

Chapter # 21

TEACHERS, PARENTS, AND MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS COLLABORATE: PROMOTING CHILDREN'S WELLBEING AND SCHOOL READINESS

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative longitudinal study focused on pedagogical and curricular practices of teachers during children's preschool through kindergarten formative years during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose was to explore how teachers supported students in developing school readiness skills in all domains of learning (cognitive, language, physical, social, emotional) over four years during and following the outbreak of COVID-19. Data were collected via semi-structured audio-recorded interviews from 10 teachers in three sessions from 2020 to 2023. Coding was used to reveal patterns, categories and emerging themes. Findings revealed that teachers: (1) modified their pedagogical practices and implemented new curricula to meet students' needs; (2) were faced with challenges in response to COVID-19 outbreak, isolation, and reestablishment periods; (3) expanded roles as they advocated and collaborated with other professionals to increase students' resilience and wellbeing; (4) created communities of practice for peer mentoring and coaching supports to expand their repertoire; (5) strengthened relationships with other teachers and students' parents through parent education, collaboration, and co-teaching. Research implications include adaptations of practices to promote school readiness. Recommendations include further research on communities of practice and collaborative practices between teachers and mental health professionals that further the wellbeing of students and their families.

Keywords: school readiness, Covid-19, developmental domains, co-teaching, mentoring, wellbeing.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study aimed to uncover how teachers of young children in preschool (PS), prekindergarten (PK), transition kindergarten (TK), and kindergarten (K) supported the development of students' school readiness skills and fostered their successful transitions into formal schooling during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers suggested that teachers were challenged to contribute to children's readiness for formal schooling during and following the pandemic (Franchino, 2020; Holod, 2020). Researchers noted that strategies and approaches used by early childhood teachers to address their students' school readiness skills during the 2020-2023 period were not known and needed to be investigated (Brown, Englehardt, & Barry, & Ku, 2018; McNally & Slutsky, 2018; Smith & Glass, 2019) especially during and following the COVID-19 pandemic (Kufi, Negassa, Melaku, & Mergo, 2020; LaVigne, 2023; Lewis & Kuhfield, 2023; Poletti, 2020; Purtell et al., 2020), suggesting a gap in the current literature, which is relevant to current teacher practice.

2. BACKGROUND

Early childhood teachers play critical roles in supporting their students' development of formal school readiness skills (Cadima, Doumen, Verschueren, & Buyse, 2015; Downer, Goble, Myers, & Pianta, 2016; Pianta et al., 2017). There was insufficient data about how PK-K teachers supported the development of school readiness skills in their students (Brown et al., 2018; Smith & Glass, 2019; Welchons & McIntyre, 2017) at the onset of this study. As universal pre-kindergarten was adopted in the state in 2021, TK teachers took on a more prominent role in kindergarten readiness (Wang, Leung-Gagne, Melnick, & Wechsler, 2024). In addition, this was compounded during 2020-2021 due to restrictions imposed by school districts. Restrictions were placed on PK and K programs in the Pacific Southwestern region of the United States in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 presented PK-K teachers with new challenges in developing formal school readiness skills to support their students' successful transition into formal school (Franchino, 2020; Holod, 2020). The researcher aimed to explore how PK-K teachers developed their students' school readiness skills to support their successful transitions into formal schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic during the pandemic and following (2020-2023). The follow-up studies in 2022 and 2023 with ten of the original participants in the 2020 interviews, indicated the overarching findings from the original study remained the same, as follows: (1) teachers modified their pedagogical practices and implemented new curricula to meet their students' needs; (2) teachers were faced with continuous challenges that arose in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, isolation, and reestablishment periods; (3) teachers expanded roles as they advocated and collaborated with mental health and behavioral experts to provide interventions and increase students' resilience and wellbeing; (4) teachers created communities of practice for peer mentoring/coaching support that resulted in expansion of their repertoire in pedagogy/curriculum; (5) teachers strengthened relationships with other teachers and students' parents while engaging in parent education and co-teaching strategies. Attempts to gather additional data from the 10 original participants in 2024 did not yield sufficient participation or significant changes in the data to report on the outcomes of interviews.

3. OBJECTIVES

Early childhood educators are essential in helping their students acquire the formal school readiness skills they need (Cadima et al., 2015; Downer et al., 2016; Pianta et al., 2017). However, insufficient data about how PS/PK/TK/K teachers supported the development of school readiness skills in their students was available at the outset of this study (Brown et al., 2018; Smith & Glass, 2019; Welchons & McIntyre, 2017). School districts' restrictions during and following the pandemic placed limitations on the programs, which made it imperative that teachers support students in making a transition to formal schooling (Franchino, 2020; Holod, 2020; Lewis & Kuhfield, 2023). During and following the COVID-19 pandemic and its variants, researchers of this study set out to investigate how teachers of young children fostered their students' school readiness for formal education. Objectives for subsequent years remained the same.

3.1. Research Questions

Two research questions guided this study, as follows:

RQ1: How do PK-K teachers support the development of school readiness skills in their students during or following the COVID-19 pandemic (and its variants)?

RQ2: How do PK-K teachers foster their students' successful transition to formal schooling during or following the pandemic (and its variants)?

4. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

4.1. Conceptual Framework

Two theories served as the foundation for this study's conceptual framework: Winter and Kelley's (2008) theory of school readiness, which was derived from Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) theory of bioecological systems, and Vygotsky's (1962) theory of social development. These theories align with the responsibilities of teachers to follow curricula and use strategies to ensure students acquire skills necessary for formal school readiness. Subsections that follow include information on social development theory and school readiness theory that grounded this study.

4.1.1. Social Development Theory

The zone of proximal development (ZPD), the more knowledgeable other (MKO), and social interaction make up the three main themes of Vygotsky's (1962) theory of social development. According to Vygotsky, social interaction development is guided by learning (Demirbaga, 2018). A person who is more knowledgeable than the child—a teacher, parent, older sibling, or peer—is known as the MKO. One could classify technology as an MKO (Eun, 2017). According to Eun (2017), the ZPD plays “a critical role in offering principles of effective learning in both formal and informal contexts in various domains of human functioning” (p. 18). A child's development happens within the three elements of social development theory (Demirbaga, 2018; Eun, 2017; Vygotsky, 1962).

4.1.2. School Readiness Theory

Winter and Kelly (2008) acknowledged Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory as having a significant influence on school readiness theory. Researchers emphasized how each child's development was interrelated to contextual factors in the home, school, community, and nation, including political and governmental influences. Caregivers, family members, educators, community members, and city and national governmental entities were considered important influencing factors.

4.2. Defining School Readiness

According to Bernstein, Barnett, and Ackerman (2019), school readiness includes knowledge and social-emotional development skills that students acquire and need before entering kindergarten. Slutzky and Debruin-Parecki (2019) highlighted a need for practitioners in the field of early childhood education to identify a more universal and complex definition of school readiness for students entering formal schooling because it encompasses roles played by both the environment and the student. Jarrett and Coba-Rodriguez (2019) surveyed teachers from different school settings and found that teachers' perceptions of skills needed for school readiness differ based on the type of the school, the curriculum followed in the school, and teachers' ethnicities, as well as teachers' years of teaching experience.

4.3. Impact of Children's Experiences on Formal School Readiness

Researchers have stressed that formal school readiness policies and programs should be implemented before K (Bernier, Beauchamp, & Cimon-Paquet, 2020; Williams & Lerner, 2019). Children's readiness for formal schooling is influenced by their experiences and not just the level of a children's inherent physical development (Bernier et al., 2020; Williams & Lerner, 2019). Williams and Lerner (2019) found that children's early learning experiences matter in their preparation for school.

5. METHODOLOGY

This longitudinal qualitative interview study was carried out between mid-2020 and mid-2023, which was during and following the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic with its variants. In 2024 all 10 teachers from the original and follow-up studies were sent emails requesting their participation. Interview data from a total of 16 teachers were collected; 10 teachers were volunteer participants throughout the 2020-2023 duration of the study. Three teachers responded, however, due to the limited number of respondents and no changes in the data, details were not included. Data were coded and analyzed to identify recurring themes related to teacher practices for the development of student school readiness skills (see Creswell & Poth, 2017). The foundation of qualitative research involves people's opinions, and the interview and member-checking processes followed during each of the three phases of data collecting revealed PK-K teacher practices to support the development of student school readiness skills during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Creswell & Poth, 2017).

5.1. Setting

Email addresses for potential participants in mid-2020 were obtained from publicly available websites, which included campuses for PS/PK/K teachers from private and public school districts. All volunteers were teachers working in preschools, elementary schools, or other early childhood programs. In the first phase, volunteers were screened to ensure that they met the criteria. Thirty-six invitations and consent forms were emailed to recruit volunteers for the first phase of the study. The invitation emails elaborated on the method of data collection (audio-recorded phone interviews, transcription of the audio recordings, summarization of data, and member checking). The email also included information about the intent of the study and volunteer/participant rights. In phase one, consent from 16 volunteer participants was received. Audio-recorded telephone interviews lasting between 45 and 130 minutes were conducted during all three phases. For phases two and three, only teachers who were volunteer participants for phase one were contacted for interviews and participation in the member-checking processes.

5.2. Participants

Volunteers met criteria (teaching the PS/PK/K at the time of interviews, having a minimum of 3 years teaching PS/PK/K, being certified by the early childhood program of the school district and state) were interviewed. At the time of phase one interviews, participants were three PS/PK teachers, seven TK teachers, and four K teachers. Data saturation was reached at each phase (see Creswell & Poth, 2017). The second (2022) and third (2023) set of interviews with ten of the original 14 teachers included representation from the PS/PK, TK, and K teachers.

5.3. Instrument

For data collection and retention an audio recording application was used. Interviews were conducted using an open-ended interview protocol. To address the two research questions, the problem statement, and the goal of this study, interview questions and prompts were created and used that aligned with the framework. To ensure clarity and ease of understanding for all participants, all interview questions were composed in a formal, straightforward style devoid of any acronyms or vague terminology. A child development specialist with over 35 years of experience in the field of child development and education, certification expertise, and higher education early childhood faculty in a state university in the United States was consulted as an expert to review the interview protocol during each phase for the purpose of validity.

5.4. Procedure

The collected data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-step guide for thematic analysis and Saldaña's (2015) steps for coding were followed. Phase 1 of the analysis was to become familiar with data. At this point, recordings and transcripts of the interviews were reviewed. Phase 2 of the analysis focused on using a priori and open codes to organize the data into initial codes (see Saldaña, 2015). Coding is the process of identifying pieces of data that are of interest to the researcher and were relevant to the phenomenon under study (Braun, Clarke, & Rance, 2017). Using the conceptual framework as a guide, a priori coding, coding data segments that were relevant were used. A priori coding was used with each transcript to code other relevant pieces of data. A codebook was created to track codes as they expanded and collapsed to become categories and themes to answer the research questions. A visual representation on a Microsoft document was created to organize data pertinent to each code and category. Phase 4 was the review and refinement of themes by looking at data points to ensure they were relevant and create a discernible pattern for that theme. The second level reviewed the entire data set to ensure that the identified themes accurately reflected meanings uncovered within the data analysis. Phase 5 involved defining and naming the emerging themes. A detailed analysis for each theme, identifying the meaning behind each theme and how the themes related to each other were performed. Subthemes were identified within themes. Phase 6 was reporting the data. The story of the data was written to convince the reader about the longitudinal qualitative study's importance, reliability, and/or validity; and to ensure that reporting contained evidence of themes identified within data and that an analytic narrative answered the research questions.

6. RESULTS

Five themes that answered the research questions are included in this section. Themes reflect teacher practices related to the development of student school readiness skills.

6.1. Teachers Modified their Pedagogical Practices and Implemented New Curricula to Meet Their Students' Needs at Each Phase

Teachers mentioned that during the isolation period of the pandemic, they had to modify their curricula and practices to keep children engaged during virtual learning sessions. Part of the modification was to help young children learn how to navigate the Zoom virtual platform. Another modification was to keep children focused while their parents and siblings were in the same physical space with them during their virtual school hours. Teachers had to become creative to help students with their manipulative activities. During the second phase,

when students returned to school with many physical restrictions, teachers had to modify their practices to accommodate every child with necessary learning tools while keeping a 6-foot distance among students and continuously sanitizing toys and teaching tools. In the second phase, teachers stressed that they had to attend to students' social-emotional learning needs more than before, because when children returned to school, there were increased fears of infections from the coronavirus and its variants. Teachers reported that this group of students was more underdeveloped in their socialemotional skills because of isolation. Teachers created more opportunities for students to work with other students even within the 6 feet distance to focus on social-emotional development. Teachers noted an increased dependence on technology. During phase three, teachers mentioned that students were less ready for school than before the pandemic in all domains. They believed that COVID-19 and its variants had contributed to student underdevelopment in domains of learning. Teachers discussed that the parents of children who were infants or born within the isolation period of COVID-19 did not have support from teachers and caregivers to learn how to help their children develop school-readiness skills. Teachers' priorities became helping students progress toward reaching their developmental milestones.

6.2. Teachers Were Faced with Continuous Challenges that Arose in Response to the COVID-19 Outbreak, Isolation, and Reestablishment Periods

During the first phase of this research, early childhood teachers were faced with challenges that were specific to young students. They were challenged by helping first-time students follow directions on a screen for a few hours each day, while there were others present in their house. Teachers reported being challenged by having parents or caregivers present in their virtual classroom, whom they viewed as depriving students of opportunities to learn and discover. Teachers faced challenges virtually teaching students to hold and use a pencil and scissors virtually. During the second phase, teachers were faced with challenges that arose due to social distancing and wearing masks. Teachers' roles changed from an educator to becoming health inspectors, caregivers, parenting consultants, technology experts, teachers, and mentors. Teachers accommodated students by co-teaching with colleagues and parents, using the teaching tools, by taking turns while attending to student and parent fears and individual needs. Teachers supported parents who had feelings of fear and guilt. In phase three, teachers were challenged by having students who had not been achieving their developmental milestones. Some students were not potty trained or able to eat independently. Students at this phase had been infants during the isolation period. When these students started school, teachers reported they were delayed in demonstrating the abilities of typically developing children for their chronicle age. Students social-emotional and motor skills were delayed. During the 2024 year, variants of COVID were prevalent in communities in the greater metropolitan area of the Pacific southwestern state; however, mandates to convert to virtual environments were not in place. At this time, early childhood programs were prepared to switch to virtual learning as needed.

6.3. Teachers' Roles Expanded as they Advocated for Children and Collaborated with Mental Health and Behavioral Experts (School Psychologists and Counselors) for Interventions to Promote Children's Wellbeing and Resilience on Behalf of Students who Experienced Trauma or Developmental Delays

Isolation and fear of the unknown caused by the outbreak of the coronavirus resulted in overprotective behavior of parents. In some cases, mental health professionals in order to help them with their anxiety, teachers became advocates for children and collaborated with behavior specialists, school psychologists, and counselors. Some students' families were facing more traumatic situations, having lost a loved one. Advocating and collaborating with behavior specialists began in the first phase and continued during all phases. Teachers collaborated with specialists to learn new interventions and practices to help students and their families.

Children's well-being, encompassing emotional, social, and physical health, has been disrupted by prolonged periods of social isolation, changes in routine, and heightened family stress. Teachers' responses to interview questions indicated that resilience in young children is not only a protective factor against immediate stressors but also a predictor of long-term wellbeing. During the pandemic, children with protective factors and higher levels of resilience were better able to maintain positive mental health, engage in adaptive behaviors, and sustain social connections, even in the face of restricted interactions.

ECE environments that emphasized social-emotional learning (SEL) and created a safe, nurturing atmosphere have been shown to buffer the negative impacts of the pandemic on children's wellbeing (Thompson, 2023). Interventions that integrate SEL into the curriculum helped children develop emotional regulation, problem-solving skills, and a sense of agency, all of which contribute to resilience.

The reestablishment period, as schools transitioned back to in-person learning, introduced another set of challenges. Teachers had to address learning gaps that had widened during remote education, while simultaneously adhering to new health and safety protocols. This period also required teachers to be sensitive to the varied experiences of students during the pandemic, as many returned to school with different levels of school readiness, academic progress, and emotional resilience.

6.4. Teachers Created Communities of Practice to Avail Themselves and Other Staff of Peer Mentoring and Coaching Support, which Resulted in the Expansion of their Repertoire in Pedagogy and Curriculum

Teachers were faced with unforeseen situations and formed communities of practice with collaborative mentorships with other teachers and school staff to support each other and share practices. In phase one, teachers and staff developed novel creative ways to support each other with technology and their students in learning, social-emotional learning, and physical development. Collaborative mentoring continued throughout phases two and three. School districts in the greater metropolitan areas required professional development supported by coaches and mentors in technology and SEL. Schools and programs prepared for reoccurrence of mandates requiring teachers and children to quickly implement online teaching and learning.

6.5. Teachers Strengthened Relationships with Other Teachers and Students' Parents While Engaging in Parent Education and Co-Teaching Strategies

Teachers engaged parents in their classrooms, developed teamwork, conducted parent education, and used co-teaching strategies with parents, siblings, and caregivers to support student school readiness skill development. These practices began at phase one and continued through phases two and three. Teachers expressed appreciation for having opportunities to use technology for effective and flexible communication with parents.

Teachers' mutually beneficial relationships with others strengthened. In stages two and three, kindergarten students converted much of their content learning, literacy development, and assessment of skills to tablets. Tablets were provided by most students in K and TK. As many families put their children in public TK and K, fewer 3- and 4-year old children were enrolled in PS/PK programs.

7. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Authors recommend that similar studies be conducted around the world and that further studies to be conducted comparing distant learning and on-campus learning with social distancing restrictions, since this study did not compare the two. An additional recommendation would be to further compare the public school and private school practices and teacher experiences during and following the pandemic. Further research on the benefits of shared leadership in promoting PS/PK/TK/K students' readiness skill development and fostering successful transitions to formal schooling is also needed. Although the participants of this study were from the diverse socio-economic backgrounds, the study did not compare the experiences of teachers from different socio-economic communities. Therefore, a comparison study be conducted on teachers' experiences during and following the pandemic in addressing their student's school readiness skills development within different socio-economic communities. This study focused on PK/TK/K teachers, we would recommend that a similar study be conducted with family members and school leaders. Further studies are needed to explore the preparedness of PK/TK/K teachers' readiness for a future pandemic and teachers' experiences with the increased use of technology for young children for teaching, learning, and conducting assessment; as well as the effectiveness of tablet assessments in contributing to students' school readiness skills.

8. CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION

Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) suggested requirements to attend to the needs of the whole child include healthy nutrition, appropriate physical activities, and a positive learning environment. Policymakers are encouraged to create a unified and organized vision for educational establishments to meet the needs of children as a whole and to develop and maintain safe and healthy environments (Temkin et al., 2020). Teachers (TPK2, TK4, TK3) emphasized that school readiness has less to do with academic skills and more to do with fundamental skills such as social-emotional skills, sense of community, the ability to communicate within a group, and self-regulation. "The health and wellbeing of the learner, including the physical, social, and emotional safety, is a requirement for learning" (Soskil, 2021; p. 99). TTK4 expressed their view that school readiness is more to do with student's ability to feel safe and secure, sit and focus on one task for a sustained period, listening and following directions, taking turns, and being patient.

Teachers stressed the importance of delivering an emergent and prepared curriculum to create safety and trust within the uncertainty of the pandemic. Teachers mentioned that it was more important during the pandemic to use an emergent and prepared curriculum that could be delivered virtually than any other time. Participants shared that they tried to create the traditional classroom environment in their virtual classrooms with varying levels of success. All teachers provided children with the stationery and material that they needed for learning called “grab and go.” Teachers TK5 and TTK5 shared that they used a whole child philosophy and evaluated their own practices to make sure students understood their teachings. Comprehensible content involved the use of realia and manipulatives. TTK1 and TPK3 explained how they tried to recreate the on-campus classroom online, by providing their students with materials and kits with explanations/directions for parents to facilitate their use in the virtual classroom.

Principals who entrusted teachers with shared decision making through open and honest communication, support teachers’ development and built a community of teachers are effective in establishing and maintaining a successful learning environment (Graham, 2018). Teachers (TTK6 and TTK1) shared that one of the teachers who had more knowledge of technology took the lead in teaching the other teachers on how to teach online and navigate the system. Shared leadership promotes a sense of community, responsibility, and trust among teachers as well as collaboration, shared purpose, and shared ownership (Daniëls, Hondeghem, & Dochy, 2019). TTK8, TK2, and TK5 mentioned that they all work as a team in their schools to help each other overcome challenges, exchange ideas, and keep students engaged and safe.

Participants shared that at the beginning of the pandemic they had to learn how to use the technology, and some had to teach their very young students how to navigate their virtual classroom. Teachers mentioned that they tried to bring traditional classrooms feel and activities into their virtual classrooms. They used technology to communicate with parents, assess students’ learning, evaluate their own practices, and create a community of students and families. Under the best of circumstances, online learning presented both challenges and opportunities for skill development in cognitive, social-emotional, and physical domains of learning for young children (Holod, 2020). TTK1 Stated that she used technology to invite experts to talk in the classroom. TPK2 Said she used the technology to assess children’s improvement and her own practice’s effectiveness.

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Short biographical sketch: Mary Barbara Trube, Ed.D. is professor emerita of education at Ohio University and co-founder of Platonium Mentoring and Coaching Consultants. Dr. Trube works as an editorial consultant for The Mentoring Institute at The University of New Mexico, dissertation mentor at Walden University, and contributing adjunct faculty at Florida SouthWestern State College and Ohio University in the United States. She has been an academic contributor to the China, Canada, United States English Immersion (CCUEI) Research Collaborative for over 20 years in the PRC. Dr. Trube has more than 50-years of experience in the field of education as a special educator, early childhood curriculum specialist, and elementary school administrator; higher education faculty, early childhood program coordinator, and assistant dean for academic engagement and outreach in a research-active college of education. She has numerous national and internal presentations and publications, including co-author of two books on mentoring.