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Prekindergarten Teachers' Perspectives Regarding Kindergarten Readiness and Challenges to Readiness Achievement

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Felicia Farr

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Walden University

2022

Abstract

Prekindergarten Teachers' Perspectives Regarding Kindergarten Readiness and
Challenges to Readiness Achievement

by

Felicia Chapman Farr

MA, Indiana University, 2012

BS, Indiana University, 2009

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2022

Abstract

The problem that was the focus of this study is that only half of the students entering kindergarten in the United States are considered kindergarten ready. This problem is important because children who are successful in kindergarten are more likely to continue to be successful in elementary school. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of prekindergarten teachers regarding lack of kindergarten readiness in students who completed a district-approved prekindergarten program and the challenges the teachers believe affected the level of kindergarten readiness. The conceptual framework for this study was based on the need for vertical alignment of classroom and instructional practices. Two research questions addressed prekindergarten teacher perspectives regarding kindergarten readiness and the challenges the teachers believe affect children's ability to achieve readiness. Data were collected from interviews with 10 prekindergarten teachers and were analyzed using thematic coding. Results indicated that teachers feel responsible for children's readiness, but they are hindered by administrative distractions, concerns for test validity, and the testing process. Implications include increased collaboration among teachers and administrators to improve testing and achieve greater student readiness. This study could lead to positive social change by being used to inform instructional or policy improvements that increase children's academic success.

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Dedication

This research is dedicated to all the former preschool graduates who may not have received or met readiness expectations in kindergarten. Hopefully, research will do better for those coming after you after seeing the misalignment between expectations not known to you or any fault of your own. This is also dedicated to current and future preschool graduates that continued research will cause all stakeholders involved to make sure that you are meeting the readiness expectations.

Acknowledgments

I would love to thank my family, friends, and colleagues at Walden University who supported my journey to completion. There were some caring Walden staff along the way, and I thank you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The topic of this study was the perspectives of prekindergarten teachers regarding the lack of kindergarten readiness in students who complete a district-approved prekindergarten program in one public school district in the southeastern United States. According to school district reports, only about one half of children who completed a district-approved prekindergarten program over the past 4 years met benchmarks on the district's readiness assessment. Per the program director, recent communication to prekindergarten teachers set the expectation at 85% of district program graduates achieving readiness benchmarks. In light of these new requirements, this study needed to be conducted to determine why half of children who have completed a district-approved prekindergarten program over the past 4 years were unable to pass the readiness assessment administered by the same school district. This study may contribute to positive social change through sharing insights gained about the perspectives of prekindergarten teachers regarding kindergarten readiness and the challenges the teachers believe affect children's readiness achievement that may result in instructional or policy improvements that increase children's success.

In this chapter, I present the background, problem statement, purpose of study, conceptual framework for the study, research questions, and the research design. I nature of the study, scope and delimitations, limitations, definitions of key terms, and assumptions are also provided.

Background

According to Thompson et al. (2019), kindergarten students' failure results when children are not prepared for kindergarten and then are expected to master skills that exceed their level of ability. For example, Franko et al. (2018), in an analysis of data drawn from the 2009 Head Start Family and Child Experiences' study of over 1,300 children, found that students have distinctly different experiences in prekindergarten and kindergarten across three factors: the use of developmentally appropriate practices, class size, and adult-child ratios. Franko et al. determined that lack of vertical alignment in these three factors between a child's prekindergarten and kindergarten experience contributed to poorer outcomes in kindergarten. Developmentally appropriate practices, class size, and adult-child ratios have been identified as markers of quality early childhood programs, yet kindergarten students experience larger class sizes, more children per teacher, and fewer developmentally appropriate practices than do prekindergarten students (Franko et al., 2018), indicating a lack of alignment across programs. Daniels (2014) found that when children who are accustomed to a child-centered prekindergarten program moved into a kindergarten program that employed both constructivist learning and teacher-focused instruction, the child's motivation for learning was reduced. Puccioni (2018) reported prekindergarten teachers believe children lack motivation to embrace the academic focus needed to successfully transition to kindergarten.

According to Greaves and Bahous (2021), attention to children's development of subject-specific school skills may compete with attention to their development of

nonacademic skills, leading to perspectives of preparation for kindergarten readiness that might differ between prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers and between childcare centers and schools. Puccioni (2018) found kindergarten teachers believed it was important for children to have a variety of academic skills and social/emotional attributes to successfully transition to kindergarten, but they placed more emphasis on early literacy skills than on social skills as determinants of children's success in kindergarten. Baron et al. (2016) asserted that teachers face challenges in implementing a developmentally appropriate curriculum in kindergarten classrooms. Puccioni found that parents and prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers stressed the importance of children's ability to interact with adults and peers in positive ways, communicate their wants and needs effectively, and follow direction to their efforts to be successful in kindergarten, but that social abilities are not emphasized in kindergarten readiness assessment. The kindergarten readiness assessment reflects the skills kindergarten teachers expect children will have mastered prior to beginning kindergarten and that are the foundation for instruction that follows those expectations. Any differences in prekindergarten and kindergarten curricula may lead to misalignment between what prekindergarten children are taught and what is demonstrated by readiness assessment that kindergarten teachers expect them to know.

Past studies of readiness expectations have included prekindergarten teachers only (Pekdogan & Akgul, 2017) or kindergarten teachers only (Regenstein et al., 2018). Longitudinal studies have combined in analysis the different expectations for kindergarten readiness of prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers (Gills et al., 2006;

McWayne et al., 2012). In contrast to past studies, in the current study I present prekindergarten teachers' perspectives of expectations for kindergarten readiness from a single community and their alignment to kindergarten readiness expectations as demonstrated by the district's kindergarten entrance assessment. This permitted me to explore teacher perspectives of expectations for kindergarten readiness that may affect vertical alignment for a single community of students and may shed light on the problem of low readiness achievement among prekindergarten students in the target district.

The gap in practice this study addressed was the need for greater understanding of the perspectives of prekindergarten teachers regarding lack of kindergarten readiness in students who completed a district-approved prekindergarten program and the challenges the teachers believe have affected the level of kindergarten readiness. Given that the purpose of a prekindergarten program is to prepare all children for kindergarten (Pianta et al., 2020), the lack of success prekindergarten students demonstrated on district readiness assessments is an indication of a teaching practice problem. This study provides insight into the problem of low readiness demonstrated by children in the target district.

Problem Statement

The problem that was the focus of this study is that only half of entering kindergarten students in the United States are considered kindergarten ready. According to Ma et al. (2015), kindergarten teachers report that only one third of the children who enter kindergarten are capable of success. At the start of kindergarten, some children are behind their peers in reading, mathematics, and vocabulary by as much as 1.5 years (Ma et al., 2015). In the 2014–2015 school year, 52% of students entering kindergarteners in a

major northeastern U.S. city were deemed “not ready” with regards to social-behavior skills (Bettencourt et al., 2016, p. 15). A statewide report from a midwestern U.S. state noted that the rate of retention in kindergarten increased from 4% of children to 5% between 2012 and 2016, citing the lack of consistent prekindergarten readiness standards as a contributing factor (Indiana Early Learning Advisory Committee, 2017, p. 27). The following 2016–2017 school year, the same midwestern state spent an extra \$23 million dollars on kindergarten, but the state retention rate remained about the same, at 4.4% (Indiana Early Learning Advisory Committee, 2018, p.39). Although all states have a de facto definition of kindergarten readiness embedded in early learning standards, there is no formal kindergarten readiness definition by which readiness can be measured (Regenstein et al., 2018). Regenstein et al. (2018) suggested that prekindergarten teacher may have different perspectives of kindergarten readiness expectations than what is described by standardized readiness assessment.

This problem was evident in half of students who attended prekindergarten programs approved by the study site public school district in a southeastern U.S. state but who then failed the district’s standardized readiness assessment. According to a local report, in fall 2016 only 49% of the incoming kindergarten students were “kindergarten-ready” based on their reading assessment scores measured early in the school year in the target district. A similar report of a study conducted in the target school district indicated that of those students who had completed the district-run prekindergarten program, only 19% of children passed the district’s Kindergarten Readiness Indicator in math and 26% of children passed in reading. In the study site district, low kindergarten readiness in

children who completed prekindergarten was a problem for at least 4 years, as indicated in annual reports internal to the district. Readiness percentages from 2016 through 2019 are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Readiness of Prekindergarten Graduates in the Target District 2016–2019

School year	Percent Ready	Percent not ready
2016	49	51
2017	42	58
2018	51	49
2019	44	56

A gap in practice was evident because only half of students who complete a prekindergarten program in the United States achieve readiness as measured by a readiness assessment. Increasing understanding of the problem of low readiness achievement is significant to the discipline because of the widespread prevalence of low readiness achievement across the United States. Increased understanding of this problem is also significant for the study site district, especially in light of new readiness target of 85% of children who complete the district-approved prekindergarten program as communicated by the district prekindergarten program director. This study addressed the need for greater understanding of the perspectives of prekindergarten teachers regarding lack of kindergarten readiness in students who completed a district-approved

prekindergarten program and the challenges the teachers believe have affected the level of kindergarten readiness.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of prekindergarten teachers regarding lack of kindergarten readiness in students who completed a district-approved prekindergarten program and the challenges the teachers believe have affected the level of kindergarten readiness. I conducted this study using a constructivist paradigm (see Guba & Lincoln, 1994). By exploring the phenomenon of interest (i.e., prekindergarten teachers' perspectives regarding kindergarten readiness), I increased understanding of the perspectives of prekindergarten teachers regarding lack of kindergarten readiness in students who completed a district-approved prekindergarten program and the challenges the teachers believe have affected the level of kindergarten readiness.

Research Questions

The following two research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are prekindergarten teachers' perspectives regarding lack of kindergarten readiness in students who completed a district-approved prekindergarten program?

RQ2: What challenges do prekindergarten teachers believe have affected the level of kindergarten readiness in their students?

Conceptual Framework

I used the work of Bogard et al. (2005) on vertical alignment of curriculum and instruction as the conceptual framework for this study. Bogard et al. suggested that children in preschool and kindergarten may benefit from vertical alignment of curriculum and instructional practices. According to Bogard et al., an essential element in aligning and coordinating of curriculum for children in prekindergarten through Grade 3 is recognizing that children need experiences that are appropriate to their age and level of development, are part of an intentional system of instruction, and are coordinated across levels and grades. Alignment implies congruence across learning expectations, curriculum, and assessment for children in prekindergarten through Grade 3, and it requires coordination among teachers, with the guidance of school leadership, from preschool all the way through a child's academic career (Bogard et al., 2005).

The work of Bogard et al. (2005) provided the framework for the current study by describing alignment across instructional levels and concluding that school failure may result when alignment is lacking. Because prekindergarten teachers in the study site district have been unsuccessful in developing kindergarten readiness in students despite using a district-approved prekindergarten program, it seemed likely that prekindergarten teachers' perspectives regarding kindergarten readiness are not aligned with district readiness expectations. Because Bogard et al. emphasized the value of alignment of expectations and experiences for children across the early childhood years, their work was relevant to this study of teacher perspectives of expectations for kindergarten readiness.

Nature of Study

In this basic qualitative study, I interviewed prekindergarten teachers regarding students' kindergarten readiness and the challenges the teachers believe have affected the level of kindergarten readiness in their students. This method reflects the constructivist tradition as described by Guba and Lincoln (1994) and is suitable for a study in which the purpose is to discover the perspectives of people who have experience with the problem, when elements affecting the problem are unknown (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A survey would not have been as appropriate for this study because surveys measure the extent of known factors and cannot describe factors that are as yet unknown to the researcher (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The phenomenon under study was the perspectives of prekindergarten teachers regarding lack of kindergarten readiness in students who complete a district-approved prekindergarten program in one public school district in the southeastern United States. Ten prekindergarten teachers participated in this study and were interviewed about their readiness expectations. I analyzed the interview transcripts using Saldana's (2016) coding method to determine the prekindergarten teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and values regarding kindergarten readiness and the challenges teachers believe affect children's readiness success.

Definition of Terms

Alignment: The intentional coordination of curricular components of disparate educational programs to facilitate a smooth transition across grades (Atchison & Pompelia, 2018). Alignment may also be achieved if stakeholders across educational

levels inherently agree on what students should know, how students should be taught, and the sort of guidance teachers need (Bogard, 2003).

Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP): An approach to teaching grounded in the research about how young children develop and learn and in what is known about effective early education (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2018). In DAP, children construct knowledge while learning flexibly and have a curriculum to match the young children's learning developmental stages (Saracho, 2017).

Head Start: An early childhood program serving low-income children and their families that is locally operated but funded and regulated by the federal government. Head Start was launched in 1965 to overcome the challenges of young children living in poverty (Jiang et al., 2021).

Kindergarten readiness: Kindergarten (or school) readiness encompasses qualities and skills that contribute to a child's ability to be successful in kindergarten, including social and emotional competence; motor capacity; development of early literacy and numeracy; and executive function skills of attentiveness, persistence, and memory (McWayne et al., 2012). School readiness typically depends on cognitive development, language development, and social emotional development, but how kindergarten readiness is operationally defined is determined by factors and goals in the local context (Sutter et al., 2017).

Readiness expectations: Although Head Start defined readiness expectations as goals for child progress across various domains (Head Start Early Childhood Learning

and Knowledge Center [ECLKC], 2020), and the NAEYC (2009) offered a policy statement on readiness, there is no operational definition for readiness (Sutter et al., 2017). For the purposes of this study, readiness expectations are expectations prekindergarten teachers use to guide their work and that kindergarten teachers look for in children newly enrolled in their classrooms.

Assumptions

I assumed that teachers were truthful and accurate in their interview responses and that the teachers who formed my sample taught children who were typical of children in the district generally. Because I accepted all teachers who volunteered to be part of this study and who believed they fit the participant criteria, it is possible that teachers of particularly low- or high-performing classes may have volunteered more readily than teachers whose classrooms were more typical of classrooms in the district. The possibility for selection bias, as described by Campbell and Stanley (1963), is inherent in studies such as the current one, in which the motivations of participants are undetermined. Such assumptions are typical in an interview-based study, in which the quality of data is dependent on the reliability and representativeness of informants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study included the perspectives of prekindergarten teachers regarding lack of kindergarten readiness in students who completed a district-approved prekindergarten program and the challenges the teachers believe have affected the level of kindergarten readiness. I chose this focus because only about half of prekindergarten

graduates across the United States score as kindergarten ready on a kindergarten readiness assessment administered to entering kindergarten students (see Barnett et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2015). This study was delimited to comprise interviews of 10 prekindergarten teachers who worked in general education classrooms in a single school district in the southeastern United States. Excluded from participation were teachers of other ages and grade levels, teachers in therapeutic or special needs settings, and teachers from school districts other than the target district. I also excluded teachers whom I knew or with whom I had worked. These delimitations reflect the focus of the conceptual framework described by Bogard et al. (2005) on alignment between grade levels in regular education classrooms. Other frameworks that might have been chosen, such as the work of Pianta et al. (2020) on kindergarten readiness or Burchinal et al. (2002) on preschool indicators of later academic success, were excluded because they do not explicitly address the issue of alignment between grade levels. These delimitations may restrict transferability to other school districts and settings. To aid in the transferability of the results, I provided clear and complete descriptions of study elements and processes so a reader may determine the applicability of the findings to their context.

Limitations

This study was limited by the fact that in the year prior to the start of data collection, schools across the United States were closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected teaching practice across all grade levels, including prekindergarten. Perspectives described by teachers in this study may have been affected by this disruption of ordinary instruction. Teachers may have found it difficult to recall

their perspectives regarding readiness and the challenges they faced in developing readiness in their students because of the alteration of teaching that occurred over an entire academic year prior to the beginning of this study. Such uncontrolled factors are not uncommon in a study that depends on data provided by informants who naturally are affected by everyday events (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I guided teachers in recalling both their prior practice when in-person instruction was the norm and their practice during the pandemic-affected year, when many taught students via online teleconference.

A researcher bias that could have influenced this study was my previous role as a kindergarten teacher and then a prekindergarten teacher in the target district. My professional experience regarding kindergarten readiness made me knowledgeable and credible when engaging teachers in the interviews, but I had to guard against the intrusion of my biases in data collection and analysis. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), researcher bias represents a threat to the validity of study results. I excluded teachers whom I knew or with whom I had worked from this study and used reflexivity mechanisms to manage my own biases while conducting this study, as described in Chapter 3.

Significance

Positive social change may result from the understanding gained in this study about the perspectives of prekindergarten teachers regarding kindergarten readiness and the challenges they believe affect children's readiness achievement in the form of being used to make instructional or policy improvements that increase children's success. The results of this study shed light on the problem at the heart of this study: Only half of U.S.

students entering kindergarten are considered kindergarten ready. Increased understanding of this problem is significant to the discipline because of the widespread prevalence of low readiness achievement across the United States. According to Pianta et al. (2020), readiness predicts kindergarten success, and success in kindergarten predicts success in subsequent grades.

Summary

In this chapter, I explained the need to conduct this study as well as introduced background literature and the conceptual framework that guided the study. The limitations, delimitations, and assumptions that are inherent in an interview-based study such as this were also described. In Chapter 2, I will present a review of extant literature related to kindergarten readiness and prekindergarten and kindergarten practices. A more in-depth description of the conceptual framework will also be provided in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem that was the focus of this study is that only half of U.S. students entering kindergarten are considered kindergarten ready. The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of prekindergarten teachers regarding lack of kindergarten readiness in students who completed a district-approved prekindergarten program and the challenges the teachers believe have affected the level of kindergarten readiness. In this chapter, I present a review of current literature related to this problem and purpose. The literature indicates that there are not established definitions of readiness or universal expectations for readiness, so that various expectations for readiness exist among prekindergarten teachers and among other stakeholders who influence curriculum and instructional practices in prekindergarten and kindergarten (Costantino-Lane, 2019). I begin this chapter with a description of my process for searching the literature and provide an in-depth explanation of the conceptual framework for this study.

Literature Search Strategy

To search the literature, I used the following five search engines in the EBSCOhost database, accessed through the Walden University Library: Academic Search Complete, Education Source, Teacher Reference Center, ERIC, and PSY. In addition, the Walden University Library provided access to the Childcare Education, Stats Database, Children's Defense Fund, Kids Count Data Center, ProQuest Central, and Sage Journals databases. These databases were searched from within EBSCOhost, and when an article could not be found there, I searched for the article through the Walden University Library. This review includes peer-reviewed articles published since 2016,

except for those seminal articles published in earlier years, which were included as necessary. Walden University's Thoreau database and Google Scholar provided additional research articles. The following keyword search terms were used: *academic/kindergarten readiness, preschool and kindergarten teachers' expectations, lack of kindergarten readiness, kindergarten achievement, kindergarten transition, developmentally appropriate practices, brain, parents, and early childhood*. The phrase "*and early childhood*" was often added to refine the search. I also used the reference section from the articles I found to locate additional search terms and articles for the study as part of my iterative search process.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was based on the idea of the vertical alignment of learning expectations and instructional practices described by Bogard et al. (2005). Bogard et al. explained that children ages 3 to 8 require experiences that are appropriate for their level of development, are intentional, and are coordinated across prekindergarten through third-grade classrooms. They suggested that this coordination requires a shared vision across what might be differently organized instructional settings, in the preschool and primary grades. These ideas align with the phenomenon that was the focus of this study

According to Bogard et al. (2005), program alignment and coordination in the prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms are achieved through four key elements. The first key element is reliance on a research-based curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for the child at whatever age. Graue et al. (2018) contended that preschool

has traditionally followed developmentally appropriate practices and focuses on the development of a wide range of abilities and skills, but school practice from kindergarten through high school is devoted to developing students' mastery of academic content. Rather than organizing curriculum by content areas, preschool educators think in terms of developmental domains that are integrated through children's experiences (Graue et al., 2018). Bogard et al. supported this developmental focus when they suggested that prekindergarten and kindergarten curriculum both should be developmentally appropriate and based in research.

The second key element is that prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers should use the same instrument by which to assess student progress and that this assessment match the curriculum in terms of what was taught and what children are expected to know (Bogard et al., 2005). Hustedt et al. (2018) found that most kindergarten teachers prefer an assessment that evaluates all developmental domains, not just academic skill mastery, but that they then prioritize this assessment information independently. Preschool teachers also tend also to assess across all domains (Hustedt, et al., 2018), but the prioritization of domains may be different at the kindergarten and prekindergarten levels.

The third key element for alignment and coordination of programs is teacher training and knowledge in early childhood development and best practices for teaching children at various developmental levels (Bogard et al., 2005). Giles and Tunks (2015) found that many preschool teachers thought that direct instruction is needed to teach literacy skills and that they needed to offer reduced opportunities for independent play,

outdoor activities, arts, and social interaction to be available for increased amounts of direct instruction. Lack of understanding about development-based teaching and learning may lead to teaching and assessment that are not developmentally appropriate (Bogard et al., 2005).

Finally, the fourth element for alignment described by Bogard et al. (2005) to increase alignment and coordination in early childhood education is a set of consistent principles across preschool to third grade that establish the concept of these years as the first level of public education and support a coherent strategic plan. According to Takanishi and Kauerz (2008), nearly all constituency groups that focus on K–12 education consider prekindergarten to be outside the scope of educational reform, a perspective that has limited attention to alignment between the readiness expectations of prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers. Preschool instruction needs to be part of the scope of public education and considered in alignment and coordination with the kindergarten and primary grade program.

The work of Bogard et al. (2005) has been used or cited by at least five researchers. For example, Franko et al. (2018) relied on the work of Bogard et al. in their exploration of differences and discrepancies between developmentally appropriate practices in preschool and kindergarten settings. Gill et al. (2006) referenced Bogard et al. and Takanishi (2004) in a study of early childhood preservice teacher perspectives towards kindergarteners' social and emotional competences and the concept of school readiness. They found these preservice teachers believed a key part of readiness is school willingness to serve all children, communicate with stakeholders across diverse settings,

and appreciate the effect of sociocultural contexts in children's ability to be ready for kindergarten (Gills et al., 2006).

The work of Bogard et al. (2005) was a logical framework for the current study because they suggested that alignment of perspectives from prekindergarten to kindergarten and from kindergarten to the primary grades is necessary to promote a smooth transition for students from one educational setting to the next. In the upcoming sections I continue an exploration of these issues by presenting literature regarding children's transition to kindergarten from prekindergarten, policy differences in readiness expectations, prekindergarten; and kindergarten teachers' readiness expectations, and how prekindergarten and kindergarten students are taught.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts

Children's Transition From Prekindergarten to Kindergarten

Teachers' beliefs about school readiness and the demands of newly adopted curriculum shaped the types of materials and resources shared with parents during kindergarten orientation for transition into kindergarten from preschool (Puccioni, 2018). There is no absolute definition of readiness; rather, it is co-constructed by individuals and shaped by the way readiness is defined within contexts (Puccioni, 2018). Ideas about school readiness are determined by the social context of the family, the school, and the community (Puccioni, 2018). Successful kindergarten transition activities foster positive relationships and connections between children, their families, and schools (Purtell et al., 2020). Transition from preschool to elementary school was described by Little (2017) as the development and change in the connection between peers, family, school, and

neighborhood contexts. Moore (2020) asserted that a child's development is influenced by broad factors, such as the social norms of the community and its economic health, and personal or family factors, including age of the parents, household income, race, and immigration status. Atchison and Pompelia (2018) defined an effective transition as the smooth passage from preschool to kindergarten, supported by deliberate practices by educators at both levels to help the child be successful in kindergarten.

The transition practices implemented by schools can help children and families move confidently from preschool to kindergarten (Purtell et al., 2020). The transition from preschool to kindergarten can be stressful, which can inhibit children's academic success and interfere with their emotional adjustment (Atchison & Pompelia, 2018). Negative transition experiences can lead to inadequate social integration, which may lead to frequent absenteeism and poor academic performance in the primary grades and into the future (Atchison & Pompelia, 2018). In addition, Thompson et al. (2019) found that younger children, such as those born in the summer, are less prepared for kindergarten than children a few months older, contributing to preschool-to-kindergarten transition difficulties. When children begin kindergarten at a disadvantage and feel pressured to master tasks for which they are not ready, the risk of developing a pattern of school failure emerges. In addition, how the struggling child's parents support the child, or contribute to the child's feelings of failure, ameliorate or compound the problem caused by a negative transition to kindergarten (Thompson et al., 2019).

The task of providing support to children who enter kindergarten not ready for kindergarten work generally is undertaken by kindergarten teachers, who must help each

child learn and make progress regardless of their level of readiness (Purtell et al., 2020). How this is achieved varies by school, however, and teachers in schools that enroll many high-poverty and children of color are less likely to engage in practices aimed at supporting the transition to kindergarten and provide less individualized assistance to families (Purtell et al., 2020). Kindergarten teachers reported engaging in fewer than half of the seven recommended transition practices (Purtell et al., 2020). According to Cook and Coley (2017, p. 172), a vast majority of kindergarten teachers reporting phoning or sending information home to parents (90%), but fewer invited preschoolers to visit the classroom ahead of the first day of school (37%) . In a study of the kindergarten readiness outcomes of economically disadvantaged children enrolled in a statewide of target district Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) program, Lipsey et al. (2018) found positive results regarding kindergarten teacher readiness ranking and in school skills at the start of kindergarten for children who had attended the program. There were two groups: a randomized control trial implemented in selected oversubscribed sites and an age cutoff that attended a VPK program applied to a probability sample of VPK classrooms across the target district's state (Lipsey et al., 2018). However, differences between the treatment and control groups were greatly diminished by at the end of the kindergarten year, so that the two groups were statistically the same. The standards for 4-year-old children that were adopted in 2012 by the target district's department of education were revised so that the English, mathematics, and content areas of prekindergarten standards align with kindergarten.

Each district in the target study state for the current study has VPK prekindergarten programs, are awarded state funding, and are required to pick from the state's approved list of a research-based curricula that aligns with the state's standards and decrease the variable gap between prekindergarten and kindergarten as well as kindergarten through third grade (McQueen et al., 2018). Each district can choose its own curriculum and the one chosen by the target district has resulted in only half of prekindergarten graduates ready for kindergarten, compared to the current standard of 85% readiness achievement. These findings suggest that prekindergarten teachers' perspectives regarding kindergarten readiness may not be consistent with kindergarten readiness assessment and that differences of policy, tradition, and instruction may create challenges that have affected the level of kindergarten readiness.

Policy Differences in Readiness Expectations

Bogard et al. (2005) were among the first to report a disconnect between prekindergarten and elementary school expectations for children and suggest that schools do more to align curriculum for children in preschool through Grade 3. Many states created collaborative initiatives across prekindergarten regulating agencies and departments of public instruction to align expectations for children in the early years across a range of developmental domains, but differences of opinion about what was most important for young children to learn persisted, resulting in frequently ineffective alignment outcomes (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). Although a smooth transition from preschool to kindergarten supports children's success in kindergarten and achievement

throughout school, the seamlessness of this transition depends on policies governing prekindergarten and kindergarten curriculum and expectations (Gills et al., 2006).

According to Pretti-Frontczak (2014), a shift in preschool objectives from play-based learning emphasizing social and thinking skills to a focus on academic skills was inspired by the AMERICA 2000 Excellence in Education Act or Education America Act (P.L. 103-277). The U.S. Department of Education (1991) released its booklet, *America 2000*, when President Bush and the state governors met at the 1989 Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia. This booklet presented a strategy for all children to be educated and for the United States to lead the world in education by the year 2000. In response, the Congress of the United States (1991) created a system of merit schools, whose students achieved highly in core subjects identified in National Education Goals by 2000 initiative. In the *America 2000* source book, the Congress of the United States stated that the attainment of the national education goals depends heavily on the preparation and performance of teachers, principals, and other school leaders in implementing standards and supporting academics.

In 1996, state governors convened at the National Education Summit to give states the power to create their own standards again, citing evidence that the national standards program of the 1991 was unworkable (LaVenja et al., 2015). In addition, the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, was signed into law in 2001, which represented a significant increase in federal influence over K–12 education, in that it required school districts to ensure all students achieved proficiency targets by 2014 (Dyson, 2016). These measures

were developed to close the achievement gap between lower income communities and wealthier communities (Dyson, 2016). In 2010, President Obama announced the continuation of Race to the Top and requested \$1.35 billion for this program in the 2011 federal budget (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This initiative recognized the importance of early brain development in the future success of young children (Reinking, 2015). To ensure that early childhood was included in grant money offered by the NCLB, a Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grant was established based on Common Core standards in each state as was the Quality Rating and Improvement System to rate effectiveness of early childhood teachers and students (Reinking, 2015). As RTT-ELC continued to give funding to states, individual states developed curriculum frameworks specifically aimed at increasing kindergarten achievement, with Common Core being used primarily as a guide for states in setting outcome expectations (LaVenia et al., 2015). Guernsey and the New America Foundation (2011) advocated that Congress include prekindergarten in the former NCLB Act and the RTT-ELC and that grant funding be expanded from kindergarten through Grade 12 to include prekindergarten. Guernsey and the New America Foundation's suggestion was not considered by Congress, but Common Core standards were.

By 2011, 46 states had adopted the Common Core (LaVenia et al., 2015). Although Common Core standards almost immediately became a source of controversy and the Common Core itself abandoned by many states, Cheng et al. (2019) found that the standards themselves persisted; most states that had nominally abandoned Common Core kept or increased achievement standards to match those originally presented in the

Common Core initiative. Support for Common Core was virtually unchanged in 2018, at 45%, compared to 2017 support at 41% (Cheng et al., 2019, p.19). The rigor demanded by the Common Core and similar state standards of children and teachers in the higher grades has led to higher expectations for young children (Nichols, 2017). According to Nichols (2017), early childhood teachers did not participate in the development of the Common Core standards, so that previous emphasis on social skills and learning through play for preschool and kindergarten instruction has been overlooked, in states that follow the Common Core and in states that follow their own standards based on the Common Core. As a result, Nichols found that the need to fulfill state standards has changed the way prekindergarten teachers and kindergarten teachers view kindergarten and their practices in their own individual classrooms.

The Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (HSELOF) used about throughout the country, including in the target district, was created in response to the difficulty of agreeing on what all prekindergarten children need to accomplish to be ready for kindergarten, given the lack of Common Core standards for preschool (DeBruin & Slutzky, 2016). The HSELOF focused not only on academics, but included development of cognitive skills, and social, emotional, and physical development (DeBruin & Slutzky, 2016). These additional skills are not in alignment with Common Core standards for kindergarten. Although alignment seemed to be attempted, the problem arises with no one has published if it worked. In addition, the HSELOF directed preschool teachers to use a whole child approach in teaching learning skills, instead of a direct instruction method (DeBruin & Slutzky, 2016). The emphasis on child developmental advocated for

preschool teachers has been replaced in the kindergarten by the Common Core standards, with emphasis on academics such as phonics, phonemic awareness, and reading instruction (Costantino-Lane, 2019). Costantino-Lane (2019) stated that the pressure to teach children to read by the end of kindergarten was a result of adoption of Common Core standards and similar state academic standards that replaced Common Core and led to adoption of direct instruction methods. The differences between HSELOF and Common Core standards may have resulted in a lack of alignment in perspectives of expectations for kindergarten readiness.

Readiness Traditions of Prekindergarten Teachers

Preschool educational expectations for children traditionally have been influenced by guidelines for DAP, first published by the NAEYC in 1987 (Erickson, 2018). DAP offers research-based guidelines regarding children's development and learning, and effective teaching practices, and is intended to guide decision making in education for children ages birth to 8 (NAEYC, 2018). Three core tenets of DAP include that a teacher is knowledgeable about children's development and the trajectory of their learning, that a teacher understand what is important to children and families of diverse cultural backgrounds, and that a teacher take into consideration the unique, individual needs of each child and family (NAEYC, 2018).

Early childhood programs that implement DAP are characterized by being child-centered and flexible in their approach and dominated by child-led problem solving during independent play and experiential (Lohmann et al., 2018). DAP is intended to facilitate children's curiosity, discovery, and learning through trial and error, and

facilitate parental involvement (Lohmann et al., 2018). Greaves and Bahous (2021) found that preschool teachers believe preschool practice should respond to children's interests, so that music, art, drama, science, and other activities are equally represented in children's daily learning opportunities and these activities are supported by hands-on experiences. Preschool teachers emphasized that readiness for kindergarten requires that children obtain cognitive and social-emotional maturity, which is supported by DAP (Greaves & Bahous, 2021). However, Jiang et al. (2021) found that greater emphasis than before is now placed in early childhood education on kindergarten readiness, resulting in assessment pressure placed on both children and their teachers, and assessment-driven competition for funding that inspires an emphasis on readiness results.

Franko et al. (2018) suggested that children in both prekindergarten and kindergarten may benefit from vertical alignment of classroom structural and instructional practices. In practice, children transitioning from Head Start to kindergarten had mixed experiences of alignment (Franko et al., 2018). Some children's Head Start experience offered a lower level of DAP than did the kindergarten into which they transitioned. For other Head Start completers, their preschool experience aligned with DAP, but their kindergarten experience did not. This lack of consistent expectations for children in Head Start and in kindergarten complicates children's transition to kindergarten and Head Start teachers' efforts to increase kindergarten readiness (Franko et al., 2018). Mages et al. (2018) found that novice and expert preschool teachers had to be willing to develop strategies that allowed them to balance the developmental needs of four- and five-year-old children with the academic expectations of kindergarten teachers.

Smith (2019) followed preschoolers chosen to participate in a public prekindergarten program because they were expected by school authorities to struggle more than their peers in kindergarten, based on their existing academic and social needs. Those children did well at the start of kindergarten but did no better than children who did not participate in prekindergarten on the year-end kindergarten assessment (Smith, 2019).

In assessing children's learning and setting instructional goals, Dogan and Omeroglu (2019) found prekindergarten teachers preferred descriptive questions instead of objective test questions. They wanted to ask questions that could be answered in learning centers while children worked in them or when they did end of the day assessments (Dogan & Omeroglu, 2019). Prekindergarten teachers used those assessments to create activity plans for the children (Dogan & Omeroglu, 2019). Li et al. (2019) indicated that prekindergarten teachers typically use diverse methods of assessment to drive approaches to teaching children. Parent reports and teacher reports provide insight into a child's development and use of language and social skills, while direct-measure assessments are used to assess academic and cognitive skills (Li et al., 2019). State mandated assessments, such as the Alaska developmental test, often were created with teachers' help, but how teachers use the assessments results is inconsistent (Harvey & Ohle, 2018). According to Harvey and Ohle (2018), teachers tend to consider state mandated assessments as simply a task to be checked off a list of mandates, instead of using it to drive instruction. Formal assessment like the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) have been validated to measure growth over time, and provide data that could establish instructional targets, drive instruction, and assist in measuring child

progress (Piasta et al., 2018). However, prekindergarten teachers are inclined to a more wholistic, observational approach than is included in state-mandated assessments.

Readiness Traditions of Kindergarten Teachers

Hustedt et al. (2018) found, in a 10-year longitudinal study, that kindergarten teachers' expectations for children emphasized the ability to express themselves clearly and to demonstrate self-control, and these took precedence over academic accomplishments such as knowing color names and demonstrating math skills. However, over the decade span of the study, grants the target state received cause the changes in policy and in policy expectations for kindergarten readiness, despite kindergarten teachers' traditional concern that children enter kindergarten with behavior self-control and social-emotional skills more than with academic skills (Hustedt et al., 2018). These findings confirm those of Hartman et al. (2017), who surveyed 2,000 teachers of young children, and found that kindergarten teachers believed children's skill in regulating their own behavior was equally important as academic skills for children's kindergarten success. They found that fewer behavior problems the year prior to entering kindergarten were associated with higher school readiness at kindergarten entry and higher kindergarten grades, even after accounting for demographic factors and children's school-entry cognitive ability and English language skill (Hartman, et al., 2017).

Bettencourt et al. (2018) found that despite the value of social skills as indicators of kindergarten readiness, children were more likely to experience kindergarten retention if they entered kindergarten with low literacy and mathematics skills, regardless of student demographic characteristics. Bettencourt et al. found that teacher ratings of

children on the KRA predicted the likelihood of kindergarten retention for individual students, and that skill in early literacy and early mathematics were more predictive of academic success than a child's oral language, motor skill ability, or social skills. Hustedt et al. (2018) found kindergarten teachers agreed or strongly agreed that reading should be taught in kindergarten increased from 31% to 80% between 1998 to 2010 (p.5). In addition, Hustedt et al. found the percentage of teachers who believed children should know the alphabet before they start kindergarten increased over the same time period, along with an increase in the percentage of teachers who thought formal instruction in reading and mathematics should begin even prior to kindergarten.

The problem of assessing kindergarten readiness and progress during the kindergarten year is similar to the problems encountered in the prekindergarten, described above. The widely used KRA measures children's development as they transition into kindergarten (Regenstein et al., 2018). It is intended to guide kindergarten teachers in collaborating with parents and prekindergarten teachers in promoting kindergarten readiness. Regenstein et al. (2018) found that the KRA is useful in shaping a conversation among stakeholders interested in meeting the needs of beginning kindergarten students, supporting early learning and alignment of classroom practices, and designing early learning programs and planning to assist in children's transition between preschool and kindergarten. According to Regenstein et al., the KRA can support teachers in aligning their instructional practices in strengths and weaknesses in each child's skill. However, Schachter (2019) found kindergarten teachers, like the prekindergarten teachers described above, found the KRA of little benefit to them in planning instruction. According to

Schachter et al., teachers reported using the KRA only minimally to improve their ability to plan and deliver instruction; most teachers believed using the KRA was not beneficial to them or to their students.

Similar to prekindergarten teachers, kindergarten teachers have their own methods of assessing children's readiness and learning. According to Schachter et al. (2019), kindergarten teachers purposefully plan for their students as they begin formal schooling by using informal assessments and observation to plan whole and small group instruction. Only the newer first and second year teachers in the field used the KRA to guide instruction (Schachter et al., 2019). Most kindergarten teachers said that the KRA takes too much time and provided no benefit (Schachter et al., 2019). Some districts have circumvented teachers' reluctance to use KRA data as the basis of instruction by placing children in classrooms based on ability, especially in reading, demonstrated on their KRA scores (Curran et al., 2020). However, such efforts have not demonstrated a positive effect on student learning except to ensure that lower scoring students get instruction to meet their learning level (Curran et al., 2020).

How Prekindergarten and Kindergarten Students are Taught

Jarrett and Coba-Rodriguez (2019) found prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers think social and emotional skills should be taught more than academics, and that prekindergarten guidelines advocate learning through play, while guidelines for kindergarten teachers focus more on direct instruction. Prekindergarten students engage in independent play, along with teacher-directed instruction, individualized instruction, group activities, and choice of center-based activities (Pistorova & Slutsky, 2018).

According to Psitorova and Slutsky (2018), incidence of stress and challenging behaviors have increased among some prekindergarten children due to elimination of independent play and imposition of academic expectations that are not developmentally appropriate. DAP comprise a set of principles created by NAEYC that focus on age-appropriate unstructured gross motor play (NAEYC, 2018). Age appropriateness, individual appropriateness, and socio-cultural appropriateness are three of the major considerations in DAP (Kim & Han, 2015). In the target district, DAP is endorsed for prekindergarten instruction, according to the department of education in the target state.

According to Brown et al. (2019), kindergarten once followed a play-based instructional plan, but has become much more like first grade, with an instructional plan based on teacher directed instruction, whole group instruction, and standardized testing. Advanced content taught in kindergarten include phonics instruction, reading aloud or silently, working on reading comprehension, and, in mathematics, addition, subtraction, place value, and ordinality (Brown et al., 2019). Brown et al., Kim and Hans (2015), and Pistorova and Slutsky (2018) seemed to agree that preschool and kindergarten children are taught differently. Pistorova and Slutsky found that developing a balance of critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills, along with development of creativity, were key skills for students in kindergarten through 12th grade, but the focus, as described by Brown et al. tends to be on mastery of measurable academic skills. How children are taught in prekindergarten and kindergarten are quite different from each other, particularly regarding the focus on DAP or academic instruction. The problem that only half of entering kindergarten students in the United States are considered

kindergarten-ready may have its roots in alignment of prekindergarten teacher perspectives regarding kindergarten readiness to kindergarten practices and goals.

Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter, I presented literature related to the study problem and purpose, beginning with a detailed explanation of the conceptual framework and the importance of alignment across educational levels. I also presented a review of current literature, including factors surrounding a child's transition to kindergarten, policy differences in readiness expectations, and readiness traditions of prekindergarten and of kindergarten teachers. Such factors may represent challenges to kindergarten readiness for students who completed a district-approved prekindergarten program. The present study filled the gap in practice evident because only half of students who complete a prekindergarten program in the United States achieve readiness as measured by a readiness assessment. Increasing understanding of this problem is significant to the discipline because of the widespread prevalence of low readiness achievement across the United States. In Chapter 3, I will describe the methodology by which I conducted this study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of prekindergarten teachers regarding lack of kindergarten readiness in students who completed a district-approved prekindergarten program and the challenges the teachers believe have affected the level of kindergarten readiness. In this chapter, I describe the methodology used to conduct this study. I also discuss the study's research design, the rationale for the research design, my role as a researcher, and elements of trustworthiness and ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

The following two research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are prekindergarten teachers' perspectives regarding lack of kindergarten readiness in students who complete a district-approved prekindergarten program?

RQ2: What challenges do prekindergarten teachers believe have affected the level of kindergarten readiness in their students?

The central phenomenon under study was the perspectives of prekindergarten teachers regarding lack of kindergarten readiness in students who completed a district-approved prekindergarten program and the challenges the teachers believe have affected the level of kindergarten readiness. In this basic qualitative study, I conducted interviews to collect data and followed a constructivist paradigm, as described by Creswell and Creswell (2017). According to Creswell and Creswell, in qualitative research, understanding of a problem is constructed through perspectives shared by interview

participants that describe their experiences with the target phenomenon and that are elucidated by the researcher through open-ended questioning. Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) indicated that, through the constructivist paradigm, a researcher assembles insights as they are described by informants who have experienced the phenomenon under study and refrains from approaching the phenomenon with preexisting ideas and instead co-constructing meaning with participants.

My choice of research paradigm was based on studies that confirm the interview process as a powerful valid source of data if analyzed effectively (i.e., Hansman, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Watts & Bentley, 1987). Qualitative researchers using the constructivist tradition explore how people experience their worlds and their understanding of their experiences (Hansman, 2015) in contrast to a positivist approach, such as in surveys (Bradt et al., 2013). In an interview, the participant shares their reality as they have constructed it through experience, and together the interviewer and the participant co-construct knowledge of the situation under study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants interpret interview questions based on their prior experience and personal analysis, not on something copied and repeated from information given (Watts & Bentley, 1987). An interview engages both the researcher and the participants in the collaborative construction of meaning so that the interview process involves discovery of truths and development of meaning (Enosh & Ben-Ari, 2016). The construction is creating something new, and the discovery is to find something to discover prior to or during research (Enosh & Ben-Ari, 2016). Use of a constructivist approach and interviews helped me create a clearly visible picture of teachers' perspectives regarding

lack of kindergarten readiness in students who completed a district-approved prekindergarten program and the challenges the teachers believe have affected the level of kindergarten readiness.

Role of Researcher

In this study, I filled the role of an observer. Because I was not a participant or a participant-observer. However, I am an early childhood educator who has observed and taught preschool through first grade for over 15 years. I currently work as a preschool teacher in the study site district. As such, I am what Dwyer and Buckle (2009) call an insider. As an insider, my role is considered as an observer with a foundational background of teaching kindergarten and preschool as well as experiencing the challenge of kindergarten readiness.

The professional relationship I had with participants was based on my role as a preschool teacher in the study site district. The study site district is large, with 291 prekindergarten classrooms. In selecting participants for this study, I excluded teachers with whom I had a previously established professional or personal relationship. In my current role, I do not supervise any teacher and have no greater role than any other classroom teacher. At the time of the study, I held no power within the district; however, because teachers may have had a concern that their perspectives shared in this study could become known to district administrators, I was and will continue to be careful to keep the information and identities of those who participated, those who declined to participate, and the statements provided by all participants confidential. I describe my

process for maintaining confidentiality throughout the study later in this chapter in the ethical procedures section.

In addition, as a prekindergarten teacher, I naturally have my own perspectives and opinions regarding kindergarten readiness. It was important that I listened to what participants shared with an open mind and avoided letting my own opinion intrude in the interview conversations or in my selection and analysis of data. To avoid bias, I practiced reflexivity, as described by Ravitch and Carl (2016), by keeping a journal of my thoughts throughout the research process.

Methodology

Participant Selection

The population from which participants were selected was teachers who work in prekindergarten programs in a single public school district in the southeastern United States. I selected participants who work or had worked within the past year in one of several schools in the target school district. Because of the expansion of the preschool program, which serves 4- and 5-year-old children, some experienced teachers in the district taught other grade levels prior to transitioning into preschool. Ten preschool teachers were included in the study. According to Kizlari and Fouseki (2018), six to 12 participants are typical in studies when using interviews.

I used purposeful sampling to identify possible participants. The criteria for participation included that the participant (a) was currently working as a prekindergarten classroom teacher, (b) had taught in prekindergarten for at least 1 year, (c) taught in a regular education classroom, and (d) taught in the target school district. I excluded from

this study persons who teach other grades or in other school districts; who were teacher aides instead of classroom teachers; who taught in a setting other than a regular education classroom, such as a classroom for special needs students or as a teacher of home-bound children; who taught prekindergarten for less than 1 year; and with whom I had any prior relationship. I intended to exclude teachers who once taught in the district but were teaching in the district no longer but because of difficulty recruiting current teachers, I did include two teachers who had recently quit teaching.

I recruited participants by posting an announcement about the study to a Facebook closed group page, which teachers in the district elect to join. The Facebook closed group page is for teachers employed or formerly employed throughout the target district. My post outlined criteria for inclusion in the study. I accepted the first 10 prekindergarten teachers who responded, excluding teachers whom I knew personally. In the Facebook message post, I requested that teachers who were interested message me through Facebook or contact me at my Walden University email address. As teachers who were interested in participating responded to the Facebook post, I messaged them and requested their email address to send them a consent form and answer any questions they had. I responded to each person who expressed interest in the study by explaining the study to them in more detail and reiterating the participant criteria. When I sent the consent form to the prospective participant, I also proposed a date and time for the interview. Interviews were conducted by telephone or teleconferencing.

Instrumentation

I developed five main interview questions and 11 follow-up questions (see Appendix A) that formed the instrument for data collection in this study. The questions were derived from the conceptual framework of Bogard et al. (2005) and the current literature and reflected the study problem and purpose. Interview Question 1 addressed the first research question, in that it asked teachers to describe their thoughts about the low readiness achievement in prekindergarten students. Two follow-up questions probed for information about teachers' level of awareness of their students' readiness performance. With Interview Question 2, I asked teachers what they believe children need to know before starting kindergarten. Follow-up questions probed for information on teachers' notions of what important skills and abilities for children must master and what teachers do to help children master these skills and abilities. Interview Question 3 asked for participants' thoughts about the district's readiness assessment. Its two follow-up questions probed for details about how the skills and abilities identified in response to Interview Question 2 are reflected in the district's readiness assessment and inquired why teachers think many children who complete prekindergarten does not achieve as expected on the readiness assessment. With Interview Question 4, I asked about challenges teachers believe affect the level of kindergarten readiness in their students, which applied to the second research question. Three follow-up questions probed for challenges the teachers notice that arise from the children themselves, from their teaching practice and teaching materials, and from district policies and support. I developed Interview Question 5 to ask teachers how they overcome the challenges they just described. With the two

follow-up questions, I first asked for an example of overcoming a challenge and then asked the teacher to consider the newly announced goal of an 85% pass rate on the readiness assessment and what they might do to meet this new goal.

To determine if the interview questions were valid, I asked a doctoral-level scholar and expert in leadership and change in serving underachieving elementary school students to review the interview questions while considering the study's purpose and guiding research questions. This scholar confirmed the questions were valid and suitable for the current study. The scholar only suggested that in the actual interviews I not allow myself or anyone to overthink the questions or stray away from the focus of the study.

As the researcher, I was also an instrument for data collection. I wrote the questions, interviewed participants, transcribed responses, selected data for analysis, and determined the results of the study. This means that I filtered data through my mind and my own perspectives in ways that could have affected the validity of study processes and the results (see Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). To limit the influence of my own perspectives, I audio recorded the interviews and transcribed them myself, using a digital transcription application. I used reflexive journaling throughout the data collection and analysis process to provide a mechanism by which to keep my own thoughts distinct from the thoughts expressed by participants. I sent a summary of my initial findings to participants for their review and invited their comments.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

After receiving approval to conduct the study from the Walden University Institutional Review Board, I recruited teachers in the study site school district by posting

an announcement about the study on a private Facebook page used by district teachers to ask questions, make comments, and post concerns. I described the study in the Facebook announcement and asked for interested teachers to contact me. A request that readers of the post share it with any coworkers or friends who might be interested in participating in the study was also included. As teachers who were interested in participating responded to the Facebook post, I requested their email address, sent them a consent form, and answered any questions they had about the study. I requested that teachers who wished to participate reply to the consent form email with the words, "I consent." All recruitment was done through social media.

As volunteers replied to my email with "I consent," I set up a time for each interview to occur by telephone or teleconference. I suggested that each participant choose a quiet, private place from which to take part in the interview. Each participant was reminded about the interview by email or text 1 day prior to their scheduled interview time. I conducted the interviews from a private room in my home.

At the beginning of each interview, I explained how the interview would proceed and made certain that the participants understood that they could stop the interview at any time. I confirmed with the participants that they consented to the interview and understood that I would be audio recording the interview and taking field notes with paper and pen to capture their thoughts accurately. Open-ended interview questions (see Appendix A) were asked in a manner that gave the participants time to think and formulate their answers. If a participant could not think of an answer or gave a short answer right away, I asked the question in a different way that might prompt an in-depth

or more in-depth response. Each interview took between 45 to 60 minutes. At the end of each interview, I thanked the participant and told them to expect to receive a transcript of their interview for their review and comments.

I transcribed the interview recordings myself, using the Otter.ai automated transcription tool that provided me with the opportunity to relisten to the conversations and notice key words and repeating ideas. My objective was to transcribe interviews exactly, leaving out only filler sounds, like “um” and “ah.” The process of creating accurate transcriptions took several hours per interview. At this point, I replaced names on transcripts with alphanumeric codes, such as P1, P2, etc., in numerical order.

Throughout the process of interviewing participants, selecting data for analysis, and conducting the analysis, I kept a reflective journal of my thoughts and opinions. This created an audit trail, which when combined with participants’ transcript review, supports the credibility of the data collected. As described later in this chapter, ideas collected in my reflective journal helped to inform the emergence of codes, categories, and themes.

Data Analysis Plan

I began data analysis by printing out each transcript, so I could easily manipulate and annotate the data. I used a pen to circle words that seemed significant or that recurred within and across interviews, as suggested by Miles et al. (2020). I read each transcript at least twice to code it accurately and completely. According to Saldana and Mallette (2017), it is especially important when analyzing interview data to be able to represent participants fully and accurately. I began this process by eliminating from each transcript my own words and any content that was extraneous to the interview, such as discussion

of the weather. I then separated each transcript into individual thought units as seemed significant. With this accomplished, transcripts were transferred into a single column of a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet that automatically assigned each thought unit its own row. In another column, I then inserted the participant identifier for each thought unit, so the source of each thought was identified. These thought units constituted codes, as described by Saldana (2016). These codes were then organized into categories, using the cut-and-insert function of Excel, and then into themes. The step-by-step process I followed is described in detail in Chapter 4. Discrepant cases may arise when a participant offers a perspective that is not shared by other participants but offers a unique idea (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016); however, no discrepancies were noted in the data.

Trustworthiness

Credibility, as described by Korstjens and Moser (2018), is established through prolonged engagement where several distinct interview questions are asked regarding the topic that is under study. Participants were encouraged to support their statements with examples, and I asked follow-up questions to encourage clear and complete responses. I also engaged participants in member checking by emailing each of them their interview transcript for review and comment. In addition, using expert reviewers can assist a researcher in recognizing patterns and synthesizing meaning from the data (Morse, 2015), so I asked a doctoral colleague to serve as expert reviewer and make suggestions to improve my data analysis. This colleague reviewed my coding of transcripts and my audit trail and advised me on addressing nuances and ideas I missed. The expert reviewer had no knowledge of participants' identities. According to Morse (2015), an expert reviewer

can help with the development of internal validity and credibility. Morse recommended that researchers listen to alternative points of view while conducting of a study but that ultimately the researcher has final responsibility for the collection and analysis of the data.

Transferability, according to Nordstrom (2015), refers to the applicability of research to another site or a continuation of another researcher's study. According to Merriam and Grenier (2019), transferability of qualitative results is determined by the reader, who makes their own connections between the study and their own contexts. I facilitated transferability to other settings through clear and complete description of all aspects of the study so readers may make informed decisions about the suitability of my findings to their own situations as administrators, teachers, and policy makers. I have presented information about the criteria I used in identifying participants, and how I conducted interviews and the questions I asked in the interviews. In Chapter 4, I present the results of my study, so readers can evaluate the conclusions that can be drawn from this study and determine transferability to their own settings.

Dependability refers to ensuring that a study can be replicated (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). One strategy needed to ensure dependability is an audit trail (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Driessen et al. (2005) suggested an audit trail, using careful documentation of the process of data collection, selection, and analysis, provides an external check against bias and helps to establish dependability. The audit trail included my field notes, the transcripts, including my own voice, and my notes created as I analyzed the data. By providing detail about how I conducted my study and arrived at conclusions, a reader

may replicate my study with a similar population and determine if my process and conclusions are dependable.

Connelly (2016) described confirmability as the degree to which findings are consistent and could be repeated. Confirmability requires that the researcher follow their proposed research plan precisely, report the conduct of the study honestly, and use evidence and not their own opinions in developing findings. Korstjens and Moser (2018) emphasized that conclusions must be grounded in the data and that the path from the start of the study to its conclusion is likely to result in similar findings if the path is retraced by another researcher. I have taken care to ground my findings in the verbatim responses of participants and in my accurate portrayal of the implications of those responses for my study problem and purpose.

Ethical Procedures

After I received Institutional Review Board approval (05-14-21-0640428), I began recruitment of participants and scheduling and conducting of interviews. I began each interview by asking the participant to confirm their consent to be interviewed and to permit me to audio record the conversation. I reminded participants that they could at any time stop the interview and withdraw from the study. I explained that all statements that they made would be kept confidential, and that their name and place of work would not be included in the study or given to the school district at any time. Participant names were replaced by alphanumeric codes. I will retain participant names and email addresses until after the conclusion of the study and after I have shared with participants a summary of study results. Only I know who participated and who did not participate in the study.

All digital material, including audio and word processing files, will be saved on a password-protected flash drive. Printed materials, including my handwritten field notes, consent forms, and printed transcripts, will be stored in a locked file cabinet. I alone will have access to the locked file cabinet. All study materials will be kept for 5 years following the completion of the study. At that point, digital files will be securely deleted, and printed files will be shredded.

Summary

In this chapter I described the methods I used to gain knowledge through participants about my study topic. I described the research design and my rationale for choosing it. I also described my role as a researcher and the procedures by which I collected data and planned to analyze the data, using methods described by Saldana (2016). I also described ethical procedures, and how I endeavored to establish the trustworthiness of this study. The following Chapter 4 provides the results of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of prekindergarten teachers regarding lack of kindergarten readiness in students who completed a district-approved prekindergarten program and the challenges the teachers believe have affected the level of kindergarten readiness. In this chapter, I describe the setting of the study, the data collection and analysis processes, and the study results. I conclude this chapter by providing evidence of trustworthiness and a summary.

Setting

The interviews took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, so this may have affected my interpretation of the results related to how participants answered questions and due to the changes in teaching styles, delivery of teaching content, and the overall feeling of each educator as they responded to questions. Teachers appeared to base their comments on teaching in a time of normalcy when district assessments on readiness took place but also brought in their experience of trying to assess readiness while teaching virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic as well. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers in the district, including three participants in this study, quit their job or moved to a different educational role. Some teachers reported teaching with more students in the classroom than is ordinarily permitted by state teacher-student ratio requirements. These factors of attrition and classroom size may have also had an impact on the results.

Ten teachers participated in the study. Four were European American females and six were African American females. Three of the ten educators had quit classroom teaching in the target district and had gone on to other professions in education within the

district or in an outside organization. The other seven were current prekindergarten teachers in the target district.

Data Collection

There were 10 participants for this study. All interviews were conducted on Zoom, an online teleconferencing platform. Each participant chose to turn their camera off so the interview would resemble an audio interview; I retained only audio data from the interviews. Participants and I chose quiet places in our homes or wherever the participant felt comfortable to take part in the interview from and where they had a reliable internet connection. All interviews were completed without any issues with internet connectivity or interruptions.

I started to recruit participants and conduct interviews at the end of the school year, so it was difficult to get people to talk about school on their summer break. The final three interviews were the most difficult to schedule and conduct because by then, it was the start of a new school year with the district resuming in-person instruction, causing some prospective participants to quit teaching or feel too pressured by the circumstances in their lives and surrounding their job to be interviewed. This meant I needed to relax my participant selection criteria because it became quite difficult to find current teachers in the target district. Therefore, I included three teachers who had recently quit teaching prekindergarten and were no longer current teachers in the district. However, all participants reported having recent, in-classroom experience as prekindergarten teachers and understanding of kindergarten readiness assessment and processes in the target district.

Data Analysis

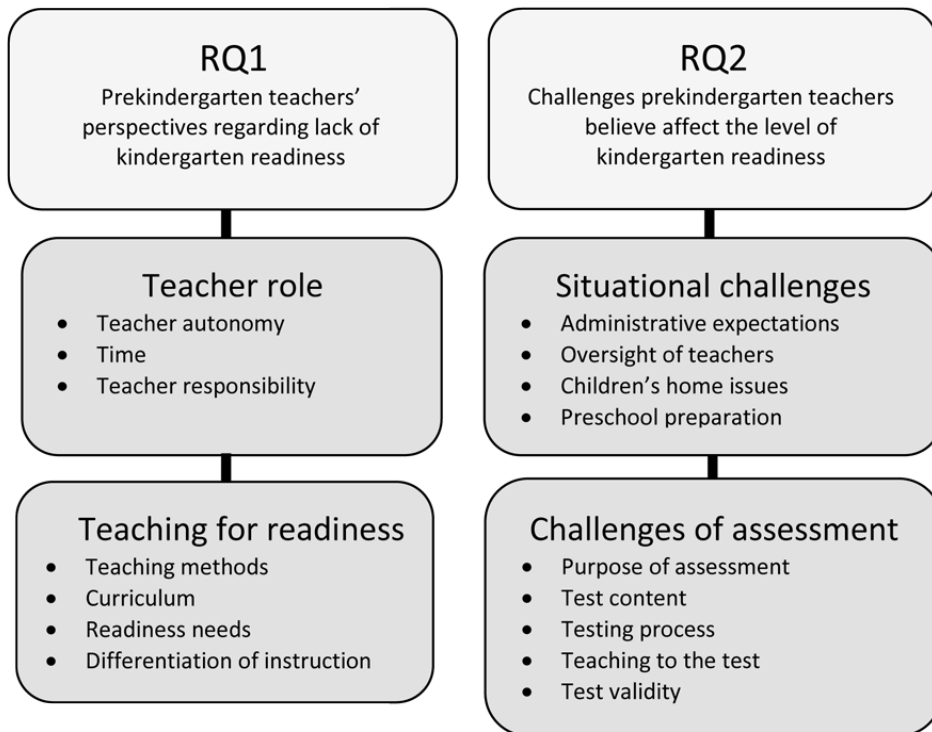
I transcribed audio files of the interviews using Otter.ai and then reviewed these transcriptions to correct errors and omissions not caught by the Otter.ai software. I then copied transcripts into a single column of an Excel spreadsheet and divided each transcript into rows on the spreadsheet, so each single sentence or narrative unit was located on its own row. For example, the sentence, “I’ve always only focused on symbols and sounds,” was accorded a row on the spreadsheet, as was the narrative unit, “I’ve never reviewed the pre-K readiness assessment. I’m only using what I am given. I’ve never been provided with that.” Each row represented an in vivo code. I coded the transcripts to identify key words and phrases relevant to the study purpose, and this process resulted in identification of 307 codes.

I then generated themes using Saldana’s (2016) advice regarding in vivo coding. In vivo codes capture the ideas and opinions of informants and help preserve the accurate reporting of those ideas and opinions (Saldana, 2016). Following Saldana, I organized codes on the Excel spreadsheet so that similar codes followed each other, independent of the participant source of the codes. This organization resulted in categories of similar codes. This reorganization of the codes resulted in 16 categories: children’s home issues, curriculum, differentiation of instruction, administrative expectations, oversight of teachers, preschool preparation, purpose of assessment, readiness needs, teacher autonomy, teacher responsibility, teaching methods, teaching to the test, test content, test validity, testing process, and time. I further grouped these 16 categories by similarity to form themes, resulting in the emergence of four themes: teacher role, teaching for

readiness, situational challenges, and challenges of assessment. I then associated themes with the study's research questions. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship among categories, themes, and research questions. All data were relevant to the study purpose, and, although teachers had differences of opinion, there were no discrepant cases.

Figure 1

Categories and Themes With Associated Research Questions



Results

In this section, I address how the research questions were answered by the data participants provided.

Results for Research Question 1

In Research Question 1 (RQ1), I asked about prekindergarten teachers' perspectives regarding lack of kindergarten readiness in students who completed a district-approved prekindergarten program. Themes of teacher role and teaching for readiness were associated with this research question. I address each of these themes in turn in the following subsections.

The Role of the Teacher in Developing Readiness

Three categories comprise this theme: teacher autonomy, time, and teacher responsibility. Teachers in this study expressed concern for their professional autonomy in making decisions about developing readiness. For example, Participant 4 stated,

maybe if I would feel more comfortable if I got to decide when I taught certain things. Cause I may think that hey if I can go ahead and teach this right now, it would correlate a little better, rather than teaching something else and then coming back to it.

Participant 2 explained, "if teachers could teach and I mean teach, pre-K babies would leave first or second grade ready." Participant 6 reported, "I love [this] age, but sometimes there's not as much room for flexibility that teachers can bring their own unique teaching styles into what they know what's best for their students and then do it." Participant 6 continued,

Sometimes there's not a lot of room for flexibility on that, and I think that most teachers truly know what's best for their kids, but yet because of district mandates, or you gotta this test today or you gotta do this, their hands are sometimes tied on what you can do to make your students have that biggest bang on the buck.

Participant 4 said, "it just depends on what it is. Sometimes I'll try to squeeze in what I feel it should be along with what the district says." Several participants described taking direct action contrary to established directives. For example, Participant 6 stated that,

I shared that the one student that performed great on the test that needed extra help, even though they were supposed to be "group"... I didn't do that, I put them in the group they needed to be. Just to make sure that they could get the extra help that they needed. I would still follow the district guidelines, but there's some room for flexibility, when you do your own individual grouping of students in the classroom.

Participant 2 added, "The way that I overcame the challenges of the slow curriculum, the expectations of my dominion is that I ignored them."

Teachers indicated that their ability to manage time, an important aspect of their professional autonomy, determined their ability to develop readiness in their students. Part of the issue teachers reported is simply the limited time available in the instructional day. Participant 2 put it this way, "When there are 24 hours in a day, children are at school for 7 or 8 hours, and if you take 1 hour for nap, that leaves 6." Participant 3 said a teacher "can't fully engage into writing assignments or math time, you're literally on a

time space.” Participant 3 also suggested that children’s own cognitive limitations play a role because “you just have to find that niche to catch their attention for that 2–5 minutes to feed them some knowledge.” Participant 2 noted, “a child learns from their teachers and that requires eye contact, conversation, explanation, practice.”

The importance of one-to-one interaction with children was described by several participants. Participant 2 named the lack of focus on individual children “the most impactful challenge” to teaching. Participant 2 remarked,

There’s a lot of stuff going on except for teaching. So on average a child with a class of 20, gets about 20 minutes of quality time with the teacher. So that’s the challenge...the challenge is the redundancy of fulfilling the dominion expectations compared to teaching. There’s very limited time for there to be teacher-child interactions because there are so many surveys, meetings, redundant paperwork, more surveys, more meetings, more professional development, more coursework.

Participant 3 said, “you can’t fully engage like you would want to.” The “stuff going on except for teaching” included administrative tasks and communication and student assessment. Participant 2 noted, “you’re getting texts from the principal all day, you’re getting emails from other dominions, you’re getting emails from the principal.”

Participant 2 estimated, “there’s about 5 hours of email meetings” each week. Testing also took time away from teaching in these teachers’ experience. Participant 6 said, “There was too much testing. You had I-Station, Brigance, and just that testing took so much time away from true teaching.” Participant 3 agreed, “You’re doing so much

testing, that it takes away from teaching.” Participant 2 described feeling conflicted between children’s needs and demands for administrative tasks, saying, “I miss some deadlines, however if I feel like I’ll still have a job if I delay something in order to reach a child, its give and take.” Participant 2 summed up the issues with time by reporting, “if teachers could teach, I think the children will leave ready.”

Some teachers made clear the responsibility of teachers for developing readiness. Participant 3 stated,

By the time they reach kindergarten, there shouldn’t be a stumbling block to spell their name. It shouldn’t be strenuous to formulate a sentence using sight words that you should already know. I don’t think its strenuous to put a pen or pencil in a child’s hand show them reading direction before they get to kindergarten. When they get to kindergarten, they going to be hit with a lot of exposure that should have been taking care in preschool.

Participant 1 suggested, “In reality it’s not what [resources] you get but you push forward with what you have.” Participant 10 said she reminds herself “to be flexible and patient and most importantly, to add to my professional development, make sure I continuously end that state of professional development.” Participant 3 described a teacher’s responsibility this way: “Where can we take that to move one step forward to give a reassurance to our kids that they know their stuff, and then give the reassurance to their parents that they’re ready for kindergarten.” Participant 10 noted that some teachers might give up on helping children be ready for kindergarten, saying, “I even find it disheartening that some of the teachers are being partially to blame.” Participant 10

advised teachers to “reach out to others especially to those who are experienced who could perhaps or perhaps be a good role model or mentor, those who seem to care and want to help you.”

In summary, teachers described their role as responsible for developing readiness in their prekindergarten students. However, teachers cited hurdles that impede their efforts, including lack of time, too many administrative tasks that take up time, too much time devoted to testing, and too little autonomy to make decisions based on their professional judgment. Teachers indicated that teaching is interpersonal, requiring individual connection with each student, and that external factors create barriers to creating interpersonal connections.

Teaching to Develop Readiness

Participants in this study described several methods or emphases they applied in helping children develop kindergarten readiness, including their own teaching methods, the curriculum available to them, their understanding of children’s readiness needs, and their efforts to differentiate instruction to support individual learners. Many teachers described the philosophical underpinnings of their instruction. Participant 5 remarked, “I do what I can. I go above and beyond as much as I can, and I try to go above and beyond when it comes to my kids.” Participant 2 agreed, saying, “I gave [children] attention, I gave them practice, I gave them love.” Participant 10 reported, “I model, and I show how things are to be done, and I repeat or review as necessary and make sure my instructions are clear.” The importance of teacher-child interaction supports teachers’ methods, as described by Participant 2 who said, “I developed the relationship to where the children

can understand that their teacher has other expectations that must be met.” Similarly, the idea of teacher responsibility threaded through teaching methods, with Participant 8 saying, “I make sure that I’m implementing those activities within our daily lesson and making sure that they have things that will help them master those skills within the classroom.”

Teachers described inclusion of play in their teaching methods, given the young age of prekindergarten students. Participant 2 remarked, “pre-K is more social, children at that age learn through play” and Participant 10 noted the cognitive value of children’s play: “they learn how to communicate through dramatic play,” and that play is part of the district prekindergarten curriculum. Participant 6 acknowledged the central role of play in the early childhood field, saying, “Even now as a pre-K teacher, we still do play-based hands-on, because I’m a lab pre-K...so we have high school students come in and observe early childhood practices and fit those into place that they learned in the classroom.” Participant 1 offered examples of play: “We [have] hands on activities to show where they could manipulate, play dough, sand, shaving cream.” Teachers also described using teacher-directed activities that were playful in nature. Participant 6 had a lot to say on this point, describing, “We would pretty much do things that were developmentally appropriate through manipulatives and things like that,” and this:

I would still keep it academically based, but we still do letter games, number games and we try to make it “hands-on” as possible, but yet we would still get in that paper and pencil work that let them know what they would be doing in kindergarten.

Participant 1 described using hands-on activities as memory aides in direct instruction: “I would build on what they were exposed to. If they were stuck, I can remind them of the tactile experience- shaving cream with the letter A.” Participant 6 remarked, “I know with what I remember with pre-K, they still wanted you to do a lot of play based which is fine but, in my opinion, there’s just a huge disconnect between pre-K and kindergarten,” and added, “But I would still introduce them to a few worksheets. You know just show them what they might be facing in kindergarten.”

Concern was expressed by participants not only for what children would face in kindergarten but also for what they would face on the readiness assessment. Teaching methods described by participants reflected these dual concerns. Many participants (Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8) described direct instruction of letter names, letter sounds, recognition of letters and sight words in print, and instruction in number skills and writing children’s names. For example, Participant 7 stated, “that’s one thing that I make sure that we do...routine drills like in the morning time, where we go over our ABCs, our numbers, and our sounds and then we do certain sight words.” Participant 2 said, “I focus on sight words and eliminate the fluff and I go direct, that’s the approach.” Participant 3 suggested expanding on the basics to increase children’s understanding of mathematics concepts, saying,

What if you utilize around the time you’re on number 5? Because by the time you gonna do number 5 we can talk about grouping. Well, here’s five objects right here, and two objects right here...hmmm I wonder what that will be altogether?

You start utilizing the language of math, and it won't be something new to them, or hard for them to understand when they hit kindergarten.

Participant 6 described anticipating what would be on the upcoming assessment and teaching those skills even if they were not yet part of the curriculum. Participant 6 said,

The district gives update standards and although it may not be in the curriculum it will still be covered, and children will have at least seen it before the next test, and I think that would help pre-K teachers out.

Participant 3 was explicit about teaching for future needs: "Teaching adding and subtracting will be very helpful in their future."

Teachers indicated they base their teaching methods on the curriculum, but also expressed mixed feelings about the curriculum. For example, Participant 7 stated,

I would have liked a different curriculum, because the curriculum that we used I felt lacked a lot of things that the students needed. I had to do a lot of work, pulling different materials, different resources to enhance that to make sure that my children got what they needed. So, I wasn't too impressed with the curriculum that the district was using for pre-K.

Participant 3 stated,

Sometimes the books can be so outdated, and then some of the words that they want you to utilize, can be so outdated as well. For example, we show the picture of a farmhouse and if the child has never seen a farmhouse, they will say that it's just a house. But the key word is "farmhouse," or they may say "cottage." It's just the level of knowledge that you think a child might be exposed to, you have to

take in consideration of where they are in their life. If we update the books, let them see themselves in books, see different cultures, which I don't think is enough exposure of.

Participant 5 described feeling frustrated by curriculum expectations and the little time at her disposal to meet them. She reported, "We're doing curriculum assigned stuff and having to get a certain number of things in within the day that our curriculum calls for, maybe I could do a little more one on one just not having the time."

Teachers suggested that readiness requires mastery of academic skills and also readiness to learn. Readiness to learn encompassed basic life skills, as indicate by Participant 10, who suggested children should know "how to dress themselves, clean up behind themselves, manage their restroom needs, know how to recognize their name, know how to say their name, repeat their birthdates, their parents' name...just skills like that." Participant 8 agreed, saying "they should know their name and parents name, how old they are, birthdate, phone number, and address." In addition, Participant 6 indicated children should "know how to work with others, and how to get along." Participant 10 said, "They should know how to follow directions, listen, and perhaps just have the normal regular emotional day to day thing that they need for future learning." In addition, participants described the importance of children knowing the patterns of classroom processes. Participant 6 suggested that children should "know how to work with manipulatives and work in a small group." Participant 6 provided a rationale for readiness-to-learn skill mastery, saying,

A lot of kids if they go to pre-K that's "play-based," when they go into kindergarten and it's all sit at your table and work, that's a big struggle to them. They need some exposure for that to be able to be successful in kindergarten, just because of the way kindergarten is run right now.

Participant 6 added that children should "know how to sit down at a center and be able to become engaged, so I think the social aspect and just ready to learn."

Many teachers expressed concern for children's academic readiness. Reading skills were cited most widely. For example, Participant 4 cited, "phonemic awareness, that is the biggest thing and knowing their alphabets. What sound the alphabets make, because now in kindergarten, they're expecting them to already know those sight words." Participant 7 added,

I feel that it would also help them a lot if they were able to learn their sounds. Because if they learn their letters and their sounds, then they're in the process of beginning to learn how to read. If they able to learn those letters and those sounds, then that's going to benefit them a lot, when they go to kindergarten where they are already prepared.

Number and mathematics skills were also a cause for concern by participants. Participant 8 said, "They should be able to count to 100, able to identify their numbers, shapes, and colors." Participant 5 agreed, saying, "Of course, the basic math skills as far as identifying numbers and counting, so they will be ready for things like adding and subtracting when they get in higher grades, so those type of skills are extremely important." Participant 4 added, "A lot of the students surprised me with the math. They

do really well with the math... they can go farther than I think that they would.” Two participants added skill in writing as essential to readiness. Participant 1 said,

Writing is an essential part of the pre-K program because you have the letters, and the letter sounds and making connections with those letters and sounds to actually writing the letters depends on the child itself because every child learns at a different pace and at a different rate.

Participant 3 concurred, saying, “When it comes to fully educating the child, writing has to be the first language of each child.

Although participants in this study were able to articulate essential elements of kindergarten readiness, and purported to teach children readiness skills, they recognized that half of their students left their classrooms at the end of the year unready. Participant 10 said, “I feel that it is a disappointment that only half of the children who complete the district program passed the readiness assessment.” Participant 8 put this problem in personal terms, saying, “So, based on what I know my students know, when they leave pre-kindergarten most times only half of my class are kindergarten ready.” Participant 7 opined, “Well personally I think that it’s not a good thing if only half have them passed the pre-K readiness assessment.”

One of the guiding principles teachers expressed was the need to differentiate instruction according to the prior knowledge and abilities of each child. Participants described children who lacked social skills, emotional readiness, and the ability to work in classroom groups. For example, Participant 8 suggested

the student is not ready for the environment. I've had students who weren't ready for a school environment who should have been in a childcare environment because they had never experienced that type of environment before being around a lot of kids.

Participant 2 said, "It's like a cultural shock, that age they're learning to be in an educational environment." Participant 8 added, "Attention span. They don't have the attention span to just sit there and pay attention when they have other children around them doing other things." Participant 9 suggested that children's home life can create hurdles for them in school, saying, "Some students come from different backgrounds and, they have a difficult home situation that can affect their learning." Participant 5 responded, "Of course, some kids come in with disabilities that we don't know until we start working with them," and Participant 10 added, "Some may not be fully developed mentally, or they have some mental, or behavioral challenges." Participant 8 summed up the challenge for teachers:

The way they do the small group and whole group instruction, I feel that some children may need a little more one on one support versus the group support. So, if I have a struggling student who's very far behind, he may need a little more one on one attention versus being in a small group with four other children who may be just a step above him.

Participant 2 said, "They're coming from different backgrounds, different individuals."

Participants described their responses to the need to differentiate instruction, focusing on children's individual needs. Participant 7 said, "We work in small groups to

make sure the ones that needs that extra attention and can do it in small group, we do in small group every day and give them that extra intervention that they need.” Participant 8 engaged parents as well, saying,

I make sure that I reinforce them in whole group, small group throughout the day if I know I have a particular student who’s struggling with a particular skill, I make sure to work on that particular skill with that student as well as send instructional materials home for homework and have the parents help that child with that skill at home as well.

Participant 10 likewise described getting additional help for students who need it: “First of all, I’ve learned to adapt to the student, and then if I need help, I’ve learned to ask for help to overcome my challenges.” What drove teachers to differentiate instruction seemed to be the readiness assessment. Participant 7 said,

I try to do a lot of small groups and one on one interventions with my students to make sure that they get those skills that they need, so hopefully we can hit that 85 percentile to make sure that they’re ready for kindergarten by giving each one that attention.

Readiness assessment, however, cannot be differentiated. Participant 2 pointed out that “Testing of that magnitude is a bit much for a human being exposed to the educational system for the first time.”

In summary, participants in this study described working to bring prekindergarten students to readiness for kindergarten, by teaching both academic and social skills they believed children need to be successful. However, participants also described hurdles in

this effort, including the traditional play-based focus of preschool education and the diverse needs of individual learners. Participants suggested that they have clear understanding of what readiness requires but were dismayed by the low level of readiness they were able to achieve in their students.

Summary of Results for Research Question 1

RQ1 asked about prekindergarten teachers' perspectives regarding lack of kindergarten readiness in students who completed a district-approved prekindergarten program. Participants described their responsibility for helping children achieve readiness and described both their understanding of what readiness demands and their efforts to develop readiness in their students. However, participants also described difficulties in this goal, because of the need to differentiate instructions to meet students' diverse needs. Participants found many children seem overwhelmed by the prekindergarten experience, overwhelmed by readiness expectations, and overwhelmed by assessment itself.

Results for Research Question 2

Research Question 2 (RQ2) asked about challenges prekindergarten teachers believe have affected the level of kindergarten readiness in their students. Themes of situational challenges and challenges of the assessment itself were associated with this research question. I describe below each of these themes in turn.

Situational Challenges in Developing Kindergarten Readiness

Four situational challenges were described by teachers in this study, including administrative readiness expectations, administrative oversight of teachers, children's

home issues, and children's preschool preparation. Some participants described readiness expectations as unreasonable. Participant 6 went into detail on this:

I think that what has always been a pet peeve of mine is that they expect all these kids to be at this level at the end of pre-K, but yet when they came in so below, with so many struggles already academically because the way they enroll children into pre-k - which I think is good - is if they take the lowest performing children on the assessments they give them to even be able to get into pre-K. So you already have kids that are already really struggling and yet they're supposed to be all the way over at this level by the end of pre-K, and it's really so hard to do.

This challenge was compounded by administrative oversight of teachers that diverted attention from the essential work of teaching. Participant 10 provided an overview of this issue: "There may be a lack of time management, there's abundance of paperwork, there's pressure from the administrators." Participant 2 connected the abundance of paperwork to children's lack of readiness, saying, "As a teacher, I think that if more time was allotted to the children versus extensive redundant paperwork, I think the quality of the child's education can be revealed more in the kindergarten readiness test." Participant 1 suggested that administrative requirements are based in ignorance of the teaching-learning process:

when an expiration date must be met, and teachers have to choose between have to meet the expectations of those who are not involved in education or people who lack education experience and make education decisions versus pushing a standard for a child to work harder.

Participant 10 noted, “I just think that the challenges from the district are kind of demanding, they are too lengthy, the policies and standard assessments are kind of lengthy and it takes away from teaching time.” Participant 2 said, “There’s a lot of stuff going on except for teaching.”

Participants described a lack of instructional resources as a barrier to teaching readiness. Participant 9 remarked, “Sometimes we do not have the necessary materials needed to teach and practice with the students. Teachers may need more training to help the students pass the assessment.” Participant 10 added, “There may be some disadvantages as far as classroom size or insufficient support needed in the classroom.” Participant 8 concluded, “One challenge I feel is the way the district operates the prekindergarten classroom.”

In addition to a lack of instructional resources, participants described being micromanaged how they work through the curriculum, a complaint that recalls their previous wish for more autonomy. Participant 4 said,

With the district challenges, I would say the amount of time that they want you to stay on a certain thing before you move on. Some things we get to hit whereas we may need to stay on it two weeks rather than just a week.

Participant 3 added, “Then you’ll have those particular ones [administrators] ‘hey you’re supposed to be on this week/day, stick to this and don’t go up out of it.’ It depends on each person that comes to evaluate you.” Participant 3 continued to describe mixed messages sent by different administrators, saying, “Sometimes I felt supported because when a district person comes in and see how were running the classroom, they’re

impressed. But then they [administrators] say you still have to follow the curriculum to this.” Participant 2 said, “They want you to perform and put on a show on submit to their judgments.” Participant 10 summed things up with, “I believe that the teachers don’t have enough support.”

Teachers described lack of preparedness in the children as a challenge to their efforts to develop children’s kindergarten readiness. Teachers ascribed some of this lack to parents and other issues in the home. Lack of parental attention to prekindergarten may be due, some participants said, to lack of understanding of what children learn there. Participant 10 suggested, “Parents may not be able to understand what is expected of their students or how to help them, especially in their reading and math assignments.” Participant 5 added, “Some kids, not all may not get as much reinforcement at home being read to at home.... So that can be a challenge of not getting the reinforcement at home.” Participant 9 stated,

Because there is a disconnect between home and school, some parents feel like it’s the teacher job to educate their child and they do not have to do anything at home to help them. Some parents say that the teacher gets paid to teach, not them.

Participants describe evidence that parents do not make prekindergarten a priority.

Participant 7 noted:

My absentee rate was very high, and I think that was a major challenge because my students were not at school. A lot of parents looked at that like “its pre-K” but pre-K is also very important because it starts off that foundation for that child to get them ready for kindergarten. So those two were my major challenges in pre-K.

Participant 8 agreed, saying,

we see many parents feel that prekindergarten is like “daycare,” so they bring their kids when they want. Some may come for 1 or 2 days out the week, which is not helpful if you’re not in the classroom all week.

Participant 7 said convincing parents that their children’s attendance is important required continued effort:

With absenteeism, all I could do was keep talking to my parents and stressing the importance of your child being at school and letting them know that you’re hindering your student by not having your child at school on time or being absent. Some parents understood that, and they tried to correct it and got better. As the year progressed, and so that’s just one of those things that you must keep working with your parents and stressing to them that it’s important for your child to be in school.

Participant 8 described an expectation that parents fill in at home what children missed by being absent at school: “This is what you should be doing to pick up where you are lacking with those absent days.”

The wish for parents to supplement classroom work with at-home teaching was described by many participants. Participant 1 suggested teachers, “talk with parents and give parents suggestions on a matching game. Give them activities they can do at home without getting on ABC Mouse and let them take the time to work one on one hands on.” Participant 5 added, “Also sending things home, extra work home for those that are behind, things like that.” Participant 8 stated it is important to have

high parental support so having those parents that are open to doing the homework. Helping their child with the skills that we are targeting in the classroom each week, and if they don't have that they don't have anyone helping them at home and they're only getting it done during the school hours then it's not very much helpful. I feel that it's not very much helpful.

Participant 4 stated,

I'm thinking the biggest thing is the school to home.... if a child participates in class every day but goes home and doesn't do anything, the next day they have to start all over again trying to recall the information, whereas if they got it again at home at night, they would retain it a little better.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which triggered online instruction even for prekindergarten students, emphasized the need for parental collaboration. Participant 2 stated, "being virtual, managing TEAMS [teleconferencing]: It took the whole first semester for children to get TEAMS. They need parental support. Some [parents] are at home and others work. Eight out of 20 were consistent with homework in pandemic teaching."

In addition, teachers reported lack of preparation in preschool prior to the prekindergarten year. Participant 4 stated,

I'll say not that the bar was set too high, but that a lot of the children did not have anything before they came to pre-K that they needed. So maybe pre-K needs to actually start at 3 instead of 4.

Participant 5 said,

The kids are coming to us so far behind already, and we get them as far as we can and we grow them as much as we can, but to say that they're going to be kindergarten ready is a toss-up because they come in already behind.

Participant 6 added,

Well as a former kindergarten teacher, it was very nice that the children came in knowing colors, letters, numbers, and I think that's important because of the skills that are required in kindergarten right now, but one of my big things that I look for too is they should go in just knowing how to work together.

Participant 8 suggested that "Some students may not have never been in a school."

In summary, participants cited many challenges to preparing children for kindergarten that were not under their control. These included the readiness expectations themselves, administrative expectations for teachers, the level of parental support for education, and what preparation children received in preschool before attending prekindergarten. Uneven attendance was described many times as a problem in helping children become ready for kindergarten.

Challenges Presented by Readiness Assessment

Teachers described many issues with the readiness assessment and the assessment process that affected their ability to develop kindergarten readiness in their students.

These issues included the purpose of assessment, test content, the testing process, teaching to the test, and test validity. Participants in this study questioned the purpose of assessment for readiness. For example, Participant 2 stated, "The tests are there, however I don't give the credit of my students learning to a test or meeting test expectations. I give

the credit of the children's education to our time together." Participant 1 said, "The test is performed to satisfy my dominion; however, the test is irrelevant I feel to the child's attainment of knowledge." Similarly, Participant 6 added, "The test is simply information regurgitated." Participant 8 suggested,

One of the most important skills I think is that they should be socio-emotional ready. Meaning that they should be ready to enter a classroom because as we know all students are not ready to enter a classroom environment. That's why I go back to the first statement that preschool needs to be updated especially with their assessments and within their curriculum as well.

Participant 2 stated, "The brain is tender at that time. The focus shouldn't be on meeting someone else's expectations; the focus should be on the child extending or reaching or recognizing their full potential." Participants seemed to struggle to justify testing for readiness and suggested the purpose of testing was disconnected from helping children learn.

Participants also questioned the content of the readiness assessment and even professed ignorance of what the assessment includes or confusion about how a determination of kindergarten readiness is derived from the test their students take. Participant 5 stated, "I don't really know what the assessments look like. I know the one that we do, but I don't know how the kindergarten readiness...I don't know what's on there." Participant 2 agreed, saying, "I've never reviewed the pre-K readiness assessment. I'm only using what I am given, I've never been provided with that." Participant 3 stated, "I understand needing to know the alphabet, numbers, shape recognition. For the

readiness part there can be some changes,” which suggests an unknown distinction between basic academic skills and some other component called “readiness.” Participant 4 stated,

I do believe that the assessment needs to address a wider variety of things. It’s like they only focus on a few simple skills. It’s not breaking down if the child did master this, it needs to go into let’s see if they can they master this *part* of it.

Participant 3 suggested that the assessment may overlook current skill needs, saying, “some of the questions and necessary requirements can be updated to where the children are now.” Overall, participants expressed dissatisfaction with the test content, to the extent they understood what the test includes.

Teachers described the testing process itself as a challenge, particularly because the assessment used in the district is administered by computer. Participant 5 described children’s testing process this way:

Sometimes the children may have the knowledge to pass the test, but if it’s done on an electronic device, especially one where they have to use the mouse...that completely I think affects the outcomes of the results. Because a lot of times if it times out on them, it’ll skip to the next question because they didn’t have enough time to answer the test because they were too busy trying to manipulate the mouse.

Participant 6 described another issue with children’s testing process:

There was a time when they were touching on a touch screen device, and I literally sat there and watched them not even half listened to the question they

were just touching and if it was an a, b, c, answer [multiple choice question], they were just picking in the same spot the whole time. They never moved and most of the answers they were getting right.

Participant 7 remarked,

My children do better on the assessments that are administered to them from the teachers, and I think that they students do better with the paper assessments and hands-on things so they can get a better understanding of it and stay focused and know what is expected of them, where they're not as focused on with the computer assessments.

In addition, Participant 1 said, "School Wi-Fi can be an issue, home Wi-Fi was an issue even with hotspots students breaking devices, biggest hang up virtual. Some of the problems were getting kicked off [Microsoft]Teams."

Several participants addressed the problem of testing on computer by preparing children for the experience. Participant 10 said,

I make sure that they understand, and before assessments, I probably review, model and everything like that and check for their understanding to make sure that they're understanding what they are supposed to be doing. During assessments, I walk around just monitor quickly and quietly. Through observation, I monitor frequently.

Participant 7 agreed, saying,

With the assessment, I just tried to a part of the schedule where that student was required to be on the computer, for a certain amount of time I tried to monitor

them and make sure that they understood the importance of it and to give them some listening strategies, to where they could listen and comprehend what was being said and not just clicking buttons.

Participant 6 summed things up this way: “I would think more would have passed it, but my concern is how the test is given.”

Concerns about the content and process of the assessment led teachers to teach to the test. For example, Participant 4 stated,

I give homework that I want the kids to work on each night. Something that I know that they would be tested on later for sure. Even though I may not tell them that they’re going to be tested on it later, I just make sure those are the things that they’re hitting for homework.

Participant 7 agreed, saying,

I make sure that we hit those skills at some point everyday like learning those letters, learning those sounds, learning those sight words...we make sure that we do that as a routine, and we hit that frequently and I make sure that they get on I-Station every day.

Participant 6 described this strategy:

I like to incorporate this thing called “kindergarten quest.” Kindergarten quest is literally a mimic of questions, assessments from detecting online testing. It’s just a reflective question that kinda matches what they see online. The goal of that is to build their confidence. Sometimes a child would know the answer but is just afraid to push the answer and be wrong.

Participant 3 remarked, “My whole goal with my children is to build up their confidence in testing. They carry that confidence with them throughout their school life. Not being afraid of a piece of paper or now, technology.”

Teachers acknowledged the value of test data in shaping their instructional plans. Participant 5 said, “So really getting into the data, focusing in on which kids were scoring low in what areas, and group those kids and just hone in on those.” Participant 7 agreed that testing guides teachers in helping children be successful, saying, “I make sure that [I teach] those certain skills that I know that is a requirement for pre-K for them to pass to kindergarten.” At the same time, the previously described problem of confusion over the test content and purpose remains, as described by Participant 1: “If teachers were able to go see the test and could see the skills. Not teach to the test but see syllables, letters, sounds.” There appears to be a desire to teach to the test, despite Participant 1’s disclaimer, to “not get in trouble with the district,” as Participant 6 put it.

Challenges with the test content and process and lack of confidence in the purpose of readiness assessment caused several teachers to question the validity of the assessment. Participant 5 stated,

I have had some in the past that were behind, and then all of a sudden when they take the test they do well. I’ve had the opposite that they were really smart and doing really well during the year, and they just not testing well.

Participant 6 reported:

When I sat down and tested [students] individually, it did not match at all what the [test] results were. Then I had a younger student, that was just picking answers

also, and he did fairly poorly on the test, but when I sat down and tested him one on one..., he knew letters, numbers, and so much more than the test showed he knew. [A] student did poorly was a great student very ready for kindergarten. But the one that was struggling did awesome on the test, and you could tell that they were just guessing.

Participant 7 noted:

I know one of our assessments are done on the computer and I think that since they're so young and they're not really used to taking assessments on the computer, a lot of them are just clicking the buttons and not actually listening to what is being said to them on the computer. I think that probably is one of the reasons why a lot of the children they feel haven't reached where they need to be saying that they're kindergarten ready because they have such a low performance on their assessments that are taken on the computer.

Participant 1 described a disconnect between the test (I-Station) and the curriculum:

For I-Station not all of the district's assessment reflected what was taught. Some of Owl was connected to I-Station and some of it wasn't. I-Station was clapping syllables or phonics heavy, so I had to add it in. A balance between reading and comprehension. You hope as a teacher you have them ready to take this test and it's tough to just sit there and guide them along. It goes back to how effective the teacher teaches and make sure you cover what's in the curriculum *and* on I-Station.

Participant 9 said, “Sometimes the students knew the answer to the questions but need extra time to do the assessment. The assessment times out on them which causes them not to pass the assessment.” Participant 6 complained, “I mean there’s somewhat recognition, some number recognition, but it goes into other things that are not pre-K oriented - it’s more of a focus of what kindergarten will be working on.” Participant 3 characterized the testing format itself as a confounding factor in evaluating test results: “I think that [the assessment] is a little too much advancement for kindergarten, because they’re looking for a certain caliber of kids.” Participant 7 explained, “a lot of them are not used to being on the computer so they’re not at that maturity level to where they can sit and listen to someone asking them some questions telling them to click that button.” As Participant 10 said, “I do not think that the assessments fully reflect all of the skills that the students have developed or learned.”

Summary of Results for Research Question 2

RQ2 explored situational challenges and challenges embedded in the assessment itself that participants perceived had an impact in their development of kindergarten readiness in their students. Participants cited what they experienced as unrealistic readiness expectations from the administration, burdensome oversight of teachers, issues in children’s home life that interfere with learning, and lack of preparation in the preschool years prior to prekindergarten. Participants also expressed doubt about the purpose of readiness testing and the content of the readiness assessment administered to children, and their concern for the validity of the test. Participants described trying to accomplish two often-competing tasks: to develop children’s abilities and self-confidence

while also teaching them what is demanded by the readiness assessment. The assessment and the district curriculum were described as disconnected from each other.

Summary of Results

Results of this study indicated that prekindergarten teachers are largely dissatisfied with the assessment system used to determine kindergarten readiness in their students, citing concerns over the purpose of readiness assessment, the time it requires that is deducted from instructional time, and the validity of the assessment in indicating which children will be successful in kindergarten or which children mastered essential skills needed to be successful. Participants in this study identified challenges of lack of time for instruction and paperwork, lack of professional autonomy, and deficits in children's preparation for prekindergarten by their parents and previous preschool teachers. A discussion of these results and possible implications for practice will be presented in Chapter 5.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility refers to the believability of results, based on the veracity of informants and the questions they were asked (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Credibility was supported in this study by asking the same questions of every participant, including questions intended to probe for clarity, and use of verbatim statements as the data set. In addition, I engaged participants in member checking by emailing each a transcript of their interview for their review and comment. Transferability refers to the applicability of research to another site or a continuation of another researcher's study (Nordstrom, 2015). I provided clear and complete description of all aspects of the study so readers

may make informed decisions about the suitability of my findings to their own situations as administrators, teachers, and policy makers. Dependability refers to ensuring that a study can be replicated (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). I created an audit trail (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018) that included my field notes, the transcripts, audio files, and my notes created as I analyze the data. Confirmability suggests that the findings reported in this study would be the same were the study to be repeated in the same way (see Connelly, 2016). I took care to ground my findings in the verbatim responses of participants and in my accurate portrayal of the implications of those responses for my study problem and purpose. All words were transcribed verbatim from the audio interview.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I presented the results of data analysis, including verbatim evidence from participants, to answer the study research questions. Research Question 1 asked about prekindergarten teachers' perspectives regarding lack of kindergarten readiness in students who completed a district-approved prekindergarten program. Participants described their responsibility for helping children achieve readiness and described both their understanding of what readiness demands and their efforts to develop readiness in their students. However, participants also described difficulties in this goal, because of the need to differentiate instructions to meet students' diverse needs. Participants found many children seem overwhelmed by the prekindergarten experience, overwhelmed by readiness expectations, and overwhelmed by assessment itself. Research Question 2 explored situational challenges and challenges embedded in the assessment itself that participants perceived had an impact in their development of kindergarten readiness in

their students. Participants cited what they experienced as unrealistic readiness expectations from the administration, burdensome oversight of teachers, issues in children's home life that interfere with learning, and lack of preparation in the preschool years prior to prekindergarten. Participants also expressed doubt about the purpose of readiness testing and the content of the readiness assessment administered to children, and their concern for the validity of the test. Participants described trying to accomplish two often-competing tasks: to develop children's abilities and self-confidence while also teaching them what is demanded by the readiness assessment. The assessment and the district curriculum were described as disconnected from each other.

In Chapter 5, I discuss these findings and their connection to the research literature. I also provide recommendations for future research and implications for practice and address how this study contributes to positive social change by providing teachers' perspectives of the task of readying children for kindergarten

Chapter 5: Discussions, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In this basic qualitative study, I interviewed prekindergarten teachers regarding kindergarten readiness and the challenges they believe have affected the level of kindergarten readiness in their students. The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of prekindergarten teachers regarding lack of kindergarten readiness in students who completed a district-approved prekindergarten program and the challenges the teachers believe have affected the level of kindergarten readiness. Findings showed that teachers struggled to meet district expectations for children's readiness assessments complicated by several challenges. In this chapter, I offer an interpretation of the findings, an evaluation of limitations that may have affected those findings, my recommendations for future research, and implications for practice.

Interpretation of Findings

A key finding in this study was that participants described feeling responsible for helping children achieve kindergarten readiness and an understanding of what readiness demands. This finding suggests alignment with the work of Gills et al. (2006) who found that preservice teachers believed their job was to serve all children and help each child become ready for kindergarten. Participants described many barriers to helping children achieve readiness, including the diverse needs of a population that may have had insufficient preparation for prekindergarten work in their preschool experience and support for learning at home. These barriers were also described by Puccioni (2018) who found readiness dependent on the social context of the child and communication among various constituencies, such as parents and teachers. Franko et al. (2018) noted

misalignment between preparation afforded by Head Start and kindergarten expectations. However, Hustedt et al. (2018) found that kindergarten teachers' expectations for children emphasized the ability to express themselves clearly and demonstrate self-control over academic skill accomplishments. Participants in the current study described some of their prekindergarten children as being overwhelmed by the prekindergarten experience, readiness expectations, and the computer-based readiness assessment.

Participants questioned the readiness assessment, suggesting that it is disconnected from the curriculum. This finding aligns with those of McQueen et al. (2018) who noted discrepancies between prekindergarten and kindergarten learning standards. Participants also expressed issues with the fact that the assessment is administered by computer, confounding readiness results with student's ability to use a computer mouse, stay on-task, and understand what they are being asked about and asked to do. Problems with computerized assessment of young children were also raised by Dogan and Omeroglu (2019) who indicated prekindergarten teachers prefer diverse means of assessment, including observation and functional success in real-life situations. Harvey and Ohle (2018) found that teachers tend to consider state-mandated assessments as simply a task to be checked off a list of mandates instead of using it to drive instruction. Schachter et al. (2019) reported that most kindergarten teachers believe computerized assessment takes too much time and provides no benefit. Overall, participants in the current study questioned the validity of the readiness assessment and suggested that its purpose was more administrative than educational.

Conflict with administrative demands was a theme repeated throughout the interviews. Participants described readiness expectations of administrators as unrealistic, given the fact that the prekindergarten program is intended to serve children already at risk for school struggle. Participants described administrative micromanagement, lack of professional autonomy, and burdensome paperwork as issues that interfered with their ability to teach. These conflicts were not explicitly described in the literature, suggesting that job requirements embedded in assessment processes and in the imperative to achieve readiness in all children may constitute challenges for prekindergarten teachers that need further study. The current study showed an ongoing contradiction embedded in two often-competing tasks: to develop children's abilities and self-confidence while also teaching them what is demanded by the readiness assessment. This contradiction disrupts the vertical alignment promoted by Bogard et al. (2005) and demonstrates how lack of consistency at the prekindergarten level may result in ongoing academic struggle.

Limitations of Study

A limitation of this study was that it was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have affected participants' experiences and their interview responses. Three participants in this study cited the pandemic as at least one reason for quitting their job as a teacher within the district or moving to a different educational role. However, only two teachers mentioned virtual learning as part of the district's pandemic response as possibly having an effect on readiness scores.

Recommendations

This study could be replicated at a time when response to a pandemic has not disrupted teaching practice. In addition, I recommend that future research should examine the effect on teachers of paperwork, meetings, and administrative oversight that appear to be adjacent to the implementation of computerized readiness assessment. The loss of instructional time that participants in this study reported as a barrier to helping children master readiness skills suggests that a testing program may run counter to students' readiness achievement. Future research might also explore the discontinuity between the focus on DAP traditional in early childhood practice and the academic focus of skills-based testing. Participants in this study raised questions about the validity of computerized testing, given prekindergarten children's lack of computer skills, wandering attention, and tendency to guess. Test validity in actual practice, especially among populations with little exposure to computers at home, is another avenue for future research. Finally, in this study, the issue of professional autonomy emerged as a key concern for teachers. Researchers should explore the effect of perceived loss of autonomy in a test-driven instructional climate on teacher effectiveness and job satisfaction.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest two implications for practice. First, prekindergarten teachers and building and district administrators should work together to resolve some of the issues that emerged in this study. In particular, collaboration could result in teachers having more control over their time, feeling less pressure to respond to

multiple email messages and attend multiple meetings, and develop a shared understanding about the relationship between the prekindergarten curriculum and readiness assessment. Second, use of computerized assessment for prekindergarten children should be reviewed for validity. Data in this study suggested that for students enrolled in prekindergarten who were selected for the program because they were anticipated to begin kindergarten less prepared than other children might be, a computer-based assessment may result in inaccurate results and may encourage teachers to teach to the test in an effort to support children who are confused by the computer platform. Participants in this study described the focus on testing and test results as a distraction from the actual work of developing kindergarten readiness in their students. In addition, this study may contribute to positive social change when readiness assessment and assessment processes are revised and/or developed to provide greater equity and support for students as well as when teachers and administrators work closely together to ensure greater support for teachers as autonomous professionals.

Conclusion

This study addressed the problem that that only half of U.S. students entering kindergarten are considered kindergarten ready. I conducted this study to explore the perspectives of prekindergarten teachers regarding lack of kindergarten readiness in students who completed a district-approved prekindergarten program and the challenges the teachers believe have affected the level of kindergarten readiness. Results indicated that although prekindergarten teachers feel responsible for helping students achieve kindergarten readiness, their efforts are thwarted by children's lack of preparation for

prekindergarten, administrative requirements that limit instructional time, and problems with readiness testing that affect the validity of test results. Teachers expressed frustration with the lack of professional autonomy afforded to them by administration. The results of this study suggest that lack of readiness achievement has multiple causes that could be ameliorated through closer collaboration between teachers and administrators as well as through evaluation of the appropriateness and validity of computer-based assessment with prekindergarten children. When such adjustments are made to prekindergarten administration and practices, there is hope for increasing children's readiness for kindergarten and their chances for future academic success.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. Only about half of children who complete the district-approved prekindergarten program pass the readiness assessment. What do you think about that?
 - a. How do you find out how well your own students do on the readiness assessment?
 - b. Can you tell me about a time you were surprised by your students' performance on the readiness assessment?
2. What do you think are the most important skills and abilities children need to master before they begin kindergarten?
 - a. How do you know these things are especially important?
 - b. What are the sorts of things you do to help children master these skills and abilities?
3. Tell me your thoughts about the district's readiness assessment.
 - a. Describe how the skills and abilities you think are important for children to master are reflected in the district's assessment.
 - b. Why do you think many children who complete prekindergarten does not pass the readiness assessment?
4. What challenges do you believe affect the level of kindergarten readiness in your students?
 - a. Tell me about challenges that arise from the children themselves.
 - b. Tell me about challenges that arise from your teaching practice or the materials you have to work with.

- c. Tell me about challenges that arise from district policies and support.
- 5. How do you overcome these challenges with your teaching?
 - a. Tell me about a time you overcame a challenge.
 - b. The district recently suggested that 85% of prekindergarten students should pass the readiness assessment. Tell me what you might do to meet this new goal.