both in and out of school. The ability to effortlessly shift tasks and identify when the rules change permits thinking in new ways, acting creatively, and solving problems. Students in kindergarten cannot begin to seriously learn

academic content standards until they have developed each component of executive functioning (Moffett & Morrison, 2020; Morgan et al., 2019).

Executive Function and Piaget

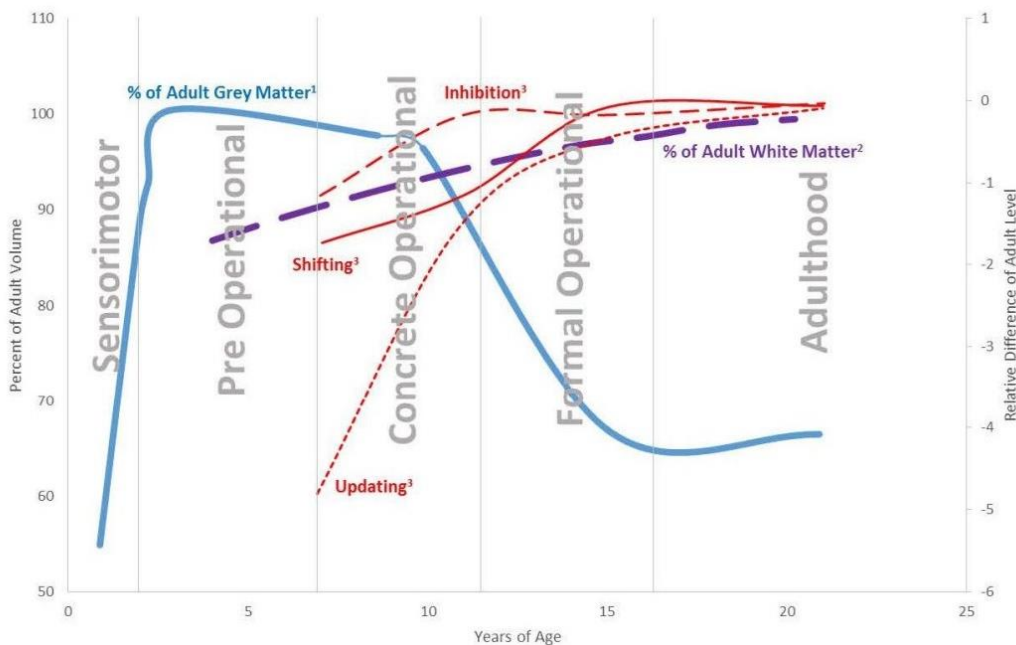
Bolton and Hattie (2017) sought to trace the interrelatedness of executive function, specifically working memory, and its correlation to achievement. The researchers claimed that chronological development of executive function plays a major part in the growth of and shift between Piagetian stages. They further found that the maturation of the brain increased in complexity during childhood and adolescence and appeared to occur in stages that parallel the stages of cognitive development identified by Piaget (1936/1952).

The growth period for inhibition happens from around age 2 until a child reaches 5 years of age with the child developing the ability to inhibit behaviors for longer periods of time with maturation. Studies have also established rapid growth in cognitive flexibility as well as inhibitory control between the ages of 2 and 7. In addition, sizeable changes in working memory abilities happen between the ages of 3 and 5 years and then remains constant or levels off towards age 7 (Bolton & Hattie, 2017).

In the following figure (Figure 2), working memory is labeled as “updating,” cognitive flexibility is labeled as “shifting,” and inhibitory control is labeled as “inhibition.” The figure shows executive function and prefrontal cortex gray and white matter matched with Piaget’s stages of cognitive development. All three components of executive function seem to have large age-related change from 3 to 5 years of age. These changes correspond with transition of the child in the preoperational stage of Piaget’s theory.

Figure 2

Alignment of Executive Function and Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development



Note. From “Cognitive and Brain Development: Executive Function, Piaget, and the Prefrontal Cortex,” by S. Bolton & J. Hattie, 2017, *Archives of Psychology*, 1(3), p. 22

(<https://archivesofpsychology.org/index.php/aop/article/view/30>). Copyright 2017 by Archives of Psychology. Reprinted with permission from J. Hattie (see Appendix L).

Fine Motor Skills

In addition to executive function, fine motor skills (FMS) have gained much attention as another factor that contributes to academic achievement in kindergarten and beyond (Cameron et al., 2012). It has long been suggested that cognitive processes correspond to internalized motor actions (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Piaget and Inhelder (1969) admittedly struggled with how fine motor skills related to language and thought, which leads to the curriculum question of whether to focus on academic skills or sensorimotor activities. Suggate et al. (2019) found that not only are FMS linked to first-grade reading success but are also more of a readiness indicator than

other indicators but are also involved in processes that develop cognitive and academic skills. FMS correspond to a skill set including hand-eye coordination, visuo-motor and grapho-motor skills, and handwriting (Cameron et al., 2012; Suggate et al., 2019).

Moreover, Suggate et al. (2019) defined FMS as “small muscle movements requiring close eye-hand coordination” (p. 248). In addition, Cameron et al. (2012) reported that children who struggled with FMS would attend to holding a pencil and the movements needed to form letters and numbers, which in turn deters their attention from making progress with other cognitive tasks such as phonics, phonemic awareness, decoding words, and reading for comprehension. Morin and Wilmot (2021) suggested that teachers use instructional time for students to develop FMS through several targeted exercises, such as using Play-Doh or putty, painting, picking up grains of rice with tweezers, water play with eye droppers, et cetera. FMS can be developed through imaginary play by embedding executive function activities daily and using the activities to construct meaningful problem situations in which students must use their executive functions to solve problems (Walker et al., 2020). It is essential for teachers to use guided play that involves FMS because when enhanced FMS is combined with enhanced executive function, it inexplicably leads to academic achievement (Cameron et al., 2012; Gashaj et al., 2019; Michel et al., 2020; Ohl et al., 2013; Stewart et al., 2007; Suggate et al., 2019).

Prefrontal Cortex Development

Another area of much research is the development of the prefrontal cortex. Although the prefrontal cortex develops rapidly in early childhood, it is amongst the last areas of the cortex to attain maturity, continuing to undergo alterations in gray matter and connectivity well into adulthood (Blair, 2016). Suggate et al. (2019) reported definite network commonalities between language and cognition and this area of the brain with motor processing needed for FMS.

Readiness

What it means by kindergarten readiness has changed over the years, along with teachers' perceptions of what it means to be ready and how ready they would like them to be upon entering their classrooms. Schools use some sort of screening tool to determine if a child can count and recognize colors, letters, shapes, numbers, or whatever else they deem as "need to know" to be ready to begin kindergarten. Bassok and Reardon (2013) reported on a phenomenon known as "greenshirting," in which parents use homeschooling, private schools, and transitional classrooms in hopes of giving their child a leg-up on being more ready than other students to begin kindergarten. Executive function was shown to predict kindergarten readiness when FMS were also considered (Cameron et al., 2012).

The development of a child's executive function plays a significant role in their readiness and success in school. Montroy et al. (2016) found that many children were still developing executive function as they began formal schooling, possibly putting them at risk for poor academic results throughout elementary school. Montroy et al. indicated that executive functions are vital skills to target in the year prior to formal schooling, typically first grade. Kindergarten students need this critical year to continue building executive functioning to both be ready for first grade and be successful academically.

The mastery of basic academic content alone does not make a child ready for learning at school. Being truly ready requires skills that are not academic. Karpov (2014) has come to a consensus about four major components for school readiness: (a) motivation to study at school, (b) self-regulation, (c) symbolic thought, and (d) non-egocentric position. An "astonishingly high" correlation exists between quality sociodramatic play of kindergarteners and various aspects of their future academic success. Sociodramatic play fulfills the need of children to

mimic and investigate adult roles and relationships, and it also means direct training for school behavior (Karpov, 2014).

Motivation to Study at School

A child should develop some motivation to study at school. By the end of early childhood, children become displeased with sociodramatic play and really want to be an adult (Vygotsky, 1930/1978). This dissatisfaction leads to realizing that they are still a child and segues to the child developing a new motive to become an adult and fulfill adult responsibilities. The motivation to be an adult becomes solidified in children's strong desire to study at school. Sociodramatic play segues into the development of children's motivation to study at school because the only way to bring them closer to an adult position is to take on the role of a student (Karpov, 2014). Therefore, kindergarten-aged students must have daily opportunities for sociodramatic play to develop a healthy motivation to study at school and to become lifelong learners.

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is the ability of children to control their own behavior, follow the rules and directions, and pay attention to their teacher. This particular component is critical to success in school. A survey of kindergarten teachers organized by the National Center for Early Learning and Development "suggested that many children are arriving at school without effective self-regulation skills" (Blair, 2002, p. 112). Karpov (2014) reported that two surveys of U.S. teachers "clearly indicate that kindergarten teachers are concerned with more strictly cognitive and academic aspects of readiness" (p. 68). In sociodramatic play, Vygotsky (1930/1978) wrote that children will act according to the role they have been assigned in the role play. They wish to be involved in the play, and the play must be as realistic as possible. Although children may want to

do something different within the role play, they must stay in character. They can bend their behavior, control it, to stay in the role. Children's involvement in mutual regulation in play further develops their ability for self-regulation in non-play situations (Bodrova et al., 2013). The lack of sociodramatic play is associated with deficiencies in a child's ability to self-regulate (Karpov, 2014).

Self-regulation is a significant milestone in a child's cognitive development because, with this skill, children can intentionally control their own thinking and behavior. Examples include being able to stop doing something when asked, such as talking, or to act in a goal-directed manner, such as retrieving materials to complete a writing task. In addition, more advanced development of metacognition is the ability to remain focused despite distractions and to notice and self-correct errors (Roebers, 2017).

Symbolic Thought

Symbolic thought is the ability to solve problems in our heads. Children can use objects that can stand in for other objects, or object substitutes, in the situation of object-centered play that guides them to develop their own symbolic thought. Sociodramatic play requires children to use their imagination and creativity to make object substitutions and aids them in developing additional cognitive skills. This ability becomes necessary for children to be successful at learning in school (Karpov, 2014). Children in primary school continue to use manipulatives, especially for math, beyond kindergarten. For example, they will continue to use objects representing hundreds, tens, and ones when learning place value through second grade and sometimes further. Kindergarteners need to develop this skill of using object substitutes throughout their academic careers. After all, they will be asked to substitute a number for a variable in math courses in a few short years.

Non-egocentric Position

Piaget characterized children aged 3 to 7 as egocentric, meaning they could not see the perspective of others and would disregard others' perspectives (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969). Vygotsky postulated that children could grow themselves out of egocentrism through sociodramatic play. Children arrive at school with many misconceptions. To be successful in school, they must give up their misconceptions and begin to recognize, comprehend, and describe the world from the viewpoint of scientific laws and rules that have been taught by their teacher (Karpov, 2014). In addition, children must be able to work together in a group dynamic and coordinate their actions with the actions of other students. Children learn to play according to their play roles to overcome egocentrism, which fundamentally alters children's perspective towards the external world.

Play

The position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) adopted in 2009 stated, "Rather than detracting from academic learning, play appears to support the abilities that underlie such learning and thus to promote school success" (p. 15). The importance of play cannot be overstated. Play *is* the work of childhood. Many studies (Almon & Miller, 2011; Colgan, 2016; Frost & Sutterby, 2017; Lynch, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Ranz-Smith, 2007) have recognized its critical importance to social and behavioral health and robust cognitive development. In one study, approximately 14% of students identified as being behind in social and behavioral skills received special education services or had a 504 plan in kindergarten. This number increased to a third by the time they reached fourth grade and proved that kindergarteners need that year to play and develop their social and behavioral skills to develop cognitively and be successful in school (Bettencourt et al.,

2018). Furthermore, Almon and Miller (2011) reported that a study found a strong correlation between play and expulsion rates—less play, more expulsions. Unfortunately, educational reforms and academic content standards have led to the near extinction of play, particularly sociodramatic play.

Vygotsky (1967) noted,

At every step, the child is faced with a conflict between the rule of the game and what he would do if he could suddenly act spontaneously. In the game, he acts counter to what he wants . . . achieving the maximum display of willpower. (p. 14)

Vygotsky stated that “real” play consists of three steps. First, the children must develop an imaginary situation, which is known as play planning. Second, they must decide who will take on and act out the roles needed to fulfill the imaginary situation. Third, the children must follow a set of rules determined by the roles they have been assigned to act out. To continue playing, children must act intentionally, inhibiting any behavior not part of their specific role. Planning play acts as the foundation for reflective thinking for kindergarten-aged children, which is another component of inhibitory control and self-regulation. This type of play develops executive function, mainly inhibitory control (Bodrova et al., 2013).

Manuilenko (1975) was a student of Vygotsky’s who continued his work into play and made discoveries that have contributed to what is known regarding best practices when developing executive function in kindergarten-aged children. Manuilenko discovered higher levels of self-regulation (inhibitory control) in children’s physical behaviors in play than in non-play situations. For example, she asked a child to simply stand still in one spot, and the child was able to do this for 4 minutes. On the other hand, when the child was asked to do the same thing in a play context in which he was asked to be the lookout, he could do the same task for 12

minutes. She found that children less than 4 years old had not developed these advanced forms of play, and children 7 and older no longer need the support of play to aid in behavior regulation.

This gap in time between play and non-play performance is widest with children of kindergarten age. According to Bodrova et al. (2013), these results advocate for Vygotsky's stance that play "is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development" (p. 115).

Furthermore, Vygotsky's (1930/1978) views regarding developmental achievements which appear within a child's ZPD include "assisted performance" with MKOs, which involves assistance with play in which adults create play worlds and provide children with objects they can use in their imaginary situations, such as a box that can be a police car or fire truck.

Both Piaget (1936/1952) and Vygotsky (1930/1978) believed that children use past experiences or background knowledge to create play situations. For instance, a child uses their knowledge of grocery shopping with a parent or going to the doctor to play store or doctor. For Vygotsky, play provides an arena of internalizing societal roles in the ZPD. To create the ZPD, play itself must evolve to reach its most mature level in which children participate in the Olympic Games, land a rocket on the moon, or go on an expedition to Antarctica. For Piaget (1936/1952), symbolic play exists as a representative assimilation for the developmental beginnings of unattainable tendencies. Piaget also theorized play as a prevalence of assimilation over accommodation, which means a child adds more to their existing schemas instead of altering them.

Almon and Miller (2011) presented evidence from Europe to make the case for more play and less pressure in kindergarten. In the 1970s, Germany began an experiment to test whether a playful kindergarten or an early-learning kindergarten would be better for cognitive development. The children were followed for 5 years after kindergarten. The children in the

playful kindergartens excelled over the early-learning kindergartens in math, reading, creativity, intelligence, oral expression, and social and emotional skills by the age of 10. Finland is another example of a country with strong student success. Finnish children are in kindergarten until age 7 when they are expected to begin first grade and formal learning. Most children in Europe do not learn how to read until they are 7 years old.

Suggate (2015) conducted several studies comparing children who had playful kindergarten experiences and did not learn to read until they were 7 years of age with children who were taught reading fluency and comprehension during their kindergarten year. The two groups were followed until they reached 12 years of age. Suggate found no difference in the reading skills between the two groups. He concluded that there are no advantages to learning how to read in kindergarten.

There are two types of play that have been identified: the social pedagogy approach and the academic, early education approach. The social pedagogy approach emphasizes a play-based pedagogy with free play, which aims to promote a child's social and emotional development. Bonawitz et al. (2011) reported that the intervention of an adult can limit learning opportunities and could restrict their explorative behavior. The academic approach involves clear explanations of learning objectives, summative assessments, and teacher-directed pedagogy. The academic approach often includes the use of guided play as a developmentally appropriate practice for early childhood education.

In guided play, an adult purposefully constructs a play environment that aims at an explicit learning objective and initiates children's autonomous investigation (Reuter & Leuchter, 2020). Children's activities during the lesson can be scaffolded to meet the learning objective. It is vital that children are the ones in control of the learning activity, determining for themselves

what they want to do, for what length of time, and at what pace. The adult can demonstrate specific actions and thinking methods to offer the child an opportunity for imitation. Guided play results in better learning gains than teaching through direct instruction (Reuter & Leuchter, 2020). However, demanding such goal-oriented and straightforward behavior from kindergarten students seems inappropriate from a developmental perspective (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009) because it imposes high demands on 5- to 6-year-old children's executive functioning skills, which are not developed as well as older students (Diamond, 2013).

Language Development

Both Piaget and Vygotsky viewed language development, specifically inner speech (private speech), as crucial to cognitive development. Vygotsky (1930/1978) regarded language as the greatest tool man had, the primary method of conveying information to children by adults. Vygotsky referred to the language used by children who are 3 to 7 years of age as *private speech*, or speaking aloud to oneself. Vygotsky (1934/1986) wrote that egocentric, or private, speech is inner speech in its functions; it is speech on its way inward, intimately tied up with the ordering of the child's behavior, already partly incomprehensible to others, yet still overt in form and showing no tendency to change into whispering or any other sort of half-soundless speech. (p.86)

At this stage, speech and thought become reliant on one another as thought becomes verbal and speech becomes representational. When this occurs, monologues of children are internalized to develop into inner speech. Both Piaget and Vygotsky agreed that the internalization of language is critical as it drives cognitive development, but their beliefs about language development differed.

Academic Redshirting

Academic redshirting is the practice of holding one's child back from beginning school as late as possible (Huang, 2015). Federal compulsory attendance laws state that a child must begin school by age 6. Some redshirted students even turn 7 years of age during the school year (Huang, 2015). This practice occurs for various reasons. Some parents report trying to keep their child a child for as long as possible and delay the academic instruction they know goes along with today's kindergarten. Others do it for more selfish reasons, such as providing their child with an athletic or academic advantage over the other younger students.

The effects of the practice of academic redshirting in kindergarten have been well-documented in many studies (Huang, 2015; Jaekel et al., 2015; Schanzenbach & Larson, 2017). Two studies in the research literature try to estimate what impact one of the oldest students in the class would have on a child. Both studies reached the same results—children demonstrated better academic performance in kindergarten. However, that edge over the other younger students declined sharply as they progressed through the grade levels and completely vanishes by high school. The skill level of a child in one semester is a poor predictor of their skill level in another semester because child development is irregular with spurts of progress in motor and verbal skills arising unpredictably. Additionally, redshirted children can be socially as well as educationally harmed by being with classmates who are behaving and performing at lower developmental levels. Overall, the practice has proven to produce more harm than good (Schanzenbach & Larson, 2017).

Retention

Hwang and Cappella (2018) define retention as “requiring a student who has underperformed academically to remain at the same grade level the following year” (p. 559). In

the state of Tennessee, a student can be retained in grade if the child's teacher feels the child did not learn the content of the grade level well enough to progress to the next grade level (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2019). Although an archaic practice, it is considered an educational intervention in Tennessee. Before educational mandates, kindergarten teachers had the autonomy to use their competency and judgement to respond to the needs of each child. Now, however, they feel like tools used by administration to fulfill legislative policies and test the latest educational fads. Kindergarten teachers provide various reasons for why they retained a student (Hwang & Cappella, 2018). Some of those reasons include the following:

1. The first-grade teacher would be so angry with me if I sent this child on to the next grade. (Hwang & Cappella, 2018, p. 566)
2. The child was very immature and needed another year in kindergarten to mature. (Hwang & Cappella, 2018, p. 560)
3. The child did not do well and had a late summer birthday. (Huang, 2014, p. 80)

The research done on retention is clear, and the statistics are indisputable. Retention in grade is a very harmful practice that is applied a great deal in kindergarten (Hughes et al., 2018). The United States spends \$20 billion each year on retention, and two million children are retained (Hwang & Cappella, 2018). Not only is retention very costly in terms of per-pupil expenditures, but it is also an indicator of other problems. Following students who have been retained uncovers a myriad of similar adverse consequences, which include an increase in the rate of suspensions and expulsions, overrepresentation in special education, increases in a student's chances of dropping out of school by 50%, lower academic achievement, criminal justice system involvement, and difficulty with obtaining and retaining employment (Bettencourt

et al., 2018; Le et al., 2019). Nevertheless, despite all the data solidifying the harmful effects of grade retention, the custom still exists (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2019).

Summary

Increasing incidents of retention, redshirting, and other phenomena associated with kindergarten have been on the rise since the advent of educational reforms during this century. We know that the current kindergarten in public schools is not conducive to optimal cognitive development. Readiness for school has been redefined many times, and students in kindergarten are missing out on cognitive building activities that aid them in motivation, self-regulation, symbolic thought, and non-egocentric behavior, leading to a host of detrimental problems which follow them into adulthood. Although parents are doing their part to prepare their children by reading them books and providing a fun environment where they can play, it does not continue once they are enrolled in school. There is a lack of qualitative studies from the point of view of strictly kindergarten teachers, so the literature lacks this phenomenon from a kindergarten teacher's perspective. This study addresses these retention issues, academic shoveldown, redshirting, play, sleep, and readiness, by eliciting responses from kindergarten teachers who have taught through these varying eras of educational reform.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of kindergarten teachers who have taught through an era of federally mandated, standards-based educational reforms. This chapter presents the design, research questions, participants, setting, and procedures for this study. The researcher's role and how data were collected are also included. A breakdown of the data analysis methods following the steps outlined by Moustakas (1994) is also contained in this chapter. Lastly, trustworthiness and ethical considerations are presented.

Research Design

This qualitative transcendental phenomenological design was selected to explore the rich textural details of the kindergarten teacher experience. The perspective was from the kindergarten teacher who was teaching in the 1990s and continued teaching after the shift to a kindergarten under No Child Left Behind (2002) and/or Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). This study focused on kindergarten teachers who experienced this shift and how it may have altered the dynamics in their classrooms.

A qualitative method was selected as the type of research because this allowed me to analyze patterns as they appeared during the study and permitted shifting of the emphasis as new ideas developed and were established through the process (Maxwell, 2013). When carrying out qualitative research, the words of the participants are the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The feelings, thoughts, and perspectives of the participants are the focus of the researcher (Morse, 2012). Since a quantitative research method emphasizes objective measures, it would not be an appropriate design for gathering the subjective lived experiences from teachers.

A phenomenological design was chosen for this study because it “describes the common meaning of experiences of a phenomenon (or topic or concept) for several individuals and the researchers reduce the experiences to a central meaning or ‘essence’ of the experience” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 314). No matter what the shared experience is, a phenomenological design aims to describe the case from the perspective of the group of participants. Moustakas (1994) clarified that a phenomenology endeavors to provide the overall viewpoint of whatever is being explored through precise detailed descriptions that bring the experience to life.

Moustakas (1994) further explained the conceptual framework of transcendental phenomenology through the notions of intentionality and intuition. For earlier philosophers, intentionality held different meanings based upon their respective fields of study. Schwandt (2007) discussed this when he wrote, “Intentionality stresses the fundamental interaction of mind and world, subject and object” (p. 56). Though some of what we are aware of is not real, we continue to experience our world and everything happening in it. The science surrounding transcendental phenomenology is intended to describe the phenomenon being studied to establish an understanding of the thoughts and attitudes of those living through the experience. Transcendental phenomenology necessitates that the researcher adheres to a specific process known as *epoche*. *Epoche* allows removal of the researcher’s personal assumptions and biases. Moustakas (1994) described the struggles researchers would face endeavoring to “set aside” (p. 88) their biases to achieve *epoche*. To make certain the *epoche* process is adhered to, any pre-existing beliefs or biases that occurred throughout this study were recorded in a researcher’s reflexive journal (see Appendix I). This reflective journal includes notes of meetings and thorough descriptions of my opinions and feelings as I collected data, analyzed it, and finalized the research findings.

This study of the perceptions of kindergarten teachers aimed to understand their lived experiences and perceptions during an era of standards-based reform. The study focused on the change in what they have had to teach and how their pedagogy has changed in response to it. Transcendental phenomenology allowed a thorough examination of the views and attitudes as this curriculum shift took place. This careful interpretation of their lived experiences allows the reader to obtain a view of the change these kindergarten teachers underwent. Transcendental phenomenology permitted me to report the substance of the experience.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers as they have taught during a shift to increased academic content?

Sub-Question One

How has the pedagogy of the kindergarten classroom fundamentally changed since the educational reforms beginning in 2002?

Sub- Question Two

What is perceived as the advantages or disadvantages of fostering and emphasizing academic skills training at the kindergarten level?

Sub- Question Three

What are the perceived advantages or disadvantages of fostering and emphasizing behavioral and social skills training at the kindergarten level?

Sub- Question Four

How have educators been able to use developmentally appropriate practices in the kindergarten classroom while adhering to academic content standards?

Setting and Participants

The setting for this study was a rural northwest Tennessee in a county with a population of about 30,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Although the area is aesthetically beautiful due to the sparse population, it is a location with high levels of poverty. Participants for this study are current or former educators who taught kindergarten both before and after NCLB (2002). For that reason, these educators have primary knowledge of the shift that occurred after this legislation was passed.

Setting

I chose to conduct my study in rural west Tennessee. This setting was not only selected for purposes of convenience, but it also went to the heart of the problem by focusing on educators who taught in a rural part of the state in Title I public schools under the mandates of federal and local educational reforms. It is important to make certain that what is truly best is done for all the public school students within the state of Tennessee, particularly the youngest of learners because their earliest experiences with education shape their perspective of school in a very profound sense and in the long-term scheme of things. Hatch (2002) noted, “Standards-based approaches represent backward movement, designed to force early childhood programs into molds that don’t work with older students and are downright harmful for young children” (p. 462).

Information regarding the demographics for the districts that teachers teach or taught in is an average of the information from the National Center for Education Statistics, a federal government website. From this data, each school system in this rural area cited having 15 to 17 kindergarten teachers countywide. In Tennessee, the hierarchy of the public school systems across the state is identical and begins at the top with a director of schools (formerly called a

superintendent). Under the director of schools, there are three supervisors of instruction, who act as assistant directors of schools. The three supervisors are for Grades PreK–4, 5–8, and 9–12. This is the standard, common hierarchy seen throughout almost every rural school system within the state of Tennessee. The hierarchy then shifts to the school level in which there is a principal and assistant principal at each school. The exception to this is that at the somewhat larger consolidated county high schools, there are usually several assistant principals who handle various tasks from athletics to discipline.

Participants

Specifically, for the participants in this study, the curriculum and instruction used by the teachers is decided by a curriculum committee at each school who view curricula sent out by the state. They first vote on it at the schools. Then, representatives meet as a district committee and share input from their schools prior to making a final decision on which curriculum they will adopt. The instructional supervisor determines the best method for the faculty under their supervision to teach the mandated content standards handed down from the state. If necessary, teachers are trained in the prescribed content delivery (Tennessee Department of Education, 2020a). Prior to content-based instruction at all grade levels, teachers had the freedom to create developmentally appropriate lessons and activities based on the developmental stage of the students under their care without oversight from an instructional supervisor.

I selected a purposeful sample of kindergarten teachers who taught prior to and during an era of standards-based reform to participate in this phenomenological study because they are able to provide insight into the research problem and central phenomenon of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I sought participants who fit the criteria throughout local school systems in northwest Tennessee. Creswell and Poth (2018)

recommended a size of 10 participants for phenomenology studies. However, I sought 10–15 participants for this study in the event that some of the participants dropped out before finishing their commitment to this study or their interviews did not yield usable results to achieve thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2020; Lowe et al., 2018; Weller et al., 2018). The participants were all female because male kindergarten teachers are extremely rare in this area. I sought participants who were 45–85 years of age because even if a teacher began teaching at the age of 21 in the late 1990s, she would now be about this age. The 40-year span accounted for teachers who may have retired after 2002. It is not uncommon for teachers in this area to teach for more than 40 years before retiring. The number of participants parallels with Polkinghorne's (1988) and Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendations of five to 25 participants. Since some of the participants were currently teaching, others were retired, and some had switched careers, participants were able to choose the most convenient setting for our face-to-face interview. I contacted educators who were no longer working in a school system to inquire if they would be interested in participation. I obtained permission from the director of schools, so for teachers still in the school system, I sent out a systemwide email informing them of my work and intent and the criteria for participants along with a link to the Microsoft Form to screen them as possible candidates. Participating teachers had all taught kindergarten but possibly at different schools or for different school systems. Participants met the criteria of having taught kindergarten both before and after the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), also known as NCLB (2002).

Researcher Positionality

When my son was in kindergarten, he brought home a considerable amount of developmentally inappropriate homework. In the spring when his school was several weeks out

from testing their kindergarten students with the SAT-10, his teacher was sending home large packets of test practice. My husband and I worked with him for hours in the evenings, but it was too much to ask of a small child and usually ended with begging us to quit and crying that he just could not do anymore. It ruined my son's overall attitude towards school from his earliest experiences with school, and he still does not like school and learning. Additionally, at the school where I am employed, I observed children in kindergarten sitting in a teacher-directed language arts section of up to 120 minutes and a math section of 90–120 minutes. Children at this age were being subjected to long periods of direct instruction with free play and art taken away from their school day. Furthermore, I observed children aged 5 to 7 worrying about end-of-year tests to the point of making them physically sick. In addition, teachers in Tennessee, including me, are very concerned about our “Level of Effectiveness” (LOE) score because it is based in part on student achievement. A common message was passed on to the students, intended or unintended, that they are in school solely to learn a set of content standards to take a comprehensive test over them at the end of the year. This is a dangerous message as it negatively affects the attitude students have towards school, particularly the youngest of students and their very first experiences. If you asked a child why they were in school, they would tell you it is to learn content to take a test at the end of the year. It affects me on a deeply personal level that all students do not love school, love learning, or realize the importance of education.

I can recall vividly my own kindergarten experience during the 1981–1982 school year. We had two recesses and a nap at the end of the day before going home. We played with various manipulatives, such as building blocks, and had lots of arts and crafts projects. I recall it as the best educational experience of my life. My teacher was so kind. I was 5 years old when I decided I wanted to be a teacher because I wanted to grow up to be as kind to children as my teacher was

to me. I was not expected to learn math facts, be able to read books of a certain level, or write a paragraph; none of us were. However, in my small class in that rural town where we remained in the same building from kindergarten through 12th grade, many of my classmates are professionals with advanced degrees. Only 19 students were in my graduating class, and other than me, there are two pharmacists, two engineers, and a corporate banker (who also served as the alumni president for the entire University of Tennessee system), just to name a few. Our kindergarten experience lacking advanced content and rigorous instruction did not affect our ability to pursue advanced degrees and careers of our choice. My first experience was a good one, and it turned me into a lifelong learner despite any adverse experiences I had after that point. If that initial experience had not been as good as it was, I do not know what might have become of me. I know that today's kindergarteners would do well to have a similar experience, and I hope that someday again they will.

Kindergarten needs to be scrutinized at the national level so that sweeping changes can be made to restore it to its original glory throughout the United States. Irreparable damage is being done to children while they are still rapidly developing. I have observed strong teachers leaving education because they perceived their role in following curriculum standards was harmful to young children. Through this study, I gave a voice to those teachers who retired early, switched careers, or are still endeavoring to teach our youngest students every day in the classroom. Some of the participants for this study were teachers I work with, used to work with, or have formerly worked in the county in which I teach. However, I currently teach in the English as a Second Language Department and had no authority over any teacher who was recruited as a participant in this study.

Interpretive Framework

The interpretive framework that guided this study is social constructivism. Social constructivism is a paradigm typically used for qualitative research in which meanings are constructed through interaction with participants. Social constructivists hold beliefs the individuals seek out understanding of the world and the culture in which they live and work and use their experiences to construct subjective meanings. The objective of the research by a social constructivist is to mostly rely upon views of the study participants. Two characteristics shared by this paradigm and phenomenology are that researchers in both recognize that their personal experiences and backgrounds influence their interpretation of the problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These defining characteristics make constructivism an obvious and suitable choice for this study.

Philosophical Assumptions

My motivation for conducting this study stems from three philosophical assumptions: ontological, epistemological, and axiological. I am completely motivated to carry this study with the well-being of children in mind. Children are the future and need the best possible beginning in their academic lives to grow into well-rounded adults who contribute in a positive way to our world. This study contributes to the body of knowledge needed to inform decisions on best practices for the youngest of students. I believe it is of the utmost importance that this topic is expanded upon because educators of young children only get one chance to get it right.

Ontological Assumption. Because I believe it is valuable to pursue the knowledge of others' experience, I subscribe to an ontological assumption which seeks to understand the participants' reality within the kindergarten classroom and to describe the perspectives of those teachers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I believe the best data must come from the reality of

kindergarten teachers who have been in this setting and worked through these shifts over the years. They have firsthand, primary knowledge to share, which effectively contributed to the goal of this study.

Epistemological Assumption. Epistemology is the second philosophical assumption used for this study, and it is simply the means by which we know what we know. Bhattacharya (2017) wrote, “The focus in transcendental phenomenology is on how knowledge and meaning are constructed, a question of epistemology” (p. 99). Individuals construct their own meaning, which is established by their interactions with the world, and this constructionism is the epistemology that guides my research. I made a cognitive, lucid choice for my specific research purpose. The epistemological assumption informing my research is that academic shakedown has changed the very nature and purpose of kindergarten to the detriment of the youngest of students.

Axiological Assumption. Furthermore, I see the value in understanding the experiences of kindergarten teachers and how to use that understanding to improve children’s first experiences in the classroom. For this reason, I subscribe to an axiological assumption because I believe this topic is important and valuable to research. With an axiological assumption, I explain how my values influence the narrative and include my own understanding in combination with the understandings of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The rearing and education of children is central to my life’s work. Children need the best possible beginnings in life to grow into intelligent, thoughtful human beings who can participate in our democracy, workforce, and communities.

Researcher’s Role

I was the human instrument in this study and was influenced by the many years I have

been a teacher and from the 15 years I have been a mother. I loved kindergarten myself and believed that everyone had the same wonderful experience as me. As an adult, I expressed this to friends, family, and coworkers who either had a similar story or a story I simply found shocking. For example, my husband told me a story about an experience in kindergarten in which he was learning to write. He is left-handed, and his teacher yelled at him, telling him it was wrong to write with his left hand and forced him to learn to write with his right hand.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained that the role of the researcher is to listen to the responses and stories that participants are willing to share. I described the lived experience of teachers who taught kindergarten during an era of sweeping educational reform. The phenomenon of interest is teachers who have firsthand knowledge from their own classrooms about how they and their students have changed due to standards-based reform. I bracketed my own opinions out of the interview and allowed the participants to tell their stories and share their experiences for the data collected to be rich and beneficial to my inquiry. I investigated their lived experiences and the context in which they experienced the shift to a standards-based classroom instead of attempting to obtain theoretical explanations.

Bracketing was necessary and was used so that I could set aside my own knowledge and prior experiences as a teacher to listen to each teacher's story through a lens of novelty to extract rich and informative data from the participants (Moustakas, 1994). I kept a researcher's reflexive journal (Appendix I) to aid in the bracketing process. As an educator who has been teaching for more than 20 years, it was essential that I bracket myself from my experiences with my biological children and working with kindergarten-aged children. Touching on the emotional, professional, personal, and pedagogical experiences of kindergarten teachers who had their livelihood transformed by standards-based reform is not something that has been studied in this

manner.

The 2021–2022 school year was my 21st year of teaching. Five of those years were spent exclusively with middle and high school students, but the remaining 16 have been spent in elementary schools teaching the youngest of students. Kindergarten students do not realize differences in cognitive abilities among each other. If a fellow student is struggling, a child who understands what to do will often come to assist that child. They are always able to create a scenario and assign parts to each other to role play a number of different situations. I have observed incredible growth of a student in just the first semester of school that shocked even the child’s teacher. I have observed kindergarten teachers who use art, music, manipulatives, and visual representations to teach their students new concepts. I have also observed kindergarten teachers who use an overabundance of direct instruction, rote practice, and worksheets to teach academic content standards. The students of the latter teacher, such as my son, grow to hate school from the very beginning. It is almost impossible to change their attitude towards school once their first experience is ruined in kindergarten. This study can help kindergarten teachers and instructional supervisors make adjustments so that every child’s kindergarten year can be something they remember with fondness that sets them up to be lifelong learners who love being in the classroom.

Procedures

The first step of this research study was to acquire written permission from the director of schools that permitted me to conduct research in the school system. Thereafter, I defended my proposal, which resulted in the ability to seek IRB approval from Liberty University. After securing IRB approval, I conducted a pilot test with teachers not involved in the study to assess the protocols designed for data collection. Teachers offered feedback to improve questions and

instructions for the open letter. Pilot testing the data collection methods through mock interviews ensured the suitability of the questions and improved interview techniques.

Permissions

Prior to recruiting any participants for this study, I sought permission from Liberty's IRB (see Appendix A) to conduct this study. Kaur et al. (2017) addressed the value of appraising the methodology of one's data collection tools. After acquiring IRB approval, I reached out to kindergarten teachers in neighboring school systems to participate in a pilot study to test my data collection methods. A pilot study is a test run, a scaled-down version of the main study. Pilot studies are valuable in that they provide the researcher with feedback about the viability of interview questions and planned methodologies for the study. Pilot studies are not intended to provide data for the main study. The questions used during the interview were evaluated during the pilot study. Maxwell (2013) rationalized that if questions are not asked in a particular way, the data gathered might not be the rich information necessary for a phenomenology. Maxwell recommended the various methods chosen to gather research information should be assessed prior to use to safeguard that they provide suitable, valuable data. Because the pool of educators I required for my main study were limited, I asked teachers who taught kindergarten in the early 2000s when changes were beginning to occur but not necessarily prior to NCLB 2002.

During the pilot study, I conducted three test interviews to refine my interview guide, conducted a small focus group, and had the pilot participants write an open letter. As a novice researcher, it was my desire that the pilot study would allow me to remove or alter any small problems I had before questioning the actual participants and to ensure that I would be able to answer my research questions from the data collection methods being used. I was able to

effectively assess the viability of the interview and focus group questions. After completing the pilot study, I began the recruitment process.

Recruitment Plan

As the first step in the recruitment process, I sent a countywide email to teachers in the school system and retired teachers that contained a recruitment letter (Appendix B) with a link to a Microsoft Forms screening survey to determine participant eligibility (see Appendix C). After determining which respondents meet the criteria for participation in the study, I emailed them, notifying them that they qualified for participation (Appendix D) and included a link to the Consent Form (Appendix E) telling them how to sign and return it to me. This email also requested that participants who replied to me should choose a time and location for the interview for the purposes of setting up a schedule. One day prior to the interview, I sent a reminder email of our interview appointment. Appendix D contains a thank you email to those who completed the screening survey but were not selected to participate in this study.

Data Collection Plan

For this study, I used a transcendental phenomenological approach to qualitative research. Before beginning to collect data, I needed to focus the research away from myself and my experience through the process of *epoché*. *Epoché* is the act of bracketing, or setting aside, personal bias or judgements and describes the transition from thinking about a phenomenon to reflecting upon it. *Epoché* prepared me for the knowledge that came from the voices of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing the topic is vital in phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The bracketing process, or *epoché*, aided me in understanding my personal bias before collecting any data, ensuring that my bias was kept out of the data once I begin data collection, and helped me view the phenomenon with a fresh eye. Moustakas (1994)

described this as an essential step in phenomenological work because it restricts preconceived beliefs and judgments, which allows for more clarified, meticulously analyzed data to emerge. I recorded my bracketed thoughts in a researcher's reflexive journal (see Appendix I). I continued to use this journal throughout the data collection and data synthesis phases of my research.

I began collecting data by using semi-structured interviews to elicit responses about the participants' lived experiences followed by a focus group of teachers to discuss difficulties in teaching standards to 5- and 6-year-old children. Focus groups and interviews were utilized to describe the phenomenon of interest. Then, I concluded the data collection by asking the participants to compose an open letter describing how kindergarten was before and after NCLB (2002). Methods of data collection were used in conjunction with each other to describe the participants' experience in the shift to a standards-based kindergarten and to increase the overall experience and voice of each participant. These three methods provided credibility to the overall shared story of the participants.

Individual Interviews

According to Gall et al. (2010), the objective of a phenomenology study is to "find the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon" (p. 345). The semi-structured interview presented an intimate perspective from kindergarten teachers who taught during an era of sweeping educational reform. The participants were given the opportunity to complete their individual interview either in-person or utilizing Microsoft Teams, an online format. All interviews were recorded and backed up to a secure cloud location. Moustakas (1994) explained that the semi-structured interview allows an opportunity for a collaborative dialogue that would make it simpler for the interviewer to create a connection with the participant. Interviews were one-on-one, semi-structured, and open-ended.

Individual Interview Questions (Appendix G)

1. How many years did you or have you taught kindergarten? (icebreaker)
2. Prior to the implementation of NCLB in 2002 and being given standards to teach, what did you use to guide what you taught on a daily basis? (Sub-Question [SQ] 1)
3. Prior to 2002, how did you assess student mastery? How do you assess mastery now? (SQ1)
4. Thinking about kindergarten content standards, do you think the current content standards are doable for 5-year-old children? (SQ1, SQ2, SQ4) Why or why not?
5. Explain whether kindergarten content standards should contain a social and behavioral skill construct. (SQ3)
6. What did it mean to be ready for kindergarten before 2002? What does it mean to be ready now? (Central Research Question [CRQ], SQ2)
7. Please explain any differences, positive or negative, which you have noticed in kindergarten students' readiness during the different eras. (CRQ, SQ3)
8. Explain the difference in the amount of time you spend in direct instruction between the two eras? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ4)
9. Explain key skills that used to be taught in kindergarten that you believe are important which have gone to the wayside? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3)
10. How has/did the pedagogy and environment of your kindergarten classroom change from pre-NCLB to post-NCLB? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ4)
11. What is the difference in how you decide to retain a child between the two eras? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ2)

12. How much free play do students currently receive daily for activities such as art, dress-up, building with blocks, etc.? How does this compare to the amount of time they received to take part in these activities prior to NCLB? (SQ1, SQ2, SQ3, SQ4)
13. What ways and how often do students have during the school day to interact with one another and build social and behavioral skills? (SQ3)
14. Do you think students in kindergarten should be given time to rest or nap in the afternoon? Have you observed any behaviors that suggests they may need it? (CRQ)
15. What specific outcomes and consequences, positive or negative, have you witnessed in children as an effect of a standards-based curriculum? (SQ1, SQ2)
16. What else would you like to add that we did not discuss?

Question 1 was an icebreaker. Question 2 asked teachers to explain what they used as a curriculum guide before being mandated to follow a set of content standards. Question 3 asked teachers how they used to assess students because now they are told how to assess student mastery. Questions 4 and 5 asked teachers for their opinion about content standards being developmentally appropriate and their ability to also teach social and behavioral skills. Prior to state-mandated academic content standards for kindergarten, school systems in Tennessee could use recommended frameworks or were left to their own devices to determine what they thought kindergarten students should learn before going to first grade; thus, it was important to discern what each teacher used for curriculum and instruction in their classrooms prior to 2001. The neoliberal political discourse in the United States has led to the privatization of many aspects of public schooling, such as curriculum and testing being provided for by private, for-profit companies (Repko-Erwin, 2017). Private companies take funds from state departments of education and local education agencies to develop curriculum and instructional materials and

standardized tests that align with federal mandates for accountability. Teachers must adhere to the curriculum in the manner in which they are instructed to do so by instructional supervisors and essentially teach students to take a test over the content at the end of the year.

Questions 6 and 7 asked teachers about readiness and what the difference in kindergarten readiness is between the two eras. Readiness to begin kindergarten has changed over the years along with teachers' perceptions of what it means to be ready and how ready they would like the students to be upon entering their classrooms. Most schools use a screening tool to determine if a child can count and recognize colors, letters, and shapes. The mastery of basic academic content alone does not make a child ready for learning at school. Being truly ready requires skills that are not academic in nature. Educational psychologists who follow the work of Vygotsky (1930/1978) have come to a consensus about four major components for school readiness: (a) motivation to study at school, (b) self-regulation, (c), symbolic thought, and (d) non-egocentric position. Over the past 10 years, Tennessee has gradually moved back the minimum age for a child to begin kindergarten. The law currently states that a child must be 5 years of age by August 15 to register to kindergarten.

Question 8 asked about the amount of time spent in direct instruction between the two eras. Instead of modeling and developing appropriate skills, teachers have had to shift to a direct instruction model, which is contrary to the learning needs of children at this age. Question 9 asked if there are any skills the teachers taught prior to the shift that have gone to the wayside, which addresses the CRQ and SQ1, SQ2, and SQ3. Question 10 asked teachers to consider any change(s) in their classroom between the two eras that they feel worthy for discussion. Question 11 asked teachers how their decision to retain a child in kindergarten has changed between the

two eras. A student can be retained in grade if the child's teacher feels they did not learn the content of the grade level well enough to progress to the next grade level.

Question 12 asked the teacher if the amount of free play students have in the classroom for playing with blocks, dress-up, etc. has changed any between the two eras. Question 13 asked the teacher to discuss the amount of peer interaction students have with one another between the two eras. Vygotsky's (1930/1978) sociocultural theory is vital to this study because he posited that children require structured imaginative play with peers, an opportunity to use inner speech when needed, and free play for proper cognitive development at the age children are typically in kindergarten. Question 14 asked teachers about their students getting rest time or nap time in the afternoon. Children this age do not have as much "memory" as adults do and must nap to clear up space. Simply put, nap time boosts learning (Jones & Spencer, 2020; Riggins & Spencer, 2020; Weissbluth, 1995). However, it has been taken away in many kindergarten classrooms to increase instructional time.

Question 15 asked teachers to note any differences between students now and students before NCLB. This question ascertained whether teachers believe there has been a trade-off between social and behavioral achievement and academic achievement. Kindergarteners need a year to play and develop their social and behavioral skills in order to develop cognitively and be successful in school (Bettencourt et al., 2018). Question 16 invited the participant to reflect on the changes she experienced and gives her the opportunity to add anything she feels is valuable to our discussion. With that transition, changes in how participants taught, what they taught, and how the children reacted were addressed. I left this last question very open to allow the participants to elaborate as much as needed to vent any frustrations or share any positive changes they had experienced.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

After transcribing the interviews, I sent the transcript of the interview to the participants to check them for accuracy. Participants were encouraged to reply to me or contact me if there was further information they wished to share with me that they thought of after the interview was concluded. After setting aside my bias and considering the phenomenon with an open mind, I read through the transcripts to identify invariant horizons, or units of meaning with each unit having equal value. This method of horizontalization aided me in phenomenological reduction of the data.

Focus Groups

Gathering participants in a group setting allowed me to ask them about standards and other aspects of the kindergarten classroom that are a challenge due to the students' developmental stage (Gall et al., 2010). Participants shared opinions and experiences that they otherwise would not have thought of in an individual interview because they could piggyback on the response of another participant if a comment raised thoughts and further added to the discussion. To accommodate the participants' busy schedules, I conducted multiple focus group sessions via Microsoft Teams. Each focus group session was recorded for later transcription. Participants performed member checks of the transcripts to determine accuracy.

Focus Group Questions (Appendix H)

1. How is everyone's year going so far?
2. Tell me how kindergarten was before NCLB.
3. Please describe any instances in which your students did not seem developmentally ready to learn a certain content standard. (SQ4)

4. Are there any standards that you would like to see reworded or completely removed from kindergarten? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ4)
5. Describe how you find ways to bring play and art into your academic content standards. (SQ4)
6. How much control do you have over the way in which you deliver lesson content? (SQ1, SQ4)
7. Describe what you think it means for a student to be ready for kindergarten. (SQ1, SQ2, SQ3)
8. What types of free play do you offer students in your classroom? (SQ3)
9. Describe the process of creating a portfolio as an assessment of your effectiveness. (CRQ)
10. How does the state's observation protocol help you to be a better teacher? How does the state's observation protocol cause you distress? (SQ1)
11. Do you hope to continue teaching kindergarten or would you prefer to try teaching a different grade? Why or why not? If you have moved to another grade, why did you leave kindergarten? (CRQ, SQ1)
12. What is your view regarding the importance of a nap time for kindergarten students? When was the last time students in your kindergarten were allowed to take a nap in the afternoon? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ3)
13. Is there anything anyone wants to add that was not discussed here?

Questions 1 and 2 were meant to be an icebreaker and lead us into the other focus group questions. Questions 3 and 4 were designed to draw out the participants' observations of their own students' readiness for the current content standards. Le et al. (2019) described the trade-

offs between academic and social–emotional skills in kindergarten, indicating there is too much focus on academics for which young children are not developmentally ready. Teachers’ methods of teaching have changed with standards-based reform, and Questions 5 and 6 aimed to elicit information about how the teachers deliver content to students. In addition, Question 6 went to the heart of teacher autonomy (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Briggs et al., 2018; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Smyth, 2008). What constitutes kindergarten readiness has changed over time (Hustedt et al., 2018), and Question 7 asked teachers to describe what they expect from a student who is considered kindergarten ready. In Tennessee, many school systems have gone to a portfolio method of assessing teachers on how well their students mastered the standards. Most teachers outside the realm of kindergarten do not have knowledge of the process or purpose, so that is the purpose of Question 7.

Smith and Kovacs (2011) explained the impact that standards-based reforms have had on teachers, and Questions 8 and 9 explored the stress of the job and teacher attrition. Question 8 asked teachers to identify the types of free play they have available for their students as play has become a central issue of academic shovedown to kindergarten (Almon & Miller, 2011; Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Bassok et al., 2016; Hatch, 2002; Le et al., 2019; Navarro-Cruz & Luschei, 2018; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Repko-Erwin, 2017; Saeki et al., 2018; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Smyth, 2008). Questions 9 and 10 asked about the procedure kindergarten teachers must follow for portfolio submission for their level of effectiveness score (TDOE, 2020b). In addition, teachers have reported feeling additional stress having to produce a portfolio proving they are an effective teacher in order to keep their job and lessen the number of observations that administrators will do (Lambert et al., 2019). Question 11 asked teachers to consider whether they would like to continue teaching kindergarten or move to a different grade level. Teachers

have reported wanting to change grade levels or get out of the profession completely (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Briggs et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Lambert et al., 2019; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Smyth, 2008; Young & Goering, 2018).

Question 12 asked about classroom naps. Sleep allows the brain to consolidate all the information that was gathered during the day to be stored in memory. The research has shown that children at this age do not have the brain space to consolidate everything that they have learned throughout the day and require a nap to free up brain space so that they can continue to be able to store information (Berger et al., 2018; Jenco, 2016; Jones & Spencer, 2020; Riggins & Spencer, 2020; Weissbluth, 1995). Question 13 invited and allowed participants to provide any further information that our group did not discuss.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

After transcribing responses from the focus groups, participants performed member checks of their contributions to the focus group to determine the accuracy of the transcripts. Upon completion of member checks, I skimmed the transcripts searching for any possible preliminary codes. Next, I used the verbatim hard copies of the checked transcripts to carefully read and manually identify statements to discover any emerging themes. Using horizontalization, I was receptive to and positioned equal worth on every statement. The method of horizontalization aided in phenomenological reduction of the data by identifying units of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). Copious units of meaning can be derived from this data. To develop a textual description of the phenomenon, I reduced the number of words and replaced the vocabulary used by participants with words of similar meaning.

Letter-Writing

Each participant was emailed the instructions (see Appendix F) for composing an open letter addressing the way in which she would describe kindergarten now compared to how it was. The goal was that the letter gave the teacher the opportunity to confidentially voice her feelings in a slower-paced, interpersonal reflective manner, which could provide very thick, rich information needed for this study. Although letters are typically used in a narrative study, these documents work well in this phenomenology because I sought to gain strong personal insight into what the participants had experienced in their professional lives. I chose to have participants complete the open letter last because, after member checking their responses from the individual interviews and focus groups, they may not have liked the way they came across, or they may have had more information that they wanted to include. Letters also allow a person to be more emotionally open to describe an experience than they would be in a face-to-face situation.

Letter-Writing Data Analysis Plan

Upon receiving completed letters from participants, I sent personal letters thanking each of the participants for their assistance in my study. Then, I read through the letters to discover any information that offered additional data and meaning units to the data I had already collected. I also looked for similar themes between the letters and interviews and focus groups to use as I moved into data synthesis and attempted to solidify the significant themes and subthemes.

Data Synthesis

Moustakas' (1994) data analysis procedure of phenomenological reduction was used in this study. Prior to beginning data synthesis, I set aside any presumptions about the topic using my researcher's reflexive journal (see Appendix I). This allowed me to hear what the participants

had to say with fresh ears. Before starting data collection, I recorded all of my personal experience working with young children and being the mother of students in kindergarten in my researcher's reflexive journal. Since I already recorded this information, I was able to bracket out all of those past personal experiences of my own as a mother and teacher to interact with the data prior to reflecting on it.

I gathered data through individual interviews, a focus group, and letter writing. These three methods furnished me with the needed information to triangulate the data, which led to a better analysis and increased the credibility of my findings. After member checks of the transcripts, I focused on organizing the data to make sense of the copious amounts of rich text to develop the narrative with a conscientious reading of the transcripts. At this point, I was able to see if there were any connections between responses in individual interviews and within the focus group. I began this process by coding the data manually, always keeping in mind the study's purpose. The first manual cycle coding used the hard copies of the transcripts to highlight repetitive patterns. Once codes were identified, I began with organizing the codes into categories. Quotes from participants that were similar were classified in the same category. Next, I began to identify common themes and make interpretations, in which clusters of meaning emerged from the analysis of statements into similar clusters, known as themes. I then removed statements that were repetitive or that overlapped one another. Next, individual textural descriptions were written about the participants' experiences and the meaning individuals have experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A simultaneous step with writing textural descriptions was to also write structural descriptions that explain how the phenomenon was experienced by the participants in the study. From these textural and structural descriptions, I was also able to arrive at subthemes of each overarching topic, like important details of a main idea. Once the textural and structural

descriptions were completed, I synthesized the data by combining the two to form a textural-structural description, or essence, of the experience. This process was repeated with the data from each participant until I reached saturation. The textural-structural descriptions from each participant were synthesized into a composite of the data, which represented the essence of the experience for all the participants. I also maintained a reflective journal to track my thoughts and experiences and to address researcher bias and prove transferability and credibility measures. Moustakas (1994) clarifies this further, explaining that the process consists of three steps: (a) pursuing all possible meanings, (b) examining possible differing perspectives, and (c) altering the contexts of the phenomenon. The final step required using a composite description to comprehensibly communicate the essence of the phenomenon in the findings section in which I constructed the structural essence of the experience. This step in the process necessitated imagination and intuition to reflect the themes relevant and applicable to the experience. The steps I used for data synthesis are described in detail below.

Horizontalization

Moustakas (1994) explained horizontalization as building lists of the data that have been gathered and putting them into beginning groups. I reviewed the data from all three collection sources and used manual data reduction to simplify the coding and detection of repetitive themes and to let the data analysis process be pictured in different ways. During the building of these lists, I continued to bracket myself and be open minded to the attitudes of the participants. My personal biases continued to be recorded in the researcher's reflexive journal.

Reduction and elimination were the second step in the analysis process. I completed this by assessing the data to determine if the data contained "a moment of the experience that was a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121) of the

phenomenon. Then, data were scrutinized to determine if the participants articulated the idea and portrayal of the case. If not, the ideas were stored in a file for what appears to be outlier data. Ambiguous or redundant descriptions were also eliminated. All the remaining codes contributed to the essence of the experience and were used to develop themes.

Clustering into Themes

Data from my analysis of the individual data collection methods that made it past the elimination cut were coded and examined for emerging themes. Each code was ordered by similar themes that related to parallel aspects of the experience. Each theme characterized a central constituent of the phenomenon. All data were relevant to the essence of the experience of the kindergarten teachers. Themes were analyzed to determine if any subthemes emerge. After codes were ordered into themes, they were validated. Validation occurred through substantiation and confirmation of data. Themes were cross-checked against the transcriptions from the participants.

Textural Descriptions

Textural descriptions of the collected data emphasized rich descriptions of the individual experience of kindergarten teachers who have taught through eras of educational reform. Textural descriptions also provided *the what* of the phenomenon in order to know and comprehend an overall meaning of the phenomenon. These textural descriptions took the individual responses and fused them together to create a composite textural description (Moustakas, 1994).

Structural Descriptions

Moustakas's (1994) seven steps for analysis continued by utilizing information that was kept after validation; all outstanding items listed were thought applicable to the experienced

phenomenon. Precise language was extricated from the transcription to check the experience. All comprehensive experiences described offered a careful restoration that clearly and precisely conveyed the lived experience in thick, rich, telling information. The textural description of the phenomenon explained “what” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 78) the event experience was akin to. The structural description of the phenomenon explained “how” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 79) the event was experienced.

Textural-Structural Synthesis

When each textural description was completed and each structural description identified, I combined the descriptions for each teacher participant. This was the final step in data analysis and provided the basis for describing the how and what of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The textural-structural synthesis used the data from the focus groups, the semi-structured interviews, and letter writing along with my intuition and reflection. Moustakas (1994) stated that reflection must occur throughout the process to aid in building structures for the experience’s essence. The descriptions manifested through the textural-structural synthesis refined the experience of the kindergarten teacher during a time of educational reform via the combination of my intuition and reflection of the merged structural and textural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). The textural-structural synthesis concluded in a complete, overall description of the essence of the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness

The process of analysis decreases the amount of data collected, detects and groups categories together, and seeks some understanding of the data. The researcher tries to stay faithful to the text and to achieve trustworthiness. Trustworthiness of a study’s results is the foundation of high-quality qualitative research. A precise and comprehensive approach was used

in this study to increase trustworthiness. Applying Lincoln and Guba's (1985) strategies for trustworthiness, I demonstrated that this study had rigor, reliability, and objectivity through the development of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These terms are all tantamount with qualitative research. In the following sections, I define each term and its association to the overall merit and rigor of this qualitative study.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which a study's results truthfully portray reality from the perspective of the participants regarding the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility in this study was reached through three different means: triangulation, member-checking, and prolonged engagement. Each of these three methods for ensuring the credibility of this study are explained below.

Triangulation

For this study, I used triangulation of qualitative methods, data collection methods, sources, and theories to uncover the experiences of kindergarten teachers who taught through a shift from a traditional kindergarten to a standards-based kindergarten. These methods included narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005) in which kindergarten teachers shared their lived experiences about the shift they have experienced with their students and within their classrooms. Three data collection methods ensured that triangulation was accomplished through the use of individual interviews with kindergarten teachers, letter writing, and focus groups comprised of kindergarten teachers. Source triangulation was accomplished using the kindergarten teachers and their perspectives on the phenomenon of the shift to a standards-based kindergarten. Theory triangulation was accomplished via Piaget's (1936/1952) theory of cognitive development and

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1930/1978) because both theoretical frameworks explain what is good and appropriate for the instruction and well-being of students of kindergarten age.

Member Checks

Having taught kindergarten myself for 16 years and during the time that the shift occurred, I had a connection with my participants simply because we shared an experience teaching elementary school in rural school systems within the same state. Although we had not had any previous conversations, I shared that connection with the participants, but no other information, including my personal biases. Rossman and Rallis (2016) wrote that this type of knowledge about the participants' experience can be beneficial for the researcher. During interviews, I asked participants a similar question or to restate their response to clarify it to immediately achieve member-checking. Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed the importance of this immediate member checking during interviews to guarantee that the essence of the experience is depicted thoroughly. I provided each participant with a transcript of their interview to review for accuracy, another form of member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition to the transcripts, I also provided them with a summary of what I took from their interviews so they could check my understanding of their experience for themselves.

Prolonged Engagement

Prolonged engagement involves spending adequate time in the field to learn or understand the phenomenon of interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I spent a minimum of 1 to 2 hours with each participant to complete the individual interview and a focus group, collecting the required data for this study. I needed a considerable amount of time to read their personal letters, which also connected me to the participants on a personal level. Having been a teacher for over 20 years, I had spent sufficient time in the field of elementary education in a public school

setting in the United States. My own lengthy experience also lent itself to the facilitation of participants to genuinely open up about their experiences and perspectives.

Transferability

Thick descriptive data of the experience (Geertz, 2008) were used to increase the transferability of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and granted the reader the ability to plainly understand the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I used detailed descriptions of the setting and the participants. Creswell and Poth (2018) wrote that detailed descriptions allow a researcher to transfer the meanings and essences of a study to other locations to determine the applicability of the findings to other kindergarten teachers who taught both before and after 2001. Taking note of the mutual characteristics among the descriptions allowed the findings to be more transferable (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, explaining the specifics necessitated the use of several participant quotes and an active participant voice (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used an audit trail as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which kept a record of all the steps completed to aid another researcher in duplicating this study.

Dependability

Dependability is validating that the results are consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Korstjens and Moser (2018) defined dependability as the stability of findings over time. Based on this description, dependability was increased by clearly and comprehensively explaining each phase of the study from IRB approval to findings. A technique I already use in the workplace is peer debriefing (Marshall & Rossman, 2016), so this was a natural choice for me. Peer debriefing allowed me to discuss developing results with colleagues to ensure that my analyses were supported by the data. My peers who have taught for at least 20 years and are also mothers like me provided their own insight to my findings. I have also shared

much of what I learned from my research with these peers along my journey, and they helped clarify my results in this way also.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a level of objectivity or the scope to which the results of a study are developed by the participants and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Korstjens and Moser (2018) defined confirmability as the degree to which findings are clearly derived from data, and both of which can be confirmed by “transparently describing the research steps taken from the start of a research project to the development of the findings. The records of the research path are kept throughout the study” (p. 121). Confirmability was addressed through a researcher’s reflexive journal (Appendix I) that was used to record *epoché* and the bracketing of my biases.

Ethical Considerations

Since this study required the use of human subjects, IRB approval was required in advance to beginning any collection of data. Evidence was submitted to the IRB to ensure that the study design obeyed the guidelines for conducting ethical research (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 151). Therefore, this study did begin without first gaining IRB approval which deemed this study ethical regarding the treatment of human participants.

Prior to seeking IRB approval for this study, I acquired permission from the director of schools to conduct the study within a specific rural yet large county. All kindergarten teachers who were interested in participating were informed of the study purpose and their ability to opt out of participating at any time. If they chose to participate, they signed a consent form recognizing that they had been informed of the study’s purpose and their role in the study. I used pseudonyms for each of the participating teachers and for the school system. This confidentiality

was addressed in the consent forms, and participants were aware that any mention of them in the findings was reported using a pseudonym. I used no distinguishing information that could connect a participant to this study. All digital files associated with this study were stored in a password-protected folder on a password-protected computer. Anything that was in written form was scanned into a portable document file (PDF) format, saved to a password-protected folder on my password-protected laptop, and the physical papers were shredded. All digital files will be erased after a period of 3 years past publication of the study. Reciprocity is important, and it is important to give back to participants for their time and effort (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 53). Participant compensation is common practice in research studies, and participants in this study were compensated for their time with an Amazon gift card valued at \$30.

Summary

This chapter explained why a qualitative methodology was used for this study and why a transcendental phenomenology has been chosen as the design. Transcendental phenomenology allowed for a thorough examination of the attitudes, feelings, and experiences kindergarten teachers have experienced as a result of standards-based reform. The research questions I used in the study have been explained. I obtained IRB and school system approval before I began any research. I explained how I recruited a purposeful sample. The three methods of data collection outlined earlier in the chapter included individual interviews, focus group interviews, and document analysis. I described how the data were analyzed and how I met standards of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of kindergarten teachers who have taught through an era of federally mandated, standards-based educational reforms. A phenomenological design was chosen for this study because it “describes the common meaning of experiences of a phenomenon (or topic or concept) for several individuals and the researchers reduce the experiences to a central meaning or ‘essence’ of the experience” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 314). The group studied consisted of educators who taught kindergarten both before and after the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002).

In this chapter, the profiles of 15 individuals who fit the criteria are described. Chapter Four begins with an overview of each participant and is followed by the results of the study. Themes established from the analysis of data are grouped together to provide a description of the experiences of the participants to establish the essence of the phenomenon of teaching kindergarten both before and after a period of major educational reform. The results of this study are explained using a narrative form and organized by theme. Participant quotes are verbatim to provide a voice for each individual and reveal individualities of each of the participants. Furthermore, this chapter considers how the collected data answer the research questions. Lastly, a summary concludes this chapter.

Participants

The participants in this study were teachers who taught kindergarten in the years before and after the passage of No Child Left Behind (2002). Twelve of the teachers were still in teacher roles. Two of the teachers were retired; however, one was still involved in education by

substitute teaching at a local K–5 elementary school and the other is still involved by serving as an advisor for Head Start. An additional participant has changed careers. All participants described their time teaching the youngest of students during an era of educational reform.

I began the study with Creswell and Poth's (2018) suggested size of 10 participants for phenomenology studies. However, I sought to acquire 10–15 participants for this study in the event that some of the participants dropped out before finishing their commitment to this study or their interviews did not yield usable results to achieve thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2020; Lowe et al., 2018; Weller et al., 2018). The number of participants parallels with Polkinghorne's (1988) and Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendations of five to 25 participants. All the participants have experienced the phenomenon of teaching kindergarten through an era of educational reform. Participants were all female, ranging in age from 45–74 years.

Participants who had taught kindergarten both before and after NCLB (2002) were selected through purposeful criterion sampling (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). To protect the identity of each participant, pseudonyms were used. Twenty-two potential participants responded to the survey; however, only 15 met the criteria and moved on to be interviewed. The participants openly shared their lived experiences of teaching kindergarten both before and after a period of major educational reform and were highly informative with their responses. Since all of the participants have taught for over 20 years, they had a wealth of experience to share with me. Their observations, feelings, and the events they had experienced provided an abundance of thick, rich data. Table 1 displays the pseudonyms, years in education both before and after the passage of NCLB (2002), and the current position of each of the participants.

Table 1*Teacher Participants*

Pseudonym	Years in Education Pre-NCLB	Years in Education Post-NCLB	Current Position
Autumn	32	20	Retired; Still substitute teaches
Daisy	10	20	Middle School Teacher
Dawn	11	20	Elementary School Teacher
Honey	5	20	Elementary Teacher
Iris	7	20	PreK Teacher
Ivy	4	20	Middle School Teacher
Lily	2	20	Middle School Teacher
Opal	8	20	Kindergarten Teacher
Poppy	15	20	Administrator
Raven	18	17	Retired
Rose	7	5	Elected Official
Sky	7	20	Kindergarten Teacher
Stormy	3	20	Middle School Teacher
Summer	11	20	Middle School Teacher
Sunny	9	21	Elementary Teacher

Autumn

Autumn is a retired teacher who has continued to work for the school system as a new teacher mentor and a substitute teacher at a local K–5 elementary school. She has been in education for a total of 43 years with 32 of those years being in kindergarten. Before she began

teaching kindergarten, she was a high school English teacher for a few years. Autumn taught kindergarten through the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. She described kindergarten as magical and said so with a sparkle in her eye and believed that if this first experience in big kid school was not a fun one that it would ruin a child on school throughout their formative years. With Autumn's vast experience over more than three decades, more information was yielded from her than any other participant with her interview running three times as long as the others.

Daisy

Daisy taught kindergarten for 17 years before making a move to teach middle school. She exuded a brilliance of warmth, life, and humor that gravitated me towards her. As an educator, I could tell she is one of the best—a person who has an excellent rapport with both students and staff. Daisy is enthusiastic about her work and about her students. When we spoke about academic shovedown, she agreed that kindergarten teachers, including herself, had been guilty of it. She took issue with the fact that although the actual brain development of a child has not changed, our expectations for them have. She said the curriculum used assumes all students know alphabet letters and sounds when they enter the classroom the first day, and the students certainly do not. She stated that education is not meeting the needs of the students but the needs of the state.

Dawn

Dawn has been teaching for 30 years. She began in the early 1990s and continues to teach now. She began her career in kindergarten but over the years, has moved up to third grade because she “could not do it anymore.” Dawn reported that academic shovedown has irreparably damaged fine motor skills and led to weak inferencing and comprehension skills in English language arts. As a teacher, she can see the advantage of a student being older and more mature

in behavior and cognitive skills. This being the case, she redshirted two of her own children, and they were very successful in school. Her child who began school at age 5 struggled tremendously in school.

Honey

Honey is a vibrant, energetic woman with a big smile and a zeal for children and life who has been teaching since the 1990s. Honey seems to always be laughing. She is firm but she is kind. Honey spent enough time teaching kindergarten to know that they are not only such a precious, gentle age to work with, but they are also not the age group of students she wanted to spend the entirety of teaching career with. She is deeply concerned by the amount of time scheduled for English language arts and math in kindergarten and the lack of a sizable recess time as they are only allowed 15–20 minutes of recess per day.

Iris

Iris has a knack for working with and being successful with the youngest students at her school. It is her passion and has been for over two decades. Iris began teaching kindergarten and then transitioned to PreK within the public school setting, where even PreK students have content standards. Her perspective is unique in that she has observed, over time, the same standards that were first expected in kindergarten have been shoved down to PreK. PreK is the new kindergarten, and she is working hard every day to see that her students are ready for the challenge.

Ivy

Ivy has been in education for 23 years. She began her career in early childhood education and is an expert on the topic. She has also served as an administrator of the littlest of students and knows what they need to thrive. She has since made the move to middle school and says that

she cannot believe what is currently expected of children in both PreK and kindergarten. She replied to a question about the current content standards, “I believe that children are not given the time to develop cognitively or socially because of the academic shakedown.”

Lily

Lily is a 46-year-old teacher who has experience with many different age groups but had her beginnings in kindergarten; due to her position, she is still able to work with kindergarteners in small group settings. She has been teaching more than two decades and seems to be a jack-of-all-trades in education with certifications and experience in every area of public schooling. She wanted to be a teacher since she was in kindergarten because she absolutely adored her own kindergarten teacher and aspired to grow up to be as kind as she was.

Opal

Opal is a career kindergarten teacher. She has been teaching kindergarten for 28 years and has no intentions of transferring to any other grade level or career. She is very comfortable doing what she does and does it well. Opal has witnessed a considerable amount of change in kindergarten during her tenure and was a wealth of information. When we spoke of the content standards for kindergarten as they are now, Opal was quick to say, “We are putting too much pressure on our children too early.” She recommended more time for them to just be children. When Opal spoke about redshirting, she agreed with the practice because the coursework of kindergarten is much more intense than it used to be. She also believes it gives students an advantage when they wait to start until they are a little older.

Poppy

Poppy is a veteran educator of 35 years, spending 29 years in the classroom and the last 6 years in administration. She is a happy and vibrant woman with a can-do attitude. Three days

into in the school year in 1993 as a fifth-grade teacher, she was transferred to a kindergarten class of 24 students. This experience began her time as a kindergarten teacher. She adores children and goes above and beyond to ensure their well-being.

Raven

Raven is a veteran educator who provided an abundance of information for this study. She is retired and worked both as a teacher and an administrator. She taught for 19 years and then moved to administration at the district level for 16 years before retiring. Although retired, she continues to serve in an advisory position for programs such as Head Start. She keeps a smile on her face and has a way of explaining things in a tactful and thoughtful manner. Her sweet voice and mannerisms make it clear that she is wonderful with children.

Rose

Rose was an educator for many years before she made the transition from education to elected office, remaining in the public sector. Rose has a kind and gentle voice and a sense of what is important in life. She left education because she “just couldn't do it anymore.” This has become a common sentiment among teachers leaving the profession in droves. She said she is much happier and content with life in general and does not suffer the stress she did as an educator.

Sky

Sky is a person towards whom others gravitate. She has an aura about her that pulls people into her presence, adults and children alike. She has taught kindergarten in few different states, and it is the only grade level she has ever taught during her career as an educator.

Responses from Sky were genuine and heartfelt, and she had much to say about specific changes

that need to be made to kindergarten to improve the overall experience for children. She wants decision-makers to know that play has a real purpose in children's development.

Stormy

Stormy has been teaching for 24 years, beginning in the 1990s. She taught through NCLB (2002) and cannot see herself going back to kindergarten. She is soft-spoken with a truthful sternness in her voice and was very professional in our interactions. Her responses were brief and to the point without much elaboration. She believes in challenging students but agreed that academic shoveldown made students no longer feel like school is a fun place to be.

Summer

Summer has taught for 24 years, teaching kindergarten for 17 years before making the switch to middle school. She loved that period in her life and excelled at teaching kindergarten, being named Teacher of the Year on several occasions. She began teaching in the 1990s and still teaches now. Although she loved teaching kindergarten, she stated, "There is no way I could it now."

Sunny

Sunny is a vibrant, always smiling 53-year-old teacher who seems to have been born to work with small children. She has been teaching for over 30 years. Over the years, she has had the children of her former students come through her classroom. The children adore her and her sweet, caring voice and bright smile. She goes above and beyond planning lessons that are interactive and doing her best to make learning the content fun. When asked about academic shoveldown, Sunny thinks that if the child is socially and mentally ready for more difficult standards, it is good for them. However, when a child is forced to work above his capability, she said that gaps will be created in which the child is only learning some of the content and spends

his later years receiving additional interventions to close those gaps. She agreed with other educators that the issue of redshirting should be decided by the parents, making certain that they are aware of the academic expectations. She recommended that parents take advantage of the free PreK programs offered at all public elementary schools in the state of Tennessee.

Results

This study endeavored to describe the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers during an era of educational reform. I read through the transcripts from the semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, and open letters and made a list of all significant statements. These statements were used to create codes, which were then used to identify themes (Moustakas, 1994). Next, using horizontalization of the data, I gave a value for each statement made from the participants (Moustakas, 1994). After several re-readings of the participants' transcripts, several themes began to emerge. The following section provides details on each theme and subtheme.

Theme Development

Based on the data collected from the semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and open letters, five overarching themes and various subthemes emerged. The five major themes include (a) pre-shift environment/pedagogy, (b) post-shift environment/pedagogy, (c) academic standards, (d) accountability, and (e) collateral damage. During the research process, these themes were consistent with current and former teachers who taught kindergarten students during an era of educational reform. I utilized the steps for data analysis defined by Moustakas (1994) to extrapolate themes and subthemes for this study. This process is described in detail in Chapter Three under the section titled Data Synthesis. Data were analyzed using horizontalization and five themes were created using the codes from the significant statements. The major themes and their subthemes emerged upon reaching saturation of data and captured the essence of the lived

experiences of kindergarten educators since broad educational reform made its way into the kindergarten classroom 20 years ago. Table 2 provides significant statements that encompass the essence of the five themes and their associated subthemes.

Table 2

Theme Development

Significant Statements	Subthemes
Major Theme 1: Pre-Shift Environment/Pedagogy	
fun units of study, personal/life skills, tying shoes, getting them ready for schooling, hygiene, ABCs and 123s, vocabulary, learned through play and social interaction, provided solid foundation for literacy, teacher autonomy, stress level minimal, nursery rhymes, counting to 10, songs, no pressure to read or write	Curriculum
excited for school, promoted imagination and social skills, magical, morning and afternoon recess, fun, developed coping skills, students unaware they were being evaluated, no readiness expectations except to be potty trained	Climate
played in centers with dramatic play, blocks, puzzles, and art, developed social/behavioral skills, art, peer communication, naps, learned how to get along with others, more physical skills and fine motor skills needed	Environment
Major Theme 2: Post-Shift Environment/Pedagogy	
scripted lessons, loss of autonomy, must learn entire alphabet in first 9 weeks of school, sight words introduced in the second week of school, sitting through hours of ELA and math instructional blocks, expected to write sentences and small paragraphs, higher-level math pushed down from first and second grades	Curriculum
do not socialize much in the classroom, expected to come to school with a basic understanding of concepts of print, mental/emotional strain on students unable to master standards, teach to the test/portfolio, cannot get along with others, extremely tired, irritable, whiny, extreme pressure on teachers, forces children to all learn the same things in the same ways at the same time	Climate

Significant Statements	Subthemes
do not get up and move around, pushed to do things they are not ready for, one 20-minute recess, no art, no free play, no play centers, took the fun out of school, more than their little bodies can handle, play was the first casualty, stifled creativity	Environment
Major Theme 3: Academic Standards	
could be less of them, expectation of paragraph writing and book reading by year's end, don't allow for complete mastery of foundational skills, too much to cover	Content
teachers know they are being evaluated, more stressful, loss of autonomy due to rigid standards and scripted curriculum	Teachers
first and second grade with some third-grade standards pushed down to kindergarten, kindergarten learning pushed down to PreK, long blocks of instruction for ELA and math, centers are academic-based, loss of recess, most children do not possess the background to be successful, become frustrated with the realization that they just do not know what they are supposed to	Students
Major Theme 4: Accountability	
evaluations, lesson plans, displaying content standards, stress on teachers, formal/announced and unannounced observations, level of effectiveness scores, feeling of having to get students ready for demands of first grade, observation rubric, accelerated pace	Teachers
teacher stress is transferred to students, accelerated pace, thrown into the fire, sink or swim, summative assessments, benchmark testing, universal screeners	Students
Major Theme 5: Collateral Damage	
cannot tie their shoes, do not know basic hygiene/self-care, do not know how to share, most do not know their address, parents' names, given name, or birthday	Life Skills
cannot get along with peers, not skilled at conflict resolution, lack basic social/emotional/behavioral skills, difficult/impossible to effectively teach social-emotional skills to older students	Social Skills
hate school, lack strong foundational skills, rushed curriculum, believe they are at school to learn content to take tests, pushed kids into a one-size-fits-all learning environment, reform had opposite effect of trying to best students around the globe	Academic Skills

Theme One: Pre-Shift Environment/Pedagogy

The first major theme of pre-shift environment and pedagogy involved kindergarten educators describing their pedagogy and the environment of the classroom before NCLB (2002). This group of educators spoke about the time with nostalgia and a longing for those fun and magical years of kindergarten. They explained what they taught and how they taught it. They described the overall climate, or mood, of the classroom. They also depicted the physical environment of their classrooms. Overall, teachers reported details of the pre-NCLB kindergarten, which comprised the three subthemes for this theme: (a) curriculum, (b) climate, and (c) environment.

Curriculum. The pedagogy of the kindergarten classroom before NCLB (2002) consisted of fun units of study, such as farms or oceans. Students learned personal and life skills such as tying their shoes and hygiene skills, such as brushing their teeth and washing their hands properly. They learned alphabet letters and how to count, which provided a solid foundation for literacy and numeracy. Students learned through play and social interactions how to behave in the classroom and within a peer group. They sang songs, learned nursery rhymes, and were never pressured to read or write. Teachers reported having autonomy and a minimal stress level. Autumn described her pre-NCLB classroom with enthusiasm:

We did learning units about transportation, farm animals, community helpers, and safety. The main part of our day was play time. We had centers, which were areas with blocks and trucks, kitchen furniture, dolls with clothes, and a little table and chairs. They played in those centers for about an hour. Our kids painted every day at an easel. They did art with Play-Doh and markers and stamps. For several years, we did a unit on space, and one dad built a space shuttle for my room! It was large enough to hold two children. We

also did a unit on the Olympics every 4 years. We even did ice skating on paper plates, hockey, bobsled, and had an awards ceremony after each event—so much fun! We did an ocean unit and had a beach set up right outside our outside door. We had sand and toys, little beach chairs, umbrellas—it was amazing! We had story time where we read four or five books connected to whatever unit we were doing and talked about them. We made dioramas when we studied dinosaurs. We sang for about 15–20 minutes each day.

Kindergarten was a magical place!

Teachers also reported that they spent much less time in direct instruction with the whole group of students. Raven reported,

Well, back in the day, there was direct instruction in letter formation and how a book works and social studies, like learning about community helpers. We made sure that, even in that learning, there was a lot of play. You could have play that was instructional, and they didn't even realize they're learning because they were playing.

Sunny, who has been teaching kindergarteners for more than 30 years, described her classroom pedagogy:

It was a fun time of learning through high-interest units of study. The students learned the alphabet and numbers with ease while learning about real life in units. We took field trips and had people come to the school. The students were excited to come to school and played in centers that encouraged their learning of the unit with art projects and dress-up centers, which all promoted their social skills and imagination. Kindergarten was a transition time for 5-year-olds to learn personal skills like good hygiene and nutrition.

They learned their address, their phone number, their parents' names, and how to tie their

shoes. This was a time of maturing and independence to get young children ready for school.

Climate. The climate of the pre-NCLB kindergarten classroom was full of young children excited for school. The mood was light, fun, and magical. Students enjoyed morning and afternoon recess. They developed coping skills to deal with their emotions and to share and cooperate with peers. Students were completely unaware of being assessed or evaluated. There were no readiness expectations except that they were potty trained. Kindergarten was a safe place with time for teachers to talk with students and build a strong rapport.

Daisy, who taught kindergarten for 17 years before making the move to middle school, described how kindergarten was when she began her career:

When I first started, they were more of blank slate, and we could take them like a ball of clay and mold them. We had two recesses, a morning recess and an afternoon recess. We had a time for them to play in the room. They had a nap time and a social time for playing in centers that we had set up, like blocks, a kitchen, that kind of thing. In my first 8 years of teaching, kids were taking naps. The ones who didn't nap—I would sit there and let them talk to me, and I really bonded with them. I had three kids tell me they were sexually abused during that time, and I've had not a single kid tell me that since we took away naps. There's not a quiet time to come tell me that. I'd like to think it's just because it hasn't happened, but I'm not stupid. It has.

Environment. The physical environment of a pre-NCLB classroom was much different than the classrooms of today. It was common to enter a kindergarten classroom and see play areas throughout the room, such as a play kitchen, an area for art, and centers for playing dress-up, building with blocks, and putting together puzzles. Students learned and played hard all day,

developing fine motor skills and social and behavioral skills such as peer communication. Then, at the end of the day, they rested. A nap was common even 20 years ago.

Lily explained what an individual could expect to see and hear in a pre-NCLB classroom, The classroom was designed for exploration and fun. The students learned critical social and behavioral skills. They loved coming to school. They had a morning recess and an afternoon recess, both of which were 30 minutes long. They took a nap for the last hour of the day. We even took a snack break in the morning. The students learned their letters and sounds. They learned nursery rhymes and how to count, to recite the days of the week and the months of the year. They practiced handwriting, and we taught them how to tie their shoes. They had art every day. They rotated through play stations we called centers. My former students are adults who are professionals with their own businesses, teachers, corporate bankers, engineers, pharmacists—they were very successful in life with this type of environment from the very beginning.

Theme Two: Post-Shift Environment/Pedagogy

The second major theme of post-shift environment and pedagogy involved kindergarten educators describing their pedagogy and the environment of the classroom after NCLB (2002). This group of educators spoke about the time with sadness for the children and with stress and anxiety over content mastery and evaluations. They explained what they taught and how they taught it. They described the overall climate, or mood, of the classroom. They also depicted the physical environment of their classrooms. Overall, teachers reported details of the post-NCLB kindergarten which comprised the three subthemes for this theme: (a) curriculum, (b) climate, and (c) environment.

Curriculum. The pedagogy of the kindergarten classroom after NCLB (2002) consisted of a copious number of content standards and the teachers' loss of autonomy. Students went from having all year to learn letters and their corresponding sounds to learning the entirety of the alphabet and its sounds within the first 9 weeks of school. In addition, they used to have students memorize a few basic sight words, but now students are given two words a week to memorize during the second week of school. Students sit through hours of English language arts (ELA) and math instructional blocks. They are expected to write sentences and small paragraphs during the second semester of kindergarten. Originally, students were only expected to learn how to count and recognize numbers, but teachers reported that math once taught in first and second grades has now been pushed down to kindergarten.

Daisy provided an account of her experience in teaching kindergarten after educational reform:

Our expectations for them have been raised by about 2 years. They are doing now what students used to do in first and second grade. We have to hit the ground running on the first day of school to get them where they need to be. We're putting too much pressure on them. We expect them to be able to read color words when before they just had to identify colors. Motor skills are not what they used to be. They can't work a puzzle. They get real frustrated, and they quit a lot. They're not problem solvers or deep thinkers. It's instruction all the time now.

Climate. The climate of the post-NCLB kindergarten classroom is full of young children who hate coming to school. There is an expectation that did not exist before for children to arrive to kindergarten with a particular skill set that includes knowing colors, letters, counting, and concepts of print. There is a strain on students who are unable to master content standards. They

are not afforded the opportunity to socialize as much as they should and do not develop the ability to get along with their peers and develop conflict resolution skills while playing together in the classroom and outdoors. There is extreme pressure on teachers to teach to a test or score high on the portfolio they submit. Children are forced to learn all the same things at the same time, regardless of whether they are developmentally ready for it. Teachers are forced to use the scripted curriculum purchased by the school system. A scripted curriculum is not a requirement of educational mandates, but these district leaders are convinced that following high-quality instructional materials to the letter will ensure students' academic success. The children are tired in the afternoon, but the teachers are made to continue teaching every minute of the day so as not to waste any instructional time.

Sunny, a veteran teacher of 30 years, lamented about the current climate of the kindergarten classroom in this way:

I feel like they're in their seats too much. They're looking at a PowerPoint that comes with the ELA curriculum, but they're not paying attention to it. The kindergarten teachers were going through a unit that introduced a bird called a tern. None of the kids could tell you what a tern is. The teachers had to lead the students in writing about it. We couldn't teach it in a unit like we used to; rather, we had to use the scripted curriculum verbatim. The math curriculum is just as bad. There are no manipulatives—nothing for the students to hold and touch and move. It's all abstract when we know learning should begin with concrete and then move to abstract.

Environment. The physical environment of a post-NCLB classroom looks more like a first or second grade classroom. The centers for play have all been removed. The bulletin boards consist of academic content. Students are seated around colorful tables but are not allowed to get

up and move around much. There is no art or free play in the classroom. This environment has stifled their creativity, made the unprepared individuals feel discouraged, and has given their little minds and bodies more than they can handle.

Dawn, who is another veteran teacher of over 30 years, spoke of the environmental changes in the classroom this way:

We had to remove all the play centers—art, blocks, puzzles, kitchen, dress-up—and convert them to academic centers where students continue to work on math and literacy skills. We no longer have fun, seasonal bulletin boards full of student artwork because they have been replaced with academic content. Even though the students cannot read them, we are required to post the content standards we are working on that day and direct their attention to them before we start a lesson. It's ridiculous.

Another veteran teacher of over 20 years, Iris, truly cares about the youngest of students and how it is affecting them. Iris reported,

They do not get up and move around like they used to because they are pushed to do things they just are not developmentally ready for. We've taken away the play centers, all their free play, the art, and left them with one 20-minute recess. It's stifled their creativity. We have taken the fun out of school. No wonder they hate it now. It really is more than their little bodies can handle, and they've taken away their nap. They have no down time to recuperate. Honestly, it's just plain cruel.

Theme Three: Academic Standards

The third major theme addresses how academic content standards have changed and what their effect has been on educators and students. NCLB (2002) required schools to meet adequate yearly progress for literacy and mathematics achievement or face sanctions (Groen, 2012; Jahng,

2011). This standards-based movement called for clear, measurable standards for all school students. States were tasked with writing academic content standards while test producers created criterion-referenced assessments to assess mastery of the content standards. Students in Tennessee kindergartens, where this study took place, took the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-10).

Content. Teachers reported that there are too many academic content standards to cover and master or that there could be less of them. Because there are so many standards, there is not enough time to teach each one to mastery. Therefore, they feel as though they are failing the students because they are not receiving a solid set of foundational skills to build on by the end of the year. Before standards-based reform, students were expected to know the letters of the alphabet and their corresponding sounds when being promoted to first grade. They are now expected to write paragraphs and read books by the end of their kindergarten year.

Iris's overall feelings about academic shakedown is that it is occurring greatly in the lower grades. She believes that educators are having to push too many academic expectations on the lower grades when the focus should be on the social and emotional aspects of life. Iris considers fine motor skills to be very important as they help to develop hand-eye coordination, bilateral coordination, visual perception, and increase focus and attention, which are all critical pre-reading skills. Lastly, Iris commented that changes needed to be made and suggested "more learning through play and more time spent on social-emotional behaviors." When asked about the current content standards, she said,

I think it's too much. I think it's way too much. I think we spend so much more time on the academic skills, which are important, but we're forgetting the social and emotional part until a child cannot [socially and emotionally] deal with the circumstances, their life,

the other stuff. It's just too hard. It's just one more stressor for them. I think we're pushing them too much. What about these kids that don't even go to PreK or day care and don't have the background knowledge of the alphabet, counting, numbers, and you're expecting these kids to know on day one, and they're tested. We ask how fast [they can] name a letter and its sound before they can even write their name or learn how to play and share.

Raven felt strongly that the bar has been raised for kindergarten students, which makes for a very challenging first year of school for both the students and the teacher. Raven would prefer the kindergarten year to be a year of transition in socialization and emotional development with some basic academics interspersed. When speaking about redshirting, she replied that parents usually know their children and have the right to make the decision to give their child an extra year to grow and develop and be more ready for kindergarten. She added that just because a child is ready according to their age does not mean that they are ready for the true academic challenges that they will face in kindergarten. Raven described teachers as an essential factor in helping children to develop their fine motor skills and that fine motor skills should be taught in the classroom. To improve the current kindergarten, Raven suggested, "One thing that I feel could be changed in kindergarten is to decrease the number of standards to be mastered. So much has to be accomplished in kindergarten now."

Autumn said she observed the academic shovedown firsthand. When she first began teaching kindergarten, the teachers were not allowed to even mention the ABCs. They studied in units around certain topics such as community helpers, transportation, and farm animals. By the time she retired, she was teaching students to read and to add and subtract. She thinks it is all "too much too soon." On the topic of academic redshirting, Autumn reported that she always

encouraged parents to hold off on sending their children to kindergarten, especially if the child had a birthday late in the year, so the child could mature and be ready to begin schooling. She recounted that she found this to be especially true with male students. Autumn recounted that they stressed fine motor skills and did so with cutting, peg boards, manipulatives, and anything else that “helped develop those small muscles.” She explained that other skills took the place of these, and the students suffered for it.

When we discussed the current content standards, Lily thought the academic shakedown was “ruining a fun time.” Lily stated that kindergarten is a time of transition to formal schooling and that taking a child straight out of day care or being at home and throwing them into academic content is cruel. She thinks the content should be pushed back up in the grades and that administrative expectations are too high. Lily asserted that an individual cannot expect mastery from students who are not developmentally ready for the content they are expected to learn. In addition, Lily could see the benefits of academic redshirting to delay the stress of academic content and because it allows the child to be a child for a little longer before “throwing them to the wolves.”

Teachers. With standards-based reform came stringent teacher evaluations in Tennessee. Teachers’ stress levels increased because they knew they were being evaluated using a state-wide model and that their job was dependent upon not only their performance during evaluations but also their students’ scores on the SAT-10. The state-wide evaluation model is based on an extensive rubric in which administrators score lessons taught by teachers. It is the biggest factor in determining a teacher’s level of effectiveness (LOE) score, and educators are under a lot of stress to earn a high LOE score each year (TDOE, 2020b). Many school systems have purchased highly scripted curriculum that promised to align with Tennessee content standards, therefore

helping students achieve content mastery. This naturally lends itself to a loss of autonomy for teachers.

Many of the teachers expressed a displeasure with the curriculum adopted by the school system, despite the district leaders professing that the curriculum is high-quality instructional material. Kindergarten teachers are naturally creative and thrive on creating teaching activities for students that are both fun and memorable. They know what works but feel like they cannot be trusted to do what is best for students since they are instructed to follow curriculum verbatim. Summer, who taught kindergarten for 17 years, is a very creative teacher who feels stifled by the curriculum:

We know that teaching concepts with in-depth units is the best way to teach students of any age. Our current curriculum has these units, but the content of the units is not age appropriate. They have trouble understanding the subject matter, and we are not supposed to deviate from it or supplement it in any way. It drives me crazy because I have such great ideas to teach my students, but I cannot use any of them.

Students. Teachers reported that academic standards have had a variety of results with their students. Most students coming into kindergarten do not possess the background knowledge to be successful, so they become frustrated with the realization that they just are not learning what the other students seem to be learning. Students must remain seated for long blocks of ELA and math instruction in which first- and second-grade content standards, and some third, have been pushed down to kindergarten. Play centers became academic-based. Students used to receive both a morning and afternoon recess but are now limited to 20 minutes of recess per day. They are very tired in the afternoon, but nap time was taken away because administrators at the district level believed that it was wasted time that could be used for instruction.

Ivy spoke to me about both gross and fine motor skills, saying that both were very important for children to develop. She believes that instead of the educational system having children enter kindergarten knowing all the skills, kindergarten should be the year to continue developing fine motor skills and social skills and their schedules should reflect time to develop those skills. Ivy added that other changes could be made to improve the current state of the kindergarten:

Kindergarten needs to reestablish a time in the schedule to incorporate Fröbel's methods of letting the children explore and learn how to function in the world. This would allow student to develop varied lifetime skills and allow themselves to grow and develop appropriately.

Theme Four: Accountability

The fourth major theme addresses how educational reform has increased accountability and how it has affected both teachers and students. Teachers have been under increased stress due to evaluations and how they are used to determine a "level of effectiveness" for an educator each year. Many reported "teaching to the test" to make them appear to be better teachers. They also feel an enormous responsibility to get their students ready for first grade. Students have been affected negatively through an approach that is not considered developmentally appropriate due to the accelerated paced of instruction and excessive assessment.

Teachers. Educators are held more accountable for everything they do than ever before, and this is causing a considerable amount of stress and burnout. They feel an overwhelming responsibility to next year's teachers to get students ready for the even more academically demanding first grade. Evaluations have become one of the biggest stressors for educators. Along with growth and achievement measures, the scores from observations are used by the state

to determine a teacher's LOE score. Teachers are also responsible for writing lesson plans that align with the observation rubric established by the state and prominently displaying content standards.

The topic of the state's evaluation system was discussed during focus groups. Teachers told about the components of the evaluation model that were stressful for them personally, and they were afraid they were inadvertently passing on that stress to the children. They also saw it as insulting that the state made a calculation that supposedly determined how effective they were as educators.

Sunny: Writing a lesson plan that aligns with the rubric is very stressful to me. I always feel like I'm going to leave something out. Administrators can come observe me any time they want. I just wish I didn't have to turn in a formal lesson plan.

Honey: I stopped letting it stress me out. I just type up what I was going to do anyway because it's the curriculum they bought that we are supposed to be doing anyway, right? I'm just so burned out on all of it.

Iris: I dislike the formality of it all. I feel like I can get some good feedback at post-observation conferences, but I wish it was more natural.

Lily: I feel it's an insult to my professionalism when the state thinks they can quantify how effective I am as a teacher. It's all a crapshoot anyway since our observations are a percentage of the LOE score. We still have to choose two other measures and who knows how those will turn out.

Summer: I have mixed feelings about the observation protocol for teachers. I have received some great feedback that I have implemented. However, I have also been scored

so low on a lesson observation, but the observer praises me and tells others they need to come observe my teaching. So, it is confusing and stressful.

Students. Students are held accountable for learning the content prescribed for them at every grade level. Some participants even stated inadvertently passing on the stress to their students or feeling as though the children could sense their stress level. Teachers also reported that the accelerated pace of learning is not developmentally appropriate and adds stress for students who are unable to keep up. For Response to Intervention (RTI), all students are screened with a universal screener and are also administered benchmark assessments in the fall, winter, and spring. Students are also assessed regularly and recorded by their teachers for submission into a portfolio which is meant to show student growth throughout the school year.

Every participant stated they believe that students are tested far too much, and it is completely unnecessary when they are in kindergarten. In the past, kindergarten teachers have always been able to simply observe their students to determine if they were learning, a type of assessment commonly known as formative assessment. Opal, a kindergarten teacher of over 30 years, said,

Used to, they didn't have a set number of topics they needed to master, you know. If they knew most of their letters and sounds and could count, that was enough. Now, we are constantly assessing them through the universal screener for RTI, system-wide common assessments, weekly assessments of the content on the pacing guide. . . . I feel so bad for these kids.

Opal conveyed that she wishes she had more time to teach fine motor skills. She said that a learning goal of kindergarten used to be tying shoes, which was not just an important skill, but

it really helped in developing the students' fine motor skills. Opal spoke of improving the overall experience for kindergarteners and responded,

I think we need to slow down a little bit and not push them so far in kindergarten. They need time to build social development—learning to get along with others and just have some time to be kids.

Rose explained that when the shift occurred,

There were 24 sight words the first year. Within 2 years, they had increased it to 100 sight words. They get here, and they realize how much they don't know and become frustrated. I've heard too many kids tell me they can't because they're dumb.

Sunny described how they used to assess students' gross motor skills by ascertaining if the child could stand on one leg and hop on one foot. She thinks that developing fine motor skills is just as important as developing gross motor skills. Sunny had much to say about changes and improvements to make kindergarten more kid friendly. She believes that time should be allotted for art so student can paint with different media and use different brushes, which would not only develop fine motor skills but also give them the opportunity to use their imagination to create and to experience firsthand how to change shades of color. Sunny explained that children should use more hands-on materials like clay or blocks to construct things with their imagination and then use their social skills to tell their peers about their work. Sunny also conveyed that students need more role-play and dress-up time to encourage social skills, respect, and appreciation for others.

Theme Five: Collateral Damage

The fifth major theme addresses the collateral damage that has occurred and affected students due to educational reform. Subthemes address both the life skills they have lost and the

effect on students' social and academic skills. Teachers lamented that they no longer taught children how to tie their shoes and practice good hygiene and to learn their parents' names, address, and date of birth. Because they must spend all their time with children teaching academic skills, they are no longer teaching them how to share, get along with peers, and to behave in a classroom setting and within a peer group in an acceptable manner. Furthermore, spending all their classroom time teaching academic skills has led our youngest students to dislike school. The copious amount of academic content standards does not allow for mastery, and students are lacking strong foundational skills required in literacy and numeracy.

Life Skills. One of the major crises reported by kindergarten teachers was that the life skills they used to teach in kindergarten are completely gone. They only teach academic content. Most students cannot tie their shoes and do not know basic hygiene and self-care. Every year, they had a dentist come to school. He showed them how to brush and floss their teeth with a model and gave the students free toothbrushes, toothpaste, and floss. Many students do not know how to share with peers or know their address, their parents' names, their given name, or their own birthday.

Poppy described her first year of teaching kindergarten and said,

The first year I taught kindergarten we went from everyone having a Route 1 address to have a number and street for the 911 system. That was part of their learning. They learned their full name, birthdate, address, city, county, state, their parents' names. It is important that they still know these things, but they are no longer part of the content for kindergarten. They had better communication skills. They learned nursery rhymes. Now, there are more kids hating school. They start with this academic day so young, and there's no fun in it.

Social Skills. Teachers report that students cannot get along with their peers because teachers are not given time to teach conflict resolution when a problem arises. Students lack basic social, emotional, and behavioral skills, and teachers reported that it is difficult or impossible to effectively teach social–emotional skills to older students. They struggle with carrying on a conversation because they are not allowed the time like they used to receive to develop social skills through play with peers. Play seems to be the first casualty of educational reform. All participants had comments about this topic.

Autumn: I think students should still get a grade in citizenship. They need to learn that school can be a fun place to be and play with friends.

Daisy: They do have social skills. The social and behavioral aspect has to be in place before the learning can take place and those skills are lower than they were when I first started teaching while our expectations for them have been raised by about 2 years. We always have to back up and address behavior issues all the time because we're putting too much pressure on them. We haven't paused for the social and developmentally ready part of it. We just keep shoving it down further and further.

Honey: I think in this stage of child's life, we have to try and establish some emotional security for our students and make them feel like school is a safe place. Our school may be the only place that children feel safe and can learn how to behave in a healthy way.

Iris: I believe we are requiring more than their little bodies can handle, and we should be focusing more on their social and emotional interactions. We need to meet the child where they are and help them grow from there.

Ivy: Students should learn through play and social interaction instead of being pushed to meet or beat other students in the world. All we are doing now is pushing them to dislike

school. Having students grow emotionally in the younger grades could have numerous benefits for the student and our world.

Lily: I think technology has kept caregivers and children from speaking to one another. Kindergarteners arrive at school lacking the skills to carry on a conversation and act in a socially acceptable way. If they're not learning it at home, the responsibility has been pushed onto us, but when are we supposed to teach social skills? We have more behavior problems with middle and high school students than we ever have, and I truly believe it is due to throwing kindergarteners into a 100% academic environment.

Academic Skills. Teachers stated that students hate school now. They are lacking in strong foundational skills in both literacy and math because they are asked to learn too much and are not afforded the opportunity to develop a strong grounding of basic skills. The curriculum that is in place is rushed, and students believe they are at school to learn content just to take tests. Students have been squished into a box, a one-size-fits-all learning environment. Educational reform has had an opposite effect from its original intention of trying to best other students around the globe.

When asked about academic skills in kindergarten, Sky said,

Our country has some of the lowest academic scores in the world, yet we are incredibly advanced and wealthy. This just shows that all the educational reform of the past 20 years has done nothing to improve our situation. Academics should be pushed back up and children's social and emotional growth should be at the forefront of instruction in both PreK and kindergarten in order to build the best foundation for them. I feel like the American educational system puts students on a conveyor belt to be processed with

academic content instead of being nurtured and allowed to develop appropriately and at their own pace.

Research Question Responses

A central research question and four sub-questions guided this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study to explore the experiences of kindergarten teachers during a time of sweeping educational reform. The participants described their experiences both before and after NCLB (2002), and viewpoints among the participants aligned with the five major themes: (a) pre-shift environment/pedagogy, (b) post-shift environment/pedagogy, (c) academic standards, (d) accountability, and (e) collateral damage. The semi-structured individual interviews, focus groups, and open letters contributed to the responses for the research questions.

Central Research Question

The central research question asked, “What are the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers as they have taught during a shift to increased academic content?” Kindergarten teachers explained how the climate and mood, physical environment, content standards, pedagogy, student skills, and accountability changed drastically between the two eras. Many teachers described kindergarten as fun and magical before it transformed into a stressful environment of forgoing social and behavioral skills in lieu of teaching academic content that is too rigorous and not developmentally appropriate for their age.

Autumn, who began teaching in the 1970s and continued into the early 2000s, had quite a bit to say about the shift:

When I first began teaching, we were not even supposed to mention the ABCs. Then, ever so gradually, we start working on learning our ABCs and 123s. Then came phonics, adding and subtracting, vocabulary words, and tests. We did cover these skills before, but

eventually they became what kindergarten was all about. Teachers now have hardly any time to do any of the fun activities because it's difficult to have time for all the lessons and worksheets required.

Sub-Question One

SQ1 asked, "How has the pedagogy of the kindergarten classroom fundamentally changed since the educational reform beginning in 2002?" Pedagogy is the method and practice of teaching. Before educational reform, kindergarten teachers taught students about the world in units, such as farms, the ocean, or outer space. Everything the students learned was tied to that unit of study. Both teachers and students enjoyed this method, and it was highly effective. Students were marked on a report card which listed skills such as getting along with others, ability to tie shoes, handwriting, citizenship, and counting. The children loved coming to school and looked forward to their lessons. They learned only one letter a week and how to count. They had areas of play in the room called centers. There was a kitchen center, a block center, a puzzle center, and other centers in which students could develop motor skills and social and behavioral skills.

After educational reform, teachers were given academic standards that laid out in no uncertain terms the content they were going to teach. Teachers were also now held accountable for meeting adequate yearly progress and annual measurable achievement objectives. These were determined by students' performance on an end-of-course exam. In Tennessee, school systems have the option of administering the SAT-10 or using the portfolio method. Never had students in kindergarten been prescribed rigorous content standards to master, nor had they taken criterion-referenced, end-of-year examinations until this time (Dombkowski, 2001; Gullo & Hughes, 2011; Russell, 2011). Adequate yearly progress and annual measurable achievement

objectives could not only cause the school and school system to face sanctions but they could also cause a teacher to lose her job if these goals were not met. About accountability measures, Lily reported,

Educators, administrators, and district personnel have been on edge for the past 20 years. The district didn't want to face sanctions and publicly be known as a failing school system. Administrators didn't want to face losing their job because students at their site if the students didn't score well on end-of-year cumulative assessments. It was and still is especially stressful for the teachers. Your career and its future depended upon how well 5- and 6-year-olds answered test questions and filled in bubbles. Some people just don't test well. Teachers started teaching to this test for purposes of self-preservation. It's not gotten any better, even with portfolios in lieu of summative assessments. We have a district-level person who takes our students' data from the universal screener and last year's test scores to determine which students can reach proficiency because they are the ones teachers are supposed to focus on. What about all the other kids? If they're already scoring high or they're too low to be helped in a school year, they are the real children left behind. I'm so done with government intervention into education.

Sub-Question Two

SQ2 asked, "What is perceived as the advantages or disadvantages of fostering and emphasizing academic skills training at the kindergarten level?" Some teachers did report that students do know more than they used to when leaving kindergarten at the end of the year, but then that statement was followed with another—*at what cost?* All teachers noted certain skills that they used to teach and no longer do, such as tying their shoes. Stormy, who now teaches middle school, noted that she has students who do not know how to tie their shoes.

Rose believes that academic shakedown is hurting our most vulnerable students. Students who come from upper-level socioeconomic status benefit from the shakedown, but students who are disadvantaged struggle more because of the expectations. Parental support is crucial to academic success in kindergarten. Rose described her experience with redshirting as giving them an academic advantage, especially in the instance of male students where it was the best decision for those children. Rose thought that more time should be allotted for fine motor skills to develop, but kindergarten teachers are required to spend too much time teaching first- and second-grade skills. Skills that are not assessed in standardized testing fall by the wayside. She opines sadly, "It is tragic for the children in my opinion." In addition, Rose spoke of how kindergarten could be improved, saying, "Kindergarten should focus on academic standards that merely lay a foundation for reading so that more time can be spent on social skills, fine motor skills, learning procedures, and play."

Sub-Question Three

SQ3 asked, "What are the perceived advantages or disadvantages of fostering and emphasizing behavioral and social skills training at the kindergarten level?" No participants saw any disadvantages of fostering and emphasizing behavioral and social skills training in kindergarten. All participants believed that kindergarten is the perfect time to engage and instruct students in social and behavioral skills, conflict resolution, and restorative practices. All teachers noted an advantage in that they were taught skills that they could not learn at home because a student needed to be with 19 other children during the day. The following are comments from several of the participants on the topic:

Opal: They don't get to be kids. They need to learn how to interact with other kids and stuff because if they don't go to PreK, some of these kids have never been around other children. They've been at home and don't know how to act and be social with other kids.

Raven: Social and behavioral skills are important because I think that was what kindergarten was designed to develop.

Rose: Kindergarten standards should be composed mostly of a social and behavioral construct. It is the most appropriate place for those students to develop those social and emotional skills that they come unprepared with.

Sky: Learning should be done by play, and the children's social and emotional growth should be at the forefront, not academics.

Stormy: A lot of kids come from homes that do not have parents that teach those non-academic skills. They sit in front of a TV as a babysitter and are just let to do whatever they want, so they really don't learn those skills until they come to school.

Sunny: They're not taught social skills, especially these that have been at home with grandma. They do not know how to interact with peers. They don't know the appropriate way to ask for things or do things. Yes, it has to be taught. There is a large majority of students that are unable to interact on a social level with peers.

Sub-Question Four

SQ4 asked, "How have educators been able to use developmentally appropriate practices in the kindergarten classroom while adhering to academic content standards?" This question was tough for the participants because they have prescribed content from which they have expressly been told not to deviate. They have been able to use developmentally appropriate practices

through the way in which they speak to the children. They have some flexibility with their learning centers to use manipulatives and other non-curriculum materials.

Summer said that kindergarten students today are asked to learn standards that are not developmentally appropriate. She reported that students are not mentally, emotionally, and physically mature enough to learn and retain what is being expected of them in today's kindergarten classroom. She added, "I believe if students were not pushed to learn academic concepts that are not age appropriate, their experience and future academic success would improve."

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of kindergarten teachers who have taught through an era of federally mandated, standards-based educational reforms. Chapter Four provided a detailed description of the teachers who participated in the study and the dialogue resulting from the three data collection methods. Five major themes were discussed: (a) pre-shift environment/pedagogy, (b) post-shift environment/pedagogy, (c) academic standards, (d) accountability, and (e) collateral damage. These themes, in alignment with the research questions, described the shift kindergarten teachers experienced during an era of educational reform.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of kindergarten teachers who have taught through an era of federally mandated, standards-based educational reforms. Chapter Five opens with the interpretations of the results of the study and a summary of thematic findings. Then, the implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, limitations, and delimitations are outlined. Finally, this chapter concludes with future research recommendations and a study summary.

Discussion

The findings of this study include the experiences of and perceptions of kindergarten teachers who have taught through an era of federally mandated, standards-based educational reforms. Within this section, I discuss the finding of the study considering the themes and subthemes and perceived through the lens of the supporting theoretical framework. First, the interpretation of the findings is discussed and followed by implications for policy and practice. Next, theoretical and empirical implications are described, and the study's limitations and delimitations are provided. This section culminates with recommendations for future research. Quotations from participants are applied to establish and validate the interpretations of this study's findings.

Interpretation of Findings

Theme development began after several interviews had been completed and similarities between participants' responses emerged. This process continued until all participants had been individually interviewed, participated in a focus group, and composed an open letter.

Comprehensive descriptions of the experiences of kindergarten teachers who have taught through an era of federally mandated, standards-based educational reforms were derived from the dialogue and written testimony provided by the 15 educators who participated in the study. Concentrating on elementary schools in west Tennessee, this study addressed how the kindergarten has been affected by educational reform from the perspective of teachers who labored through this era. Each participant had experience teaching both before and after the passage of NCLB (2002) and, for some, the subsequent ESSA (2015) and revealed those experiences through semi-structured individual interviews, focus groups, and by composing an open letter. The events described in Chapter Four captured the essence of the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers during a career-altering legislative shift. Five major themes emerged: (a) pre-shift environment/pedagogy, (b) post-shift environment/pedagogy, (c) academic standards, (d) accountability, and (e) collateral damage. These five themes, in association with the research questions, explained how kindergarten has evolved during an era of educational reform through the lived experiences of the participants.

Summary of Thematic Findings

This summary will be approached by discussing the themes and subthemes of the findings. The major theme of pre-shift environment and pedagogy has three subthemes of curriculum, climate, and environment. Altogether, the 15 participants discussed how the curriculum, climate, and environment of the kindergarten classroom was prior to NCLB (2002). The curriculum of the pre-NCLB was full of play and social interaction while learning the alphabet and how to count without the stress of content mastery. Teachers lamented about the personal and life skills that were removed from the curriculum such as how to tie their shoes and personal hygiene. The pre-NCLB kindergarten classroom possessed a climate that supported

students' imaginations and their social and coping skills. There were no readiness expectations, and students were excited to come to school. The environment of pre-NCLB kindergarten classrooms was full of play centers that encouraged the development of social and behavioral skills. Students spent time honing their fine motor skills and had an area where they took a nap every day.

Teachers also discussed the major theme of post-shift environment and pedagogy, which included the curriculum, climate, and environment of their kindergarten classrooms after the passage of NCLB (2002). This was an immense transition, which carried with it a loss of teacher autonomy. The curriculum was developed for them with scripted lessons leaving no room for deviation. Participants conveyed that play was the first casualty of the legislation with play centers being taken away and students going from two 30-minute recesses and a nap per day to one 20-minute recess and no nap. The mood and climate are very different because students do not have the opportunity to engage with one another as they used to and are expected to master a set of content standards. Participants also expressed that this environment seems to have stifled students' creativity and pushed them to learn content for which they are not developmentally ready. In addition, they reported that students are no longer excited to come to school like they used to be.

The major theme of academic standards originated from teacher experiences as the participants expressed the impact of academic standards in terms of the actual content and its effects on both teachers and students. Every participant noted that there were too many standards to master within a single school year, and this affects students' core foundational skills. With educational reform came the accountability measures that include teacher evaluation and end-of-year exams, which increased teacher stress to levels they had never experienced before in their

careers. Standards from first and second grade, and some third, have been pushed down to kindergarten. Students are expected to attend to long instructional blocks of up to 2 hours each for literacy and mathematics.

The fourth major theme of accountability affects both teachers and students in a profound way. Teachers are under a considerable amount of stress to teach content at an accelerated pace. Their effectiveness as a teacher is evaluated and quantified through multiple measures, one of which includes announced and unannounced observations. Students are tested using multiple measures for various purposes throughout the school year and must learn to navigate a fast-paced curriculum.

The fifth and final major theme of collateral damage describes the life, social, and academic skills that have been lost due to educational reform. This is probably the most critical aspect of the study. Although students in kindergarten complete the year more skilled than their earlier counterparts, they have suffered in ways that an exam cannot measure. Despite our knowledge of multiple modalities, students have been put in a one-size-fits-all standard box without space for deviation. They lack basic knowledge and do not have the opportunity to develop skills for conflict resolution, sharing, and getting along with peers.

Most Important Findings

The following section discusses the most noteworthy findings from this study, which are the loss of non-academic skills, academic shovedown, and the kindergarten losing its original purpose. This section begins with the demise of any content that is not strictly academic. The subsequent section deals with academic shovedown of standards from Grades 1 through 3 being pushed down to kindergarten. The section ends with a discussion of how kindergarten has veered so far away from its original intended purpose that it is no longer serving its intended purpose.

Non-Academic Skills. The most significant finding from this study is the collateral damage that was caused by educational reform, which is far-reaching and seemingly unacceptable. All the participants worked or still work within a school that serves students in PreK through the eighth grade. Being in the same building, kindergarten teachers have had the privilege of observing their students as they grow and until they go to high school. Several of these teachers have made the transition to teaching middle school and have the same students they had from kindergarten. A similar point was brought up by all of them—it is evident that these students neither developed appropriate social and behavioral skills from the beginning nor did they develop strong foundational skills in literacy and mathematics. In addition, their executive functioning skills are not what they should be. Students in kindergarten cannot begin to seriously learn academic content standards until they have developed each component of executive functioning (Moffett & Morrison, 2020; Morgan et al., 2019). Participants who now teach middle school (Daisy, Ivy, Lily, Stormy, and Summer) reported a lack of inhibitory control with many older students, causing them to have difficulty regulating their own behavior. Working memory, which is needed for all content areas but particularly necessary for mathematics, is not as developed as it should be by the time they reach middle school.

It has long been suggested that cognitive processes correspond to internalized motor actions (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Fine motor skills are related to language and thought. Veteran teachers explained that children's penmanship is the worst they have ever seen, but they understand what is going on in the lower grades and can sympathize. They lack the fine motor skills to do certain tasks, and it affects them in varying ways. Many of them cannot form numbers correctly or write them the same size or even in a straight line, which makes it difficult for mathematics teachers attempting to teach students how to calculate problems that require

multiple steps. Other educators report being unable to read much of what is written. One teacher who has moved to teaching sixth grade reported that a student in her class is unable to tie his shoes, a fine motor and life skill she used to teach in kindergarten.

Academic Content Standards. With the passage of federal education reform came the advent of academic content standards and all the ramifications that accompany them. Simply looking at older standards from first, second, and third grades alongside the current kindergarten standards demonstrates that those standards have been pushed down to kindergarten, a practice commonly referred to as academic shovedown. Supposedly, a typical 5-year-old child who enrolls in kindergarten with a considerable amount of background in mathematics, literacy, and the world in general should be able to master the academic content standards for kindergarten. However, it is not reasonable. Eleven of the participants worked at or still work at schools in which the percentage of students living at or below the poverty line is approximately 75%. These students are not enrolling in kindergarten with the skills necessary to master the current content standards. They need a full year to get ready for the demands of first grade; nevertheless, this will not happen, and these children may become frustrated and learn to hate school.

The sheer number of standards is much too high to effectively teach to mastery within a school year. Prior to educational reform, teachers reported having to focus thoroughly on one letter per week beginning no sooner than the third week of school because the first few weeks were spent learning classroom, hallway, library, cafeteria, and other procedures for behavior within the school. Every day, they would practice rote counting and reciting of the entire alphabet. By the end of the year, if students could put together a CVC word and read it, that was great, but certainly not necessary. Most students could count to 30. They understood behavioral expectations and how to treat their fellow classmates and received a score of S, N, or U on how

well they got along with others. Over the past 20 years, the standards push has become greater and greater. At the beginning, most states created a framework or a set of standards for each grade level and content area. The state-led effort to create the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) began in 2009. State school chiefs and governors acknowledged the importance of consistent, real-world learning objectives. They initiated this effort to guarantee all students would graduate high school prepared for college, career, and life (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017). Although meaning well, the CCSS were only matched with a specific subset of students. CCSS called for kindergarteners to master more than 90 standards in mathematics and literacy with many of the standards for literacy meant to have children reading by the second semester of kindergarten (Almon & Miller, 2011). Granted, students do know more now, but the trade-offs do not seem worth it when we have more knowledgeable students who are lacking in every other area that is also important. In this case, the end certainly does not justify the means.

Lost Purpose. Kindergarten's original purpose was to be a bridge between home or day care and beginning the formal schooling of first grade. It was created with a specific mission in mind of readying the youngest of students for the academic-based classroom of first grade through play and inquiry (Graue, 2009). That mission has been restructured so much by bureaucracy that it scarcely looks like kindergarten anymore. Kindergarten is not a grade level. Instead, it is a very special place in the school for students to become ready for school (Catsambis & Buttarò, 2012). Passe (2010) wrote, "The goal was not so much teach reading and writing but to develop overall cognitive and social-emotional skills—the beginning of considering the whole child" (p. 43).

It is clear that the current kindergarten in public schools has gotten so far away from the original purpose that it may be difficult to back pedal to an appropriate range. For years, we have

heard that kindergarten is the new first grade so often that it has become a common adage. One of this study's participants, Ivy, an education specialist, even spoke of Fröbel, commenting that we need to get back to the original basics of the kindergarten: "Kindergarten needs to reestablish Fröbel's methods of letting the children explore and learn how to function in the world. This would allow students to develop varied lifetime skills and allow themselves to grow and develop appropriately."

We truly are doing kindergarten students a disservice when we do not take this holistic approach to education imagined by Fröbel. Kindergarten is meant to fill that gap between being a toddler and first grader and effectively strike a balance between the two. Because kindergarten no longer has a construct to nurture the social, behavioral, and emotional needs of the child, educators are seeing children who not only have social-emotional challenges with peers and adults, but also students who are wholly apathetic and dislike school overall.

Implications for Policy or Practice

The findings of this transcendental phenomenological study exposed several implications for policy and practice. The results revealed how kindergarten teachers have fared since the passage of federal education reform. Teachers, administrators, district personnel, and legislators can use these implications to improve the overall experience and effectiveness of kindergarten for the youngest of students.

Implications for Policy

At the state and federal level, content standards need to be reviewed with educators from all grade levels and content areas to determine what content could be eliminated or at least significantly scaled down. There are too many standards currently for teachers to teach and for students to learn to mastery. When this occurs, students lack strong foundational skills that they

require for use as a scaffold to move on to more difficult content. The expectations set by the state are unreasonable and excessive. Additionally, consultations with educational psychologists or early education specialists could determine if the proposed and amended standards are developmentally appropriate. If students are allowed to acquire a strong base of foundational skills in Grades K–2 through a well-defined, purposeful, and focused set of content standards, the overall achievement of students in Grades 3–12 would likely increase to targeted academic achievement levels set by legislators.

Developmental Needs. In addition to a reduction in the disproportionate amount of academic content standards, additions must be made to the current kindergarten content standards to address their developmental needs. First, it is recommended that a set of social and behavioral goals should be added to the standards in which students learn acceptable social interactions, conflict resolution, and communication skills. Secondly, an added life skills portion would address basic knowledge of topics such as where they live in the world and items relating to health and wellness. Lastly, there should be an addition of a physical component that addresses and sharpens their fine motor skills through art and other creative methods.

Play Mandate. A further implication would be to mandate recess periods that must total 1 hour per day for those students attending a full-day kindergarten. Many studies (Almon & Miller, 2011; Colgan, 2016; Frost & Sutterby, 2017; Lynch, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Ranz-Smith, 2007) have recognized the critical importance of play to social and behavioral health and robust cognitive development. Vygotsky's (1930/1978) stance is that play "is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development" (p. 96). If it has been confirmed that play is so critical for children, then it would behoove legislators to mandate it at this level if the goal is to educate the whole child to the best of our ability.

Rest/Nap Mandate. An additional implication would be to mandate an afternoon rest period for those students attending a full-day kindergarten. Seehagen (2022) reported that sleep supports memory in children through multiple pathways. Active system consolidation explains how sleep allows the brain to transfer recent information from temporary memory to long-term memory. Synaptic homeostasis explains sleep as critical in providing neural connections with a much-needed rest. Seehagen (2022) suggested that vital learning activities should take place just prior to a nap. Kindergarten used to be a place where students continued to be able to take a nap in the afternoons; however, with standards pushing their way down, nap time became a target for school systems who were looking to take time away from certain parts of the day to make time for more content area instruction. According to a study by Berger et al. (2018): “Results suggest that sleep duration may be an important bioregulatory factor to consider in young children's early academic achievement” (p. 624). Teachers in this study reported that students become increasingly tired and whiny as the day progresses and need a time to rest.

Teacher Training. State-mandated requirements for universities that train preservice kindergarten teachers should instruct them on how to develop a young child’s executive functioning and fine motor skills and how to develop lessons that are developmentally appropriate and would align with the new and fewer content standards. According to Cameron et al. (2012), executive function substantially predicts all six academic achievement measures in kindergarten, including general knowledge, mathematics, word reading, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and phonics. Students in kindergarten cannot begin to seriously learn academic content standards until they have developed each component of executive functioning (Moffett & Morrison, 2020; Morgan et al., 2019). It is critical that preservice teachers are knowledgeable about the topic of executive functioning and how to develop it in the youngest of students.

Implications for Practice

Scheduling within each school and school system is flexible to an extent. Students have gone from 1 hour of recess (two 30-minute periods) to just 20 minutes per day. A nap or general rest time has been removed completely. The first suggestion is for administration to reevaluate the policies of removing naps and limiting recess time for kindergarten. It is evident that students may be more academically successful if given a time for not only free play but also for rest.

Teacher Autonomy and Curriculum. Local school systems are provided with a list of approved curricula from the state. The school systems usually form an adoption committee of teachers, consisting of content experts, special education and English language teachers, and general education teachers for that grade level and/or content area, who can provide feedback about the pros and cons of each curriculum. Local school systems are also given leeway to decide if their teachers can add to or deviate from the scripted or prescribed curriculum. It may be helpful to allow teachers the opportunity and autonomy of being able to choose if they would like to be able to do this. It may alleviate stress, and the autonomy it offers may help teachers feel as though their professional decisions about how and what exactly to teach to their students is respected and valued.

Useful Professional Development. Administration at the district level may be limited in what they can do because they must follow the mandates from the federal and state government, but there are many areas in which they have the leeway and flexibility to make the classroom more enjoyable and improved for both students and teachers. Professional development opportunities provided by the school system could be more thoughtful by offering kindergarten teachers authentic and useful examples of methods of developing fine motor, conflict resolution,

and executive functioning skills in their students in a way they could take those methods and start using them immediately in their classrooms.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The findings that developed from this analysis have both theoretical and empirical implications. The theories supporting this study are Piaget's (1936/1952) theory of cognitive development and Vygotsky's (1930/1978) sociocultural theory. Centered on the implications from this study, recommendations describing to how to improve kindergarten are made for all involved stakeholders.

The findings and theoretical implications of this transcendental phenomenological study investigating the experiences of kindergarten educators teaching through an era of educational reform through the theoretical lens of Piaget and Vygotsky are clear. This study corroborates that children require more outdoor free play and the return of play in the classroom in combination with social and behavioral guidance. It also supports the need to lower the sheer number of standards required by students to master so they can develop a strong base of foundational skills. They also still require rest in the afternoon to consolidate learning in long-term memory. The participants of this study appeared to validate the theories of both Piaget and Vygotsky. The conclusions of this study using the theories of both Piaget and Vygotsky as a framework may be transferable for future research within the career arena of education.

Theoretical Implications

The theories guiding this transcendental phenomenological study are Piaget's (1936/1952) theory of cognitive development and Vygotsky's (1930/1978) sociocultural theory. This transcendental phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers who taught through an era of educational reform. Both Piaget and Vygotsky explained

the development of children during varying stages of development. Piaget focused on distinct stages of development and the role of peer interaction. In contrast, Vygotsky focused on cognitive development through play and how peers, teachers, parents, and other adults guide them. Vygotsky theorized that children learn through play and social interaction. Both theorists believed that children learn actively and via hands-on experience and required play to effectively develop.

Each teacher in this study had similar experiences teaching through an era of educational reform. Their lived experiences provided support for the combined theories of both Piaget and Vygotsky. Students are not receiving what they need to develop in a healthy way as suggested by both theorists. Ivy stated that the way in which she taught students before educational reform would not meet the expectations of today's classroom. She explained the difference between the two eras this way:

Of course, I taught letters, letter sounds, shapes, and numbers, but most importantly, the students learned through play and social interaction with others. The focus was on play and really mastering the letters and their sounds to provide a solid foundation for success. When I moved to third grade, I still had students that did not know the alphabet because of not having the strong foundational skills of letters, which is definitely, in my opinion, leaving students behind. Lawmakers should view students as future productive citizens instead of pushing students to meet or beat other students in the world. They should look at lessening the number of standards instead of pushing them to dislike school because they never get a break in their learning. It's constant. It would be more useful to have students grow emotionally in the younger grade levels which could have numerous benefits for the student and our world.

Stormy, who transitioned from kindergarten to sixth grade has witnessed a noticeable difference in children between the two eras. Her current students are struggling in many areas as a result of a standards-based classroom. Her account was similar to Ivy:

Before No Child Left Behind, we focused on a variety of things such as teaching students social skills, how to tie their shoes, how to properly wash their hands and other health-related skills, how to get along with others both in class and at recess, as well teaching them their numbers, letters and sounds, decoding, and vocabulary. Students took a nap or rested during the last 30 minutes of the day. After No Child Left Behind, the expectations of kindergarten students increased greatly. We were expected to teach kindergarten students to write sentences and form small paragraphs. In math, we had to teach everything we already taught plus currency, ordinality, and more advanced addition and subtraction. More emphasis was put on test scores, which resulted in teachers teaching to the test. We no longer taught social skills through centers and students were no longer allowed to rest at the end of the day. This resulted in students that did not know how to get along with others, did not know how to share, and were extremely tired, irritable, and whiny. It also put an extreme amount of pressure on teachers, due to the increased focus on test scores. It was the beginning of taking the fun out of school.

Empirical Implications

The lived experiences of the 15 participants collected during this research confirmed empirical research conclusions regarding the topic of the changed kindergarten during a shift to a content-based kindergarten. Students who are unable to master the content of kindergarten are often retained. The research done on retention is clear, and the statistics are indisputable. Retention in grade can be a very harmful practice that is applied a great deal in kindergarten

(Hughes et al., 2018). Following students who have been retained uncovers a myriad of similar adverse consequences, which include an increase in the rate of suspensions and expulsions, overrepresentation in special education, a 50% increase in a student's chances of dropping out of school, lower academic achievement, criminal justice system involvement, and difficulty with obtaining and retaining employment (Bettencourt et al., 2018; Le et al., 2019).

Copious amounts of empirical research exist into the importance of play in the development of a child. Vygotsky (1930/1978) wrote that play "is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development" (p. 96). The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is a critical concept taught to preservice teachers across the country, so a definitive conclusion can be made that play is necessary for the development of the child. The participants in this study talked about how recess within this school system has been reduced to one third of its pre-NCLB amount and that play inside the classroom in centers is gone completely. Pertaining to the research on executive function, many studies have shown executive function to predict educational results over and above measures of intelligence or poor ability (Blair, 2016). Researchers report that play is critical for a child to develop their executive functioning skills.

It has long been suggested that cognitive processes correspond to internalized motor actions (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Internalized motor actions refer to developing fine motor skills. During the era prior to the passage of NCLB, teachers had centers in place where students used blocks, modeling clay, paintbrushes, and other toys and tools to develop their fine motor skills. Teachers were also able to spend a great deal of time on forming letters and how to properly hold a pencil for writing. Students were assessed on penmanship. Suggate et al. (2019) found that not only are fine motor skills linked to first-grade reading success but are also more of a readiness indicator than other indicators but are also involved in processes that develop

cognitive and academic skills. Teachers in this study reported that they were introducing students to multiple letters a week and could not take the time to determine if they were forming the letters correctly; they were instructed by district officials to have students learn the entire alphabet before fall break, approximately 9 weeks after school began. This is an incredibly rushed curriculum that is not supported in the empirical research of developmentally appropriate practices.

Piaget also stated that cognitive development is guided by learning from others, particularly peers, through *social transmission* (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969). This knowledge of the importance of social transmission for cognitive development is contrary to the long blocks of instructional time in literacy and mathematics that kindergarteners now experience. They are expected to sit in a chair at a desk or table for 90 to 120 minutes. Teachers admittedly reported that children do not obtain even close to the amount of social transmission from peers as they did prior to NCLB. Teachers also reported that parents are not interacting with their children the way they used to. Poppy said, “Many children do not eat meals together as a family anymore.” Iris explained,

Children are provided with a television or an electronic device to pacify them so the parents can relax without having to interact. Many parents spend a lot of time on their cell phones and pay little attention to their children.

Therefore, children require this social transmission during kindergarten to make up for what they may not have received up until this point in their lives.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations of this study may be regarded as a supposed weakness and could not be controlled. One limitation of the study is the narrow scope of racial and gender identities of the

participants. The identity of a participant can have an impact on her worldview, and in this study, 14 of the 15 participants were White females, and one was a Black female. While recruiting participants, no racial or gender requirements would disqualify a person from participating. All participants were female since I knew of no male kindergarten teachers in the area where the study took place. A further limitation of this research study was the limited number of schools from which I recruited. I solicited and gained approval from two school systems which included 11 schools from that pool of potential participants. I also contacted retired teachers and administrators and teachers that I knew who had left education for another career. An additional limitation could be related to the qualitative research design of the study. The participants who volunteered to be a part of the study were likely interested in the research topic, which may have inclined the way in which questions were responded to, possibly imparting partiality and speculation.

The study's delimitations included the boundaries of the study I set. One delimitation is this study's location as it was limited to western Tennessee. Another delimitation is that all the participants had to have taught kindergarten both before and after the passage of NCLB (2002) to be considered a participant. This, however, was necessary as participants had to be able to answer questions regarding their classrooms pre- and post-shift. In addition, collecting only lived experiences of teachers excluded parents and other stakeholders from providing their perspective. Lastly, the transcendental phenomenological research design supports the researcher in collecting lived experiences. This research design does not permit subjective analyses of the phenomenon as allowed in a hermeneutical phenomenology design described in Creswell and Poth (2018). As a researcher, I recognize that different approaches may offer further conclusions.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future research are focused on the limitations and delimitations and findings of this study. The currently teaching participants for this study were selected from six elementary schools in western Tennessee while the remainder of the participants were those who had retired, changed careers, or made the move to administration. Future research should recruit participants nationwide as each state handled the changes differently, so the experience of those teachers may be quite different. In addition, other states may mandate the course offerings I suggested at universities that train teachers. I would not, however, extend the reach of participation to private schools as they do not bear the same responsibilities as public schools. All participants in this study worked at rural public schools that are Title I, high-poverty schools. This can affect the population of students. It would be worth exploring if teachers who are employed at schools in affluent metropolitan areas have similar experiences. It may also be helpful to extend participation to administrators who were principals or district leaders both before and after the passage of NCLB (2002).

The findings of this study could be extended into other research designs for further research. In this study kindergarten teachers shared their lived experiences of teaching through an era of educational reform. A narrative design may be appropriate for exploring personal experiences in the actual school setting. The most appropriate research design, besides a phenomenology, would be to conduct a case study to focus on the teachers and how the school system's decisions affected their classrooms. A grounded theory research design could investigate how the demeanor or personality of each teacher affects how she has managed the shift to standards-based kindergarten classroom and create a theory regarding teacher temperament and methods for supporting those educators.

Conclusion

Our nation has always looked at the advances of other countries and wondered what could be done to keep up or surpass them. Legislators figured the best way to accomplish this feat was to focus attention on the nation's public schools and to make the education of the children as rigorous as possible and to hold schools accountable for these goals. To them, it stood to reason that this plan would create more academically intelligent citizens who would help the United States surpass the technological, medical, and additional advances of other developed countries. I began my teaching career just before the NCLB legislation was put into place. I have observed the consequences of it firsthand but have always been concerned about how it has affected the youngest of learners, particularly my own children. Upon interviewing participants, five themes began to emerge as teachers mourned the lost childhood of kindergarteners. I identified these five themes as (a) pre-shift environment/pedagogy, (b) post-shift environment/pedagogy, (c) academic standards, (d) accountability, and (e) collateral damage. Overall, the most noteworthy interpretation was the collateral damage that occurred as a result of educational reform. NCLB (2002) had good intentions, notwithstanding the accountability requirements and much too lofty goals, but it fell short and failed by placing all students into a one-size-fits-all box without concern for teaching the whole child. It neglected not only their development but also their needs in areas other than academics. If the United States is genuinely serious about putting our country at the top in areas of advancement, it will look to the youngest of students and begin making changes there that will have lasting effects.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 8, 2022

Rachel Whites
Gail Collins

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-593 LET THEM BE LITTLE: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS DURING AN ERA OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Dear Rachel Whites, Gail Collins,

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

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

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

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

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

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

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

Dear Educator:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirement for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to understand the changes kindergarten teachers have observed in their classrooms regarding standards-based reforms, and I am writing to invite you to join my study.

If you have been or currently are a kindergarten teacher within the past twenty-five years, you will be asked to (1) participate in an interview session where I will ask open-ended questions related to your experiences as a kindergarten teacher; (2) participate in a focus group discussion with other former or current kindergarten teachers regarding the same topic; and (3) write an open letter addressing the way in which you see kindergarten is now and how it was, adding any information you would like to share that was not addressed during the individual interview and focus group session. I will make an audio recording of all interviews and focus group discussions for transcription purposes only. The time it takes to write the letter will vary from participant to participant. Both the interview and the focus group will take 45–60 minutes. Your name and any other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation; however, all of your information will remain confidential.

The screening survey is a Microsoft Form. Here is a link to the Form:

Once you have completed the Form, I will review your responses and determine if you meet the criteria to participate in my study.

If you have any additional questions regarding my study, please call me at [REDACTED] or by email at [REDACTED]. Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,

Rachel Whites
Doctoral Student, Liberty University

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Appendix C: Screening Survey

1. For how many years have you taught kindergarten? Or, if no longer teaching kindergarten, for how many years did you teach kindergarten?
2. Did you teach kindergarten prior to the implementation of NCLB in 2002?
3. Did you teach kindergarten after the implementation of NCLB in 2002?
4. Have you taught kindergarten both before and after the implementation of NCLB in 2002?
5. Have you taught kindergarten since the implementation of ESSA in 2017?
6. Have you worked in the same school system the entire time you taught kindergarten?
7. Should you qualify for this study, would you be interested in participating? Please enter your preferred email address that can be used for correspondence related to this study.

Appendix D: Emails to Individuals who Complete the Screening Survey

Dear Teacher:

After reviewing your answers to the screening survey, I have determined that you qualify to participate in my study. I have attached a consent form that is required for your participation. It must be signed and returned to me before we can schedule your interview. Please sign, scan, and return it to me at [REDACTED] or you may type your information directly into the form and attach it in an email. Also, when forwarding your consent form, please let me know which method of interviewing you prefer (MS Teams or face-to-face) and what dates within the next week that you are available to meet.

Thank you so much for taking the time out of your busy schedule to participate in this study. I look forward to speaking with you and learning from your experiences.

Best regards,

Rachel Whites
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University
[REDACTED]

Dear Teacher:

After reviewing your answers to the screening survey, I have determined that you do not meet the criteria to participate in my study. Thank you for your interest.

Best regards,

Rachel Whites
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Appendix E: Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: Let Them Be Little: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of Kindergarten Teachers During an Era of Education Reform

Principal Investigator: Rachel Whites, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be an educator who taught kindergarten before and after the passage of NCLB in 2002. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

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

The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences and perceptions of educators who taught kindergarten both before and after 2002 when the No Child Left Behind law was passed. The study aims to gain perspective from teachers who taught through an era of federally mandated, standards-based educational reform.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Participate in an individual interview, either in-person or via Microsoft Teams, based on your preference of setting. This individual interview should take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. The interview will be audio recorded.
2. Participate in a focus group. The focus group should take 45-60 minutes to complete. The focus group session will be audio recorded.
3. Compose an open letter. You will be asked to write a letter in which you will describe how kindergarten is now or, if applicable, was when you left kindergarten, and compare/contrast that to how kindergarten was before the federal legislation of the past 20 years. The time in which it takes you to complete this will vary but should be completed within 30 minutes.
4. Review the transcript of your individual interview and your part of the focus group for accuracy, which should take approximately 15 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

There are no direct benefits for participating in this study.

Benefits to society include additions to the body of research involving best practices for kindergarten classrooms, which could contribute to the development of new theories and understandings into pedagogy. Ideally, this study would help frame future legislative discussions to exact real changes in the classrooms of our youngest learners.

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Approved on 3-8-2022

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

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

How will personal information be protected?

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

- Participant responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms. Interviews and the focus groups will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated with an Amazon gift card valued at \$30 for participating in this study. I will physically deliver it to you after the individual interview, focus group, and open letter are completed.

Is study participation voluntary?

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

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

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

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

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

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

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

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

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

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

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Liberty University
IRB-FY21-22-593
Approved on 3-8-2022

Appendix F: Open Letter

Date

Dear Participant,

As part of your participation in this study, please write an open letter beginning with *To Whom It May Concern*. In your letter, describe how kindergarten is now or, if applicable, was when you left kindergarten, and compare/contrast that to how kindergarten was before the No Child Left Behind legislation. Please provide details of your personal experiences and opinions during those times, particularly as it relates to your students. Email the completed letter to [REDACTED]. Your letter is completely confidential and will only be used as a data collection method in this study. It will not be distributed to anyone.

Thank you for your time and contribution. If you have any further questions, please call or text me at [REDACTED] or email me at [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Rachel Whites

Doctoral Student, Liberty University

Appendix G: Interview Questions

1. How many years did you or have you taught kindergarten? (icebreaker)
2. Prior to the implementation of NCLB in 2002 and being given standards to teach, what did you use to guide what you taught on a daily basis? (SQ1)
3. Prior to 2002, how did you assess student progress? How do you assess mastery now? (SQ1)
4. Thinking about kindergarten content standards, do you think the current content standards are doable for 5-year-old children? (SQ1, SQ2, SQ4) Why or why not?
5. Explain whether kindergarten content standards should contain a social and behavioral skill construct. (SQ3)
6. What did it mean to be ready for kindergarten before 2002? What does it mean to be ready now? (CRQ, SQ2)
7. Please explain any differences, positive or negative, which you have noticed in kindergarten students' readiness during the different eras. (CRQ, SQ3)
8. Explain the difference in the amount of time you spend in direct instruction between the two eras? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ4)
9. Explain key skills that used to be taught in kindergarten that you believe are important which have gone to the wayside? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3)
10. How has/did the pedagogy and environment of your kindergarten classroom change from pre-NCLB to post-NCLB? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ4)
11. What is the difference in how you decide to retain a child between the two eras? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ2)
12. How much free play do students currently receive daily for activities such as art, dress-up, building with blocks, etc.? How does this compare to the amount of time they received to take part in these activities prior to NCLB? (SQ1, SQ2, SQ3, SQ4)
13. What ways and how often do students have during the school day to interact with one another and build social and behavioral skills? (SQ3)
14. Do you think students in kindergarten should be given time to rest or nap in the afternoon? Have you observed any behaviors that suggests they may need it? (CRQ)
15. What specific outcomes and consequences, positive or negative, have you witnessed in children as an effect of a standards-based curriculum? (SQ1, SQ2)
16. What else would you like to add that we did not discuss?

Appendix H: Focus Group Questions

1. How is everyone's year going so far?
2. Tell me how kindergarten was before NCLB.
3. Please describe any instances in which your students did not seem developmentally ready to learn a certain content standard. (SQ4)
4. Are there any standards that you would like to see reworded or completely removed from kindergarten? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ4)
5. Describe how you find ways to bring play and art into your academic content standards. (SQ4)
6. How much control do you have over the way in which you deliver lesson content? (SQ1, SQ4)
7. Describe what you think it means for a student to be ready for kindergarten. (SQ1, SQ2, SQ3)
8. What types of free play do you offer students in your classroom? (SQ3)
9. Describe the process of creating a portfolio as an assessment of your effectiveness. (CRQ)
10. How does the state's observation protocol help you to be a better teacher? How does the state's observation protocol cause you distress? (SQ1)
11. Would you like to continue teaching kindergarten or would you prefer to try teaching a different grade? Why or why not? If you have moved to another grade, why did you leave kindergarten? (CRQ, SQ1)
12. What is your view regarding the importance of a nap time for kindergarten students? When was the last time students in your kindergarten were allowed to take a nap in the afternoon? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ3)
13. Is there anything anyone wants to add that was not discussed here?

Appendix I: Researcher's Reflexive Journal

Date	Entries
10/04/2021	I come into this study with specific biases that should be noted before beginning. I believe that children in kindergarten should not be pushed into learning academic content yet. It is my assertion that the practice does more harm than good. The educational reforms of the past 20 years have created a situation that has transformed kindergarten into an academically rigorous grade when it should be a transitional period before beginning formal schooling.
03/15/2022	I interviewed "Sunny" today, an educator with over 30 years of teaching the youngest of our students. She has witnessed the socioeconomic status of her students getting lower and lower over the years to the point where three out of every four students live at or below the poverty level. It is so difficult to teach these students to master content standards when they come to school with little background knowledge, low vocabulary, and don't have the dexterity to hold a crayon and use it.
04/19/2022	Today, I interviewed a recently retired educator, "Raven," who worked as both a classroom teacher and an administrator at the district level. She taught through the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s before transitioning to administration. I was unhappy with many of her responses, but I had to keep it to myself and just listen because the purpose is not to elicit responses I like, but responses from experienced teachers who taught through an era of reform. Her responses were typical of an administrator who has been out of the classroom for some time and has lost touch with what it is like to be in the kindergarten classroom.
04/20/2022	Over half of my participants have moved on to a different grade level. "Daisy" is one of them. She is my fifth interview, and her responses were lively and genuine. She told me of issues I had not even considered when it comes to children. She said that she would use nap time for those kids that did not rest as a time to talk with them and get to know them. During those years, several students let her know they were victims of incest. She said that since the naps were taken away, she no longer gets to talk to students one on one. She moved grade levels because her zest for kindergarten had fizzled to the point that she dreaded work. I am already seeing themes emerge at this point as many responses are close to identical.
04/24/2022	Today, I interviewed "Iris." She made the move to public school PreK after her time teaching kindergarten. She reported that what she was teaching in kindergarten then is what she is expected to teach in PreK now. The academic shakedown is very obvious to her.
05/27/2022	Today, I interviewed "Autumn." She was the most experienced of all the teachers I spoke to. She began teaching kindergarteners in the early 1970s and continued well into the next century. The interview took three times as long as the others, and it yielded a wealth of thick, rich data. She had much to say. It was a joy to listen to her.

06/15/2022	I interviewed “Poppy” today. As a current district level administrator, she hates what has happened to kindergarten, but her hands are tied to be able to do anything. I felt empathy for her because she has to do what the state directs. She said that kindergarten was so much fun in the 90s.
08/01/2022	Today, I interviewed “Rose.” She has left education altogether and sought public elected office. She was so sick of the legislators at both the federal and state level that took a job that used to be so fun and turned it into something which she hated getting up every morning to do. It had nothing to do with the students but rather the bureaucracy that controls the educational landscape.
08/29/2022	I met with focus groups today of five participants each. They bounced off each other’s responses well. Although they had similar feelings, the degree to which they felt those emotions was varied among them. They laughed and shared their stories (experiences). It was an enjoyable time of fellowship.
08/29/2022	After conducting focus groups today, it felt wonderful to have gathered all sources of data from participants. It felt good to sit down this evening and write in thank you cards and place gift cards inside of them. It was certainly a feeling of accomplishment, but I genuinely enjoyed speaking to each of the educators and reading their letters.
09/06/2022	Throughout this process of interviewing and conducting focus groups, I have transcribed every spoken word. Each time I reread the transcripts and their letters, something else would take me aback. I have highlighted and taken notes and been organizing since March. I typed my themes, subthemes, and significant statements into a table for Dr. Collins to look over and approve.
10/12/2022	I submitted my first draft of Chapter 4 for review. The five major themes include: Pre-Shift Environment and Pedagogy, Post-Shift Environment and Pedagogy, Academic Standards, Accountability, and Collateral Damage. Pre-Shift and Post-Shift Environment/Pedagogy centered around the curriculum, climate or mood, and physical environment of the classroom between the two eras. Academic standards focused on the changed content and its effect on both educators and students. Accountability addressed all the testing and evaluations that came about with NCLB and their effect on both educators and students. Collateral damage focused on the unintended and negative consequences of educational reform.
11/06/2022	Finalized and submitted Chapter 5 for review. Interpretations of findings, implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research are included.

Appendix J: Audit Trail

Date	Entries
04/20/2021	District approval from school system director
03/08/2022	IRB Approval
03/09/2022- 03/14/2022	Conduct pilot study
03/09/2022 (ongoing)	Acquire participants
03/15/2022 – 08/01/2022	Conduct individual interviews
08/29/2022	Conduct focus groups
03/15/2022 – 08/30/2022	Collect open letters
03/15/2022 (ongoing)	Transcription and Member Checks
08/30/2022 – 09/30/2022	Delivered thank you cards with gift cards to participants
08/30/2022 – 10/12/2022	Phenomenological reduction and report of findings in Chapter 4
10/18/2022 – 11/06/2022	Development of Conclusions reported in Chapter 5
11/12/2022	Requested an APA editor for final dissertation
12/01/2022	Received final edits of dissertation from APA editor for submission to the JF Library

Appendix K: Permission to Use Figure 1

From: Steve Wheeler [REDACTED]
Sent: Tuesday, September 7, 2021 3:19 AM
To: Whites, Rachel D [REDACTED]
Subject: [External] Re: Permission to Use Figure

Hi Rachel

Please feel free to use the figure with appropriate attribution to the source.

Best regards

Steve Wheeler

On 6 Sep 2021, at 22:41, Whites, Rachel D [REDACTED] wrote:

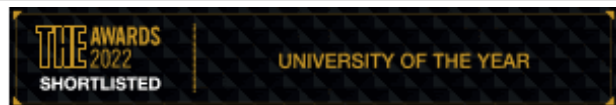
Hello, Dr. Wheeler. I am a doctoral student at Liberty University. The theoretical framework for my phenomenology includes the work of Lev Vygotsky. I am writing in reference to securing permission to use your 2013 figure of the ZPD and scaffolding, which would be included in the literature review of my dissertation.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Rachel Whites



**UNIVERSITY OF
PLYMOUTH**



Appendix L: Permission to Use Figure 2

From: John Hattie [REDACTED] >
Sent: Tuesday, December 21, 2021 9:46 PM
To: Whites, Rachel D <[REDACTED]>
Subject: [External] RE: Permission to Use Figure

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

You have our permission to use this and delighted you are so doing

Best wishes

John

From: Whites, Rachel D [REDACTED]
Sent: Wednesday, 22 December 2021 2:18 PM
To: John Hattie [REDACTED]
Cc: Collins, Gail L (Doctor of Education) [REDACTED]
Subject: [EXT] Permission to Use Figure

External email: Please exercise caution

Hello, Professor Hattie. I am a doctoral student at Liberty University in the United States. The theoretical framework for my phenomenology includes the work of Jean Piaget, and a great deal of information about executive function is included in the literature review. I am writing in reference to securing permission to use your 2017 figure of age-related changes in the components of executive function, prefrontal cortex grey matter, prefrontal cortex white matter matched with Piagetian stages of cognitive development from the research article, *Cognitive and Brain Development: Executive Function, Piaget, and the Prefrontal Cortex*. I will accredit the figure to both you and Bolton, which will be included in the literature review.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Merry Christmas,
Rachel Whites