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Caregivers' Understanding Of Early Literature Expectations For Firstborn Children Entering Kindergarten

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CAREGIVERS' UNDERSTANDING OF EARLY LITERATURE EXPECTATIONS FOR
FIRSTBORN CHILDREN ENTERING KINDERGARTEN

By

Kathleen England

THESIS

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CAREGIVERS' UNDERSTANDING OF EARLY LITERATURE EXPECTATIONS FOR
FIRSTBORN CHILDREN ENTERING KINDERGARTEN

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ABSTRACT

CAREGIVERS' UNDERSTANDING OF EARLY LITERATURE EXPECTATIONS FOR FIRSTBORN CHILDREN ENTERING KINDERGARTEN

By

Kathleen England

This qualitative phenomenological research was designed to develop an understanding of caregivers' understanding of early literacy expectations for their firstborn or only child as they begin their kindergarten schooling. This study consisted of seven participants and six interviews with caregivers that enrolled their children in the Archdiocese of Detroit Catholic Schools in Southeast, MI. With the findings of this study, school administrators and researchers alike may be able to find a deeper understanding in efforts to support their families as they begin their educational careers and establish a solid foundation for further growth and development.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank my husband, Dylan, for consistently pushing for further growth and development. In addition, my parents for their dedication to a solid foundation of learning rooted in Catholic Schools.

To all of my professors in the School of Education, Leadership, and Public Service, I thank you for providing me with the guidance, growth, and care for my education that distance learners might miss. Never did I feel alone on my journey at Northern Michigan University.

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INTRODUCTION

The dynamic world of technology allows for an always engaged, always accessible stream of information. This allows anyone the opportunity to gather information and data as they see necessary. However, in the world of technology and social media, easily accessible information isn't always as factual as it is available. The result of this in the world of education is multi-faceted; caregivers can be faced with information overload, which may or may not be accurate, in addition to an overwhelming pressure for caregivers to fit a certain 'mold' of what their child should be learning by a certain age, regardless of developmental milestones or child readiness for certain skills.

Early learning theorists such as Jean Piaget (1896-1980), Erik Erikson (1902-1994), Arnold Gesell (1880-1961), and Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), amongst others, established theories that help educators and caregivers alike understand how children learn and grow best. These theories and theorists serve as a guiding framework for early childhood curriculum development, best developmentally appropriate teaching practices, and how children learn and pass milestones in sequential order.

Purpose of the Study

Within the field of education, the world of early childhood education is still earning the respect of professionals in the field of education. Early childhood theorists laid the foundation of the best, developmentally appropriate sequential pathways for the evolution of the child and their ideal way to learn. This is important for caregivers to understand to best help their child reach

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success. Throughout this research, an understanding has been developed to best meet the needs of early learners through interviews, collection of caregivers' understandings surrounding their child's early learning, and identifying early learning theorists' understanding of how children learn best.

In a world of fast-paced immediate solutions, and a proud, overworked culture, the child can be easily lost. Many people pride themselves on the brink of exhaustion, working outside of their contractual hours and we wonder, *at what cost?* This trickle-down theory of exertion, which is explained with the onset of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, January 2002), part of the President George Bush era, pushed a giant shift in the educational area.

Over the past two decades, there has been a significant change in how and how much children learn. A journal publication from DeBray-Pelot and McGuinn (2009) notes how NCLB and political policymakers dove into a stronger educational reform.

Responding to the pressure of voters and an interest group environment in education that was more complex and less supportive of the old finance equity regime, national policymakers embraced the call for a more aggressive federal role in school reform. (p. 24)

However, there hasn't been empirical research that supports this topic, only theories. In efforts to support this, this study looked at the idea surrounding caregivers' understanding of firstborn or only children's literacy abilities concerning what they should be capable of demonstrating within the first quarter of their kindergarten academic year.

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As an early childhood educator, one's purpose is to support caregivers in their understanding of what is actually developmentally appropriate for their earliest learners. In a text from Copple and Bredekamp (2009), they discuss that "Developmentally appropriate practice utilizes child development theory to encourage teaching that emphasizes the young children's individual progress and learning based on their developmental areas in a way that speaks to 'the social and cultural contexts in which they live'" (p. 10). Utilizing developmental theories is one concrete way to meet the needs of children where they are in their own unique stage of development.

The discussion this research sifted through surrounded the idea that children, regardless of policy change, still developed in relatively the same sequential order, per early learning theorists. The result of this is teachers meeting children where they are, curating their curriculum to best meet the needs of the learner, regardless of policy.

In addition to policy, caregivers were faced with mixed messages from colleagues, friends, and the ever well-informed social media outlets. The important note here is that while many people mean well with their information shared, much of the information shared is through anecdotal discovery, rather than through study and research. This research sought to uncover the understandings of caregivers as a means of recognizing what further information is needed to support their child within their first school encounter.

Research Question

- (1) What do caregivers of first-born children who are entering kindergarten understand in regards to their child's literacy abilities at ages five or six?

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- (a) How do the understandings of caregivers align with the actual kindergarten literacy expectations in Michigan?

Theoretical Framework

Utilizing early learning theorists' examples, a qualitative study was conducted. Based upon research pioneered by some of the most referenced early learning theorists, there appeared to be a gap in understanding. The missing concept of what is most appropriate for a child to be able to successfully perform upon entering a kindergarten classroom isn't crystal clear for caregivers and often left them wondering how to support their child in their earliest years of school.

Children follow a sequential approach to maturation and readiness, as identified by Arnold Gesell as the maturational-developmental theory. Gesell's theory surrounded ideas that "observed and documented patterns in the way children develop, showing that all children go through similar and predictable sequences, though each child moves through these sequences at his or her rate or pace" (Gesell Theory, 2012, para. 1).

While many theories support early childhood learning and development, most notably, Lev Vygotsky (1931-1997), guided this research. The sociocultural theory, developed by Vygotsky, focused on "how individual mental functioning is related to cultural, institutional, and historical context; hence, the focus of the sociocultural perspective is on the roles that participation in social interactions and culturally organized activities play in influencing psychological development" (Scott & Palincsar, n.d., para. 1). This context painted a framework for how kindergarten children are brought into school with varying experiences.

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Many different experiences all play an important role in how children develop and learn. In an article by Scott and Palincsar (n.d.), they discuss that “a sociocultural theorist, when interpreting a learning situation, might attend to the broader social system in which the learning is happening and will draw interpretations about an individual's thinking and development based on his or her participation in culturally organized activities” (para. 17). With different social and cultural experiences, levels of education, and development opportunities, children draw on their experiences, contributing to the vast dynamics in the new world of kindergarten.

Within the classroom, kindergarten teachers hold a certain level of accountability for what children should be able to successfully demonstrate an understanding of within their first quarter of schooling. In comparison, it is believed that caregivers of children who are their first, or only to enter school, are faced with the reality of social expectations that are not realistic to the child's nature of natural progression in their development, leaving them in a state of confusion, only wanting what is best for their learner. With many different aspects of children's early development contributing to their growth, kindergarten teachers are faced with many different learners and their abilities.

Through thorough research of journal articles, the specific topic of caregiver's understanding, in comparison to teachers' expectations, was exhausted. This specific search warranted findings (but not limited to) of positive transitional experiences of students when moving into kindergarten, and kindergarten readiness in conjunction with race, ethnicity, and development (Takriti, 2020; Diamond et al. 2010).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study encompassed the discrepancies in the understanding of developmentally appropriate practices in conjunction with a caregiver's understanding of kindergarten readiness. Preparedness for kindergarten starts in the home, and is built upon in prekindergarten schooling and solidified in the kindergarten year. However, there appeared to be many differing opinions about what a five or six-year-old child should be able to do upon entering their first formal kindergarten schooling.

With multiple streams of information in the world, at times, it can be difficult to see through the muddiness and understand what is the truth. Caregivers appeared to face the same struggles when it came to their child's growth and development. Information on how children learn best, what they need to know for school, and how they should learn information is presented in blogs, advertisements, and on various social media platforms. However, the information presented is often subjective, or strategies that worked for a specific family; not necessarily rooted in research.

When a child reaches the age of five or six, they typically enter kindergarten. For some children, it is their first formal encounter with schooling while others may have a year or even two of preschool experience. With this in mind, kindergarten teachers receive an influx of children who vary significantly in all areas of development. Caregivers only want what is best for their child, and have provided varying levels of what one might refer to as school readiness, in efforts to prepare them for their first encounter with school.

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With these avenues in mind, in conjunction with subjective information streams caregivers have about teaching their child, there was a significant difference in what caregivers thought their child should be capable of. Through the lens of the caregiver, this research looked into what caregivers thought their child should know in regards to literacy standards within the first quarter of kindergarten.

Early Childhood

The early years of a child's life are some of the most critical concerning their early development and lifelong learning abilities. The Center for High Impact Philanthropy (n.d) defines early childhood as, "Early childhood comprises a number of life stages, marked by developmental milestones. Here, we define early childhood as the period from birth to age eight, although we also recognize the importance of quality prenatal care in early childhood outcomes" (para. 1). From the moment a child is born through third grade is equivalent to roughly 2,920 days. Third grade in this matter is significant because "age eight corresponds to third grade, a critical year for mastery of the reading skills upon which further learning will build and a reliable predictor for future education success" (The Center for High Impact Philanthropy, n.d., para.1). Within this large frame of time, synapses are formed, connections are made, and the foundational building blocks of a child's life are laid. Setting children up for success starts early and continues well into their later years.

Foundations are what structures are built upon. According to Merriman-Webster (2021), a foundation is "a basis (such as a tenet, principle, or axiom) upon which something stands or is supported" (para. 2). If the foundation isn't laid well, the structure will not be as strong as

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others. This foundation that is built within the early years of a child's life is what will set them up for academic endeavors in the future.

Another significant aspect of a strong, early childhood foundation, is the caregivers that were responsible for their child's early learning. In a recent longitudinal study, Sheridan et al. (2020), notes:

Parents play a critical role in the early learning and development of their children. They create opportunities for children to explore their environments and interact meaningfully with people and objects. They provide a context within which cognitive, social, emotional, behavioral, and physical development can be stimulated. (p. 365)

Within the early years, it is both the caregivers who begin to establish the foundation, followed by collaborating with teachers to build upon their child's learning.

Educational History

Through teamwork and understanding, caregivers can work alongside teachers to best support their children as they begin their early learning experiences.

Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education. Our requirements for world leadership, our hopes for economic growth, and the demands of citizenship itself in an era such as this all require the maximum development of every young American's capacity. The human mind is our fundamental resource.

(Kennedy, 1961, para. 1)

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Education is the cornerstone for further development; it all starts in the earliest years of a child's life. Early educational theorists are some of those who shaped early childhood education into what it is today. Well experienced psychologists such as Jean Piaget, Noah A. Rubin, Arnold Gesell, and Lev Vygotsky paved a trail for early childhood that has continued to remain current and relevant. While these theorists are just some of those who paved the way for early childhood education, they all share a very similar message while complimenting each other's theories. The child continues to develop at an invariant rate, regardless of when and where they are born.

A child's cognitive development is not just about acquiring knowledge, the child has to develop or construct a mental model of the world. Cognitive development occurs through the interaction of innate capacities and environmental events, and children pass through a series of stages. (McLeod, 2020, para. 1)

Children are not able to skip stages and they advance through these stages at different rates, however, they are not able to advance past one stage without the other.

With children progressing through Piaget's four stages of cognitive development at different rates and levels of maturation, caregivers and educators must continue to meet the needs of the children where they are. Early childhood education is not a one size fits all approach, but rather, it is about meeting each individual child where they are developmentally, and teaching them to their unique and individual needs. One author notes on early education, cognitive-developmental "The clear implication for education and teaching is that a reflective analysis of Piaget and other cognitive developmental theorists' function when application of that translation to education in general and early childhood education in particular, is required"

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(Tyler, 2012, p. 7). The important note here in regards to early learning theorists is that taking the whole child and their learning needs into account is necessary for educational growth and development.

Early Education and Testing Today

Through extensive research, a minimal discovery was found surrounding this topic of how caregivers truly understand what is important for their child to understand when entering kindergarten in regards to their firstborn child. It's important to note that "given that caregivers are among the primary influencers of children's early learning across pre-k to kindergarten transition, it is important to understand their engagement during that period" (Sheridan et al., 2020, p. 365). As caregivers are typically the primary influencers, they are often inundated with information from various social media outlets, blog posts, or different articles that are not connected to the research. Thus, caregivers are often swimming in the information that is convoluted, leading them in directions that are not necessarily developmentally appropriate. With this statement in mind, caregivers are the first teacher a child has in their life. It would be proactive to provide education for them to further develop into their early years in school.

With caregivers playing such a critical role in their child's early development, it appears that many are just unsure how to best support their child. Caregivers that are specifically teaching their firstborn child, or their only child, are essentially building the plane as they fly it. Allowing caregivers to learn and develop themselves along with their children could serve purposefully for children, caregivers, and their educators.

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Through the implementation of the “No Child Left Behind Act” signed into effect in January of 2002, a major shift in education happened. When NCLB was signed into law schools and teachers now had an unequivocal undertaking to prove their teaching and their schools as ‘successful’. This shift of focus at both state and federal levels heavily influenced kindergarten teachers as the pressure from policy elicited changes within the classrooms, and a push for the child to learn quicker and sooner than developmentally ready also took place. Keeping in mind, the child still has not changed, even though the expectations have.

Rather important factors in both kindergarten and school readiness are birthdays in relation to school start days. Children entering kindergarten all enter at developmentally different levels, some turning six within the first days, while some within the last days of their academic year. It’s not necessarily important to know ahead of time what a child is capable of doing upon arrival of kindergarten, but rather their biological growth which will determine their abilities to learn once in school.

Conclusion

Understanding the needs of children and ensuring that kindergarten teachers, and the schools, are ready to meet the needs of the child, and not the other way around. Hustedt notes: “Kindergarten has historically emphasized child-centered and play-based approaches, though reform efforts have been accompanied by significant changes in instructional practice” (2018, p. 53). Many caregivers have had kindergarten experiences that align closely with Hustedt. Through this shift, increasingly there has been a push for standardized testing, a heavy focus on academics, and a lack of social-emotional focus and play-centered learning. A completely

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different world than what most caregivers know kindergarten to be, solely from their personal experiences.

Traditional early childhood assessment practices focused on informally collecting data through observation and questioning. The current kindergarten trend of collecting data on a larger scale is much different from the play-based learning approach that once balanced the curriculum of kindergarten. “Tensions regarding child assessment in kindergarten reflect larger struggles between developmentally appropriate practice for young children and the more structured, didactic approaches to instruction typically more common for older children” (Hatch, 2005, p. 53, as cited in Hustedt et al., 2018).

The concern for improving the success of school children in learning to read has led increasingly in the last decade to suggestions that formal reading instruction should begin earlier, moving that instruction from the primary grades down into the kindergarten and pre primary grades, which is not considered to be developmentally appropriate. (Saracho, 2017, p. 302)

The change in teaching practices and initiating curriculum sooner than developmentally ready put children at risk of being labeled ‘at or below grade level’ whereas twenty years ago, the same child would be labeled as ‘developing as expected’.

METHODS

In this chapter, the methodological framework for research is outlined, including the design of the research, participants of the study, and the procedures followed. This study follows a qualitative design. Creswell (2015) explains the characteristics of a qualitative study, such as: “collecting data based on words from a small number of individuals...analyzing the data for description and themes...interpreting the larger meaning of the findings...and including the researchers’ subjective reflexivity and bias” (p. 26). These key characteristics allowed the researcher to gather the necessary data needed to complete this research.

Through a qualitative study, the information gathered through interviews can now help both caregivers and teachers gain a better understanding of what children between the ages of five and six understand upon entering school. In addition, it also assisted to paint a picture of what caregivers need to understand to be successful in supporting their child’s early literacy experience.

Participants

Participants in this study were caregivers of children who are their oldest, or only child, entering their first year of kindergarten. The caregivers varied in age, however, the children were between the ages of five or six; depending on when their birthday falls in the academic year. All children in the state of Michigan must be the age of five, on or before September 1, 2021, to enroll in kindergarten unless a waiver is granted:

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Beginning with the 2015-2016 school year, a child who resides in the school district may enroll in kindergarten if the child is at least 5 years of age on September 1 of the school year of enrollment. For the district to be eligible to count the pupil in membership and receive state aid, the pupil must meet these age requirements [MCL 388.1606(4)].

(Michigan Department of Education, 2014, p. 1)

This specific group of participants enrolled their child in schools within the Archdiocese of Detroit, located in Southeast Michigan. Before the start of the study, the research considered the use of snowball sampling to acquire participants. Creswell (2018) defines snowball sampling as “a form of purposeful sampling that typically proceeds after a study begins and occurs when the researcher asks participants to recommend other individuals to be sampled” (p. 209). In this specific research, snowball sampling did not occur.

Participants attended schools in the surrounding Southeast area and varied in demographics, educational status, and financial status. This group of participants was selected because it was believed that they would provide a range of information, based on each family's experiences, and provide the most diverse data to be analyzed in this research paper.

Procedures

Requests for participant participation were emailed (see Appendix A) to principals within this specified diocesan area. Principal emails were acquired through the associate superintendent, who approved researching within this area. Emails, with attached information for the study, were sent to principals to forward along to their kindergarten families, permitting their interest in participation (see Appendix B). The email clearly outlined if families were

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eligible to participate in the survey. Those participants who were eligible contacted the researcher to participate. Participants who were willing to join the study filled out the informed consent form, acknowledging their rights as a participant (see Appendix C). Through this, they signed, acknowledging consent to participate in this study, and a questionnaire was sent to them.

After they consented to participate in this study, a questionnaire (see Appendix D) was sent to their contact information by the researcher. Follow-up reminder phone calls were made to participants that had completed the survey, and showed interest. Participants had the right to withdraw at any time from the study at no cost or risk, and one participant selected this option.

This study sought to collect anecdotal information from six participants in multiple different schools to provide a wide variety of information. Participants engaged in open-ended interviews through Zoom, as interested, in efforts to retrieve more information. Zoom interviews were recorded with permission from participants' consent forms, which allowed review of information and transcription at a later time. Interview questions for Zoom (see Appendix E) were preliminary and had the possibility for change and further discussion which evolved and happened organically. It's important to note that open-ended interviews and questions are important "so that the participants can best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings" (Creswell, 2015, p. 218). As the conversation progressed with the interviewee, the findings ebbed and flowed, thus, making this open-ended process extremely beneficial to record findings.

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Data Collection and Analysis

Using open-ended interview questioning, information from the initial survey was collected regarding children's current abilities as they enter the kindergarten classrooms. The information consisted of anecdotal situations caregivers provided about their children's abilities, direct quotations, and other pertinent information that benefited the study. Through the information collected, the researcher was able to compare the caregiver's assessment of their oldest or only child with expectations that occur within the first quarter of the child's kindergarten year. In addition, the information collected was coded to search for commonalities amongst responses, any unusual trends, and respect privacy.

Recording and Managing Data

Initial information regarding participants' demographics, contact information, and qualifications to participate in this study was collected through a Google Form after consenting to participate in the study. This allowed for a screening process on the answers submitted to collect the most accurate data. Google was an excellent tool for gathering data, as it was easily exported to Google Sheets, which allowed for information to be organized by time, date collected, and highlight common answers and themes.

After the initial information collected was analyzed, an interview was conducted with the participants who qualified and were interested in participating in further discussion. During the interview process, a series of questions were asked to participants (see Appendix E), as well as any follow-up questions that correlated with the participant's response. The interview process took place utilizing the Zoom platform. Participants verbally acknowledged the recorded

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interview in addition to the consent form that was initially submitted. The recorded piece of the interview allowed for the researcher to be present in the interview process, and transcribe the interview at a later time. The interview itself lasted approximately 10-15 minutes, depending on the participant interviewed.

Data Analysis and Interpretation Process

Data analysis and interpretation isn't a systematic approach, and cannot be treated as such. Initial strategies for this process range as follows. During the interview process, additional categories were added through discussion with the participant. Categories that were included are literacy and fine motor, literacy and sound recognition, beginning sounds, and word recognition.

This process was very fluid, and the categories had the opportunity to change, however, these categories were an excellent starting point for caregivers to understand and gain a generalization of where their children fall in their developmental scale concerning age-appropriate expectations. The interview was just a template for discovery; through reading and re-reading the research, alternative understandings and offering interpretations were avenues for further discovery and analysis of data.

Marshall and Rossman (2006) note, "In qualitative studies, data collection and analysis typically go hand in hand to build a coherent interpretation. The researcher is guided by initial concepts and developing understandings that she shifts or modifies as she collects and analyzes the data" (p. 156). The process outlined by Marshall and Rossman (2006) consisted of: organizing the data, immersion in the data, generating categories and themes, coding the data, offering interpretations through analytic memos, searching for alternative understandings, and

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writing the report or other format for presenting the study. For this study, the listed categories were adhered to.

RESULTS

The research findings for this study were gathered through qualitative measures. Creswell (2015) noted that a qualitative study is based upon “collecting data based on words from a small number of individuals...analyzing the data for description and themes...interpreting the larger meaning of the findings...and including the researchers’ subjective reflexivity and bias” (p. 26).

Initial contact that was made through the building principals in Southeast Michigan was not fruitful. Only seven people had contacted the researcher, to begin with initial consent. A follow-up email was again sent to principals, this time indicating that the researcher’s contact was not spam, and indeed asking for their assistance and compliance with a voluntary study. After the second follow-up email was sent, five more interested participants emerged and were followed up with by the researcher. Ultimately, with twelve possible participants, only six completed the initial consent, google survey, and scheduled a Zoom interview.

The six participants shared relevant and useful information during the interview process. Across the six interviews, some common themes emerged amongst the questions (Appendix E) that were presented. Each question that was asked to participants demonstrated similar responses and thought-provoking discussion. Additionally, some participants engaged in further discussion allowing for organic data to be collected.

From the questions that were asked, the responses are below.

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What do you believe your child should be able to demonstrate as they enter their first kindergarten year? Be as specific as possible.

Through this discussion, it was interesting to listen to different participants discuss what they believe their child should be able to do. After speaking with Participant A, they mentioned “My expectation going into kindergarten was that we would have, like, reading readiness, like, they would know letters and sounds that they would have, like, the building blocks to put it together for sure” (Participant A, personal communication, October 15, 2021). Which, as an early educator, is something to agree upon, however, early childhood education isn't standard across that board, which poses many variables for children entering kindergarten in terms of prior schema.

Common concepts had emerged such as identifying uppercase letters, shapes, and basic mathematical concepts like number recognition (even though the focus was on literacy). In addition to these concepts, it was noted “I think what they should have to do is just demonstrate a readiness to learn or a willingness to learn and an ability to retain certain concepts” (Participant D, personal communication, October 18, 2021). Children at this age, in efforts to keep up with the kindergarten pace, do need to demonstrate these early learning skills or be open to learning them. Readiness isn't just identifying concepts, as described by Dr. Dan Gartrell,

Readiness was always more complicated than that, and new brain research is helping us understand what readiness really is. Readiness doesn't mean just knowing the academic basics. It means a child has a willing attitude and confidence in the process of learning: a healthy state of mind (n.d., para 1).

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We took this important information on readiness and looked at kindergarten a little bit differently, in essence: the mindset to learn and grow.

What do you believe a kindergarten day looks like? Be as specific as possible.

When asked this question, caregivers unanimously agreed that a kindergarten day is full of structure and rigor. As noted by Participant B on what the typical day looks like:

A day in kindergarten would be like short intervals of subjects, so not an hour for math. It'd be 20 minutes for math and then move on to the next thing. Still a lot of play and imagination. So large and small motor skills are being developed, still repetitive, so they know what to expect. I think children thrive on that schedule. And also I would say a mixture of group and individual activities (personal communication, October 18, 2021).

In this instance, the caregiver understood what to expect, which helps support their child.

It's helpful to be able to discuss with the child 'what happened after math today?', 'when you ate a snack what were you doing', 'did you finish your bell work before reading', etc, to help the child remember their routines, and to help the caregiver understand the day, too. Children thrive in routine.

Children with regular routines at home have self-regulation skills, the building blocks of good mental health. When children learn to regulate feelings and behaviors, it means they are able to identify their feelings and have skills to manage those feelings so that they don't feel overwhelmed (Bocknek, 2020).

When allowed to recall and discuss their day, it assists the child to develop skills that will ultimately assist in self-regulation in their day-to-day routine of school.

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As kindergarten started for the year, these first-time kindergarten caregivers were relatively surprised at how much these children are doing in reference to their daily school tasks and the amount of work brought home. Some of these caregivers even fear that it's too much too soon. However, these first five weeks of school appear to go fast, and children typically settle in and rise to the challenges set forth.

Do you believe that your child is developmentally ready for kindergarten? Why or why not?

Upon interviewing participants, they all agreed that their child was indeed ready for kindergarten. Out of the six participants, three had previously been in a young fives program, two attended preschool and prekindergarten, and one entered kindergarten with no formal schooling, due to parents never attending preschool, and not feeling it as necessary.

One participant from a young fives program commented on maturity in their child, stating:

We've seen a lot more maturity this year than we have in years past, and just like being ready to be there all day and learn all day and actively participating and that sort of stuff we see that at home, and I can hear in the way that the day is relayed back to me that that is the case at school, too (Participant A, personal communication, October 15, 2021).

It appears that these caregivers had found success in their respective early childhood programs. Research from the First Five Years Fund suggests that “high-quality early learning and care provides the support children need to build a foundation for a healthy and productive future” (n.d., para.3). With this idea in mind, supporting caregivers in their child's first academic

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experiences and guiding them through the process could be key to the foundational structure for a strong academic future.

An important comment that another participant made was “But I feel there is some emotion with the kids that nobody's thinking about” (Participant D, personal communication, October 18, 2021). In regards to this, there are so many layers to this topic they spoke upon, and while it didn't fall into this scope of research, it was important to note. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these children have lived approximately half of their lives in what would be considered abnormal developmental conditions, much unlike their peers who were in kindergarten over three years ago. This participant held an important point for further research, in the essence that there are so many social factors that will need to be addressed with these children to gather more information in efforts to support their learning best.

Do you have concerns about your child academically as they enter kindergarten? Why or why not?

Caregivers did not appear to display concerns for their child academically entering kindergarten. Curiously, there were no specific concerns from this group sampled. Were participants possibly not wanting to share so much personal information with a stranger? The important part of those interviews is to remember that these children have yet to have, as some might refer to as a ‘normal’ year of schooling. Some caregivers expressed concern for making friends, working through social situations, and the lack of social skills; worrying that kindergarten is very academically based, where there should be a different focus.

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What areas do you feel your child is strongest? Be as specific as possible.

During this discussion, it was most interesting to hear how the caregivers interpreted their child's abilities. Through the discussions with various caregivers, multiple times it was brought up how kindergarten is "too much" or "really fast" and even "nerve-wracking", and should focus on "social skills" rather than the "fast pace of academics". However, consistently caregivers mentioned how their child is doing well and has adapted to the rigor that is the kindergarten classroom.

Outside of the understanding that Kindergarten is a fast-paced, rigor-driven environment, caregivers of these children consistently brought up that math was what their child was strongest in. This specifically is precarious, as the questions asked to caregivers were again, literacy-based.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview of the Study

This qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to further a caregiver's understanding of educational literacy, concerning their firstborn or only child entering kindergarten. After surveying seven participants and formally interviewing six of them, the following questions were answered:

1. What do you believe your child should be able to demonstrate as they enter their first kindergarten year? Be as specific as possible.
2. What do you believe a kindergarten day looks like? Be as specific as possible.
3. Do you believe that your child is developmentally ready for kindergarten? Why or why not?
4. Do you have concerns about your child academically as they enter kindergarten? Why or why not?
5. What areas do you feel your child is strongest? Be as specific as possible.

Ultimately, the objective of this research was to understand how to best support caregivers as they enter their first formal schooling experience with their child, specifically under the literacy umbrella of kindergarten.

Conclusions

From this study, a few conclusions were drawn. From the participants surveyed, caregivers have a superficial understanding of what is expected of their child upon entering kindergarten. Specifically, they were able to regurgitate information such as their child has a

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structured day, typically with center-style activities, enrichment classes, and less creative expression in comparison to earlier educational experiences. The caregivers believed that their child is capable of kindergarten expectations, they felt that they are capable of supporting their child, but had concerns about the child developing socially. Participants, during formal interviewing, repeatedly referred to mathematical concepts and how their child understood math well. However, it is important to note that the focus was on literacy expectations.

A few questions that came to mind were: “Is this [understanding of mathematical concepts] something that caregivers tend to focus on more?”, “Is it easier to teach math concepts for caregivers?”, “Do caregivers realize what early literacy skills are, and if they are engaging in them with their child?”. These are all important questions to consider when developing further opportunities for research.

Limitations

This study, from a research perspective, could have spanned across further geographical areas, and gathered similar results. It is not believed that these results are based on certain demographics or geographical specific coverage. If this was conducted over a wider diocesan range, or in a public district, more of the population would have been able to respond and arguably provided more information.

Creswell (2015) discussed, “It is typical in qualitative research to study a few individuals or a few cases. This is because the overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual” (p. 209). While this is important to note, if the opportunity were presented, it would be worthwhile to continue investigating this topic.

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In addition to the areas surveyed, recruiting participants proved to be challenging. With caregivers entering their first formal schooling experience, participants were followed up multiple times, both administrators, as well as participants that responded, to gain as many participants as possible. After beginning the journey with 12 qualifying participants, seven responded to the survey, and six of those seven followed through with the interview process.

Last, out of the participants surveyed, they represented two of three schools that the researcher personally knows the administrative team well. The effort that the administrative team put forth to recruit participants appeared to be higher than surrounding diocesan schools. While it is not believed to negatively affect the survey, perhaps a stronger relationship with surrounding diocesan administrators would have provided more recruitment.

Recommendations for Future Research

First, it would be interesting to conduct this research again following a few different avenues. For example, taking the initial survey results from a caregiver's understanding, shadowing them against the teacher's interpretation of those skills from the child. In doing so, this would paint a picture for open discussion amongst caregivers and teachers, depending on the results of the survey.

Second, as the researcher, it would be interesting again to conduct this across public sectors of education. Out of curiosity, are expectations and understanding similar amongst caregivers, if not the same, or would results speak differently on this topic? On the other hand, is education uniform enough to provide cohesiveness across all sectors of education: public, charter, private, and parochial?

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Last, this research could be adapted to gather a deeper understanding of a caregiver's understanding of the child's mathematical abilities or social constructs, especially deficits that they might be facing, or see as a challenge, due to the Covid-19 era that their child is currently growing up in.

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APPENDIX A

Email to administration

XX/XX/XXXX

Dear ADMINISTRATOR,

My name is Kathleen England and I am currently a PK-8th grade principal at St. Pius Elementary School in Southgate, Michigan. In addition to serving in this role, I am also a graduate student at Northern Michigan University. Currently, I am conducting research that focuses on caregivers' understanding of early literacy expectations and capabilities of their firstborn, or only child, entering kindergarten.

I am reaching out to administrators within the Archdioceses of Detroit to request permission to work with your incoming kindergarten families through a survey and Zoom interview. The goal of this study is to identify what caregivers believe their child is capable of concerning standards assessed within the first quarter of kindergarten.

Would it be permissible for you to email your kindergarten families with the following letter, encouraging those who meet the criteria to participate?

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

[Kathleen England](#)

Northern Michigan University, Ed.S. Candidate
kengland@nmu.edu

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APPENDIX B

Email to invitation to families

XX/XX/XXXX

Dear Kindergarten Family,

My name is Kathleen England and I am currently a PK-8th grade principal at St. Pius Elementary School in Southgate, Michigan. In addition to serving in this role, I am also a graduate student at Northern Michigan University. Currently, I am conducting research that focuses on caregivers' understanding of early literacy expectations and capabilities of their firstborn, or only child, entering kindergarten.

I have already received permission from your school principal, which is why you are receiving this letter. If you are a caregiver of a first-born child, or only child, entering kindergarten, I encourage you to please participate in this survey.

This study will allow the researcher to gain a better understanding of a caregiver's understanding of early literacy development with children entering kindergarten. The benefit of this will allow teachers to gain a better understanding of how best to support caregivers and children as they enter kindergarten.

To participate further, please contact me to move forward.

Best,
Kathleen England
Northern Michigan University, Ed.S. Candidate
kengland@nmu.edu

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APPENDIX C Informed consent

Northern Michigan University
School of Education, Leadership, and Public Service
PROJECT TITLE: caregiver's Understanding of Early Literacy
IRB Approval Number:

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the research study: This is something of interest to me to understand where the disconnect is between what families believe their child should know in regards to literacy upon entering kindergarten. This will align with expected standards within the first quarter of kindergarten.

What you will be asked to do in the study: You will be asked an interview series of questions followed by a possible recorded Zoom interview.

Time required: Approximately 15 minutes on the survey. Approximately 15-30 minutes on the Zoom interview.

Risks and Benefits: This research will allow for teachers and administrators to understand caregivers' expectations better, adjust teaching, and possibly help guide a change in later curriculum mapping. There are no foreseeable risks involved.

Incentive or Compensation: There is no other incentive for participating; therefore, you will not be adversely affected in any way if you choose not to participate.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Your information will be coded by numbers and completely unidentifiable.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence or penalty.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study: If you have any further questions regarding your rights as a participant in a research project you may contact Dr. Lisa Schade Eckert of the Human Subjects Research Review Committee of Northern Michigan University (906-227-2300) leckert@nmu.edu. Any questions you have regarding the nature of this research project will be answered by the principal researcher who can be contacted as follows: Kathleen England kengland@nmu.edu.

Agreement:

If you wish to participate in this study, please sign the form below. A signature will indicate agreement to participate.

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Participant's Name _____ (Print)

Signature _____ (Date)

I understand that I will be audio and video recorded digitally by the researcher. These files will be kept by the researcher on a password-protected computer. I understand that only the researcher will have access to these files.

Video recording of study activities Interviews may be video recorded to assist with the accuracy of your responses. You have the right to refuse the recording. Please select one of the following options: I consent to video recording: Yes _____ No _____

Audio Recording of Study Activities Interviews may be using audio recorded to assist with the accuracy of your responses. You have the right to refuse the audio recording. Please select one of the following options: I consent to audio recording: Yes _____ No _____

Photographing of study activities/participants Photographs of participants may be taken to preserve an image related to the research. You have the right to refuse to allow photographs to be taken. Please select one of the following options: I consent to photographs: Yes _____ No _____

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APPENDIX D

SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Please enter your child's date of birth. The purpose of this is to identify the child's individual skills in relation to their age and months.
2. Can your child write both their first and last name, uppercase first letter/lowercase remaining. (i.e. Kathleen England)
 - a. If no to both first and last name, please type what they are capable of, if any.
3. Can your child identify all 26 uppercase letters (sequential order/random order)?
4. Can your child identify all 26 lowercase letters (sequential order/random order)?
5. Can your child write all 26 uppercase letters (sequential order/random order)?
6. Can your child write all 26 lowercase letters (sequential order/random order)?
7. Can your child identify all 26 sounds (a, e, i, o, u; long vowels only) (sequential order/random order)?
8. Can your child rhyme with word families such as (-at, -ap, -ar, -it, -ip, -uck)
9. Can your child identify syllables, clap out syllables? (hot-dog (2), read-ing (2), Hall-o-ween (3))
10. Can your child identify beginning sounds of words (**b**at, **m**ap, **c**ar, **j**et, **p**en)
11. What is your child's experience with reading?
 - a. Nonsense reading, such as saying words while they 'read'
 - b. Nonsense reading, such as saying words that identify with the pictures on the page

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- c. Identifying beginning sounds, or familiar words on page
- d. Other

12. Can your child identify the following when asked?

- a. Front of the book?
- b. Back of the book?
- c. What the author does?
- d. What the Illustrator does?
- e. Follow text from left to right?
- f. Follow text from top to bottom?

13. Can your child

- a. Retell parts of a story, in sequential order?
- b. Recall events/people/places from a story?

14. May I contact you for more information, and a possible Zoom interview?

- a. Yes
- b. No

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APPENDIX E

1. What do you believe your child should be able to demonstrate as they enter their first kindergarten year? Be as specific as possible.
2. What do you believe a kindergarten day looks like? Be as specific as possible.
3. Do you believe that your child is developmentally ready for kindergarten? Why or why not?
4. Do you have concerns about your child academically as they enter kindergarten? Why or why not?
5. What areas do you feel your child is strongest? Be as specific as possible.

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Appendix F

Memorandum

TO: Bethney Bergh
Kathleen England
School of Education, Leadership, and Public Service
Northern Michigan University

DATE: September 22, 2021

FROM: Lisa Schade Eckert
Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

SUBJECT: **IRB Proposal HS21-1220**
IRB Approval Date 9/22/2021
Proposed Project Dates: **9/1/2021 – 8/31/2022**
“Caregiver’s Understanding of Early Literature Expectations for First Born Child Entering Kindergarten”

Your proposal “Caregiver’s Understanding of Early Literature Expectations for First Born Child Entering Kindergarten” has been approved by the NMU Institutional Review Board. Include your proposal number (HS21-1220) on all research materials and on any correspondence regarding this project.

- A. If a subject suffers an injury during research, or if there is an incident of non-compliance with IRB policies and procedures, you must take immediate action to assist the subject and notify the IRB chair (dereande@nmu.edu) and NMU’s IRB administrator (leckert@nmu.edu) within 48 hours. Additionally, you must complete an Unanticipated Problem or Adverse Event Form for Research Involving Human Subjects.

- A. Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant.

- A. If you find that modifications of investigators, methods, or procedures are necessary, you must submit a Project Modification Form for Research Involving Human Subjects before collecting data. Any changes or revisions to your approved research plan must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

Until further guidance, per CDC guidelines, the PI is responsible for obtaining signatures on the COVID-19 Researcher Agreement and Release and COVID-19 Research Participant Agreement and Release forms for any in-person research and following any COVID guidelines in their research location.

All forms can be found at the NMU Grants and Research website: <http://www.nmu.edu/grantsandresearch/node/102>