TEACHER PRACTICE SUPPORTING STUDENT SCHOOL READINESS SKILLS: A QUALITATIVE LONGITUDINAL STUDY RELATED TO COVID-19 FROM MID-2020 TO MID-2023

Eileen Manoukian[1], & Mary Barbara Trube[2]
[1]*Gem Educare/Platonium Mentoring & Coaching Consultants (USA)*
[2]*Platonium Mentoring & Coaching Consultants (USA)*

Abstract

Studies focusing on pedagogical and curricular practices of teachers during children's formative years during and following the COVID-19 pandemic are scarce. Framed by school readiness and social development theories, a qualitative 4-year longitudinal study was conducted in a metropolitan region of the western United States. A total of 10 teachers completed three semi-structured open-ended interview sessions with one researcher. The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers supported their students in developing school readiness skills during and following the outbreak of COVID-19. Sixteen teachers volunteered for the first phase of the study in 2020; 13 of the 16 teachers were participants in the second phase during 2021-2022; and 10 out of 16 teachers were participants during the third phase of the study in 2023. Criteria for recruiting volunteer participants included the following: (1) currently teaching preschool (PS)/prekindergarten (PK)/kindergarten (K) when interviews were conducted, (2) having a minimum of 3 years' experience teaching at the PS/PK/P levels during phase one, and (3) teaching in an accredited private, public, or charter school in a metropolitan area of the western United States during the 4-year span. Data were collected via one-on-one semi-structured audio-taped interviews, each lasting between 45 and 130 minutes. Data were analyzed by following an inductive process based on Saldaña's coding system. A priori codes were taken from the conceptual framework and relevant literature, which were updated during each phase of the data analysis as questions were checked for reliability and validity. Structural, descriptive, and axial coding were used to reveal patterns and categories with emerging themes. The member-checking process was followed with each participant following all phases. Findings from the longitudinal study revealed five themes that teachers (1) modified their pedagogical practices and implemented new curricula to meet their students' needs; (2) were faced with continuous challenges that arose in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, isolation, and reestablishment periods; (3) expanded roles as they advocated and collaborated with mental health and behavioral experts for student interventions; (4) created communities of practice for peer mentoring/coaching support resulting in expansion of their repertoire in pedagogy/curriculum; (5) strengthened relationships with other teachers and students' parents while engaging in parent education and co-teaching strategies. Recommendations include further research on communities of practice and collaborative practices between teachers and mental health professionals that benefit students and families.

Keywords: School readiness, COVID-19, developmental domains, co-teaching, mentoring.

1. Introduction

This study aimed to uncover how PS/PK/K teachers 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 are 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 are not known and need to be investigated (Brown et al., 2021; McNally & Slutsky, 2018; Smith & Glass, 2019) especially during and following the COVID-19 pandemic (Fufi et al., 2020; Poletti, 2020; Purtell et al., 2020).

2. 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/K teachers supported the development of school readiness skills in their students was available at the outset of this study (Brown et al., 2021; Smith & Glass, 2019; Welchons & McIntyre, 2017). School districts' restrictions during and following the pandemic have made this worse by placing limitations on the PS/PK/K programs, which made it imperative that teachers support students in making a transition to formal schooling (Franchino, 2020; Holod, 2020). During and following the COVID-19 pandemic and its variants, researchers of this study set out to investigate how PS/PK/K teachers fostered their students' school readiness for formal education.

2.1. Research Questions

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)?

3. Review of the literature

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.

3.1. 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).

3.2. 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 (related to COVID-19).

4. Methodology

A 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. Interview data from a total of 16 teachers were collected; 10 teachers were volunteer participants throughout the duration of the study. 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).

4.1. 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.

4.2. 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).

4.3. 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.

4.4. 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 et al., 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.

5. 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.

5.1. 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 social-emotional skills because of isolation. Teachers created more opportunities for students to work with other students even within the 6 feet distance. During phase three, teachers mentioned that students were less ready for school than before the pandemic. 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.

5.2. 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 using the teaching tools by taking turns while attending to student and parent fears and individual needs. They helped parents with 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.

5.3. Teachers' roles expanded as they advocated for children and collaborated with mental health and behavioral experts (school psychologists and counselors) for interventions 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 paranoia and overprotective behavior of parents. 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.

5.4. 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.

5.5. 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.

References

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design.* Harvard University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1989). Ecological systems theory. *Annals of Child Development*, *6*, 187-249.

Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Rance, N. (2017). How to use thematic analysis with interview data. In A. Vossler, & N. Moller (Eds.) *The counselling and psychotherapy research handbook* (pp. 183-197). SAGE Publications.

Brown, C. P., Englehardt, J., Barry, D. P., & Ku, D. H. (2018). Examining how stakeholders at the local, state, and national levels made sense of the changed kindergarten. *American Educational Research Journal, 56*(3), 822-867.

Cadima, J., Doumen, S., Verschueren, K., & Buyse, E. (2015). Child engagement in the transition to school: Contributions of self-regulation, teacher–child relationships and classroom climate. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 32*, 1-12.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. (2017). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed). Sage Publishing.

Demirbaga, K. K. (2018). A comparative analysis: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Montessori's Theory. *Annual Review of Education, Communication & Language Sciences, 15*, 113-126.

Downer, J. T., Goble, P., Myers, S. S., & Pianta, R. C. (2016). Teacher-child racial/ethnic match within pre-kindergarten classrooms and children's early school adjustment. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *37*, 26-38.

Eun, B. (2017). The zone of proximal development as an overarching concept: A framework for synthesizing Vygotsky's theories. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *51*(1), 18-30.

Franchino, E. (2020, September 14). *Kindergarten entry assessments during COVID-19: How are states adapting?* Message posted to https://www.newamerica.org/

Fufi, E. F., Negassa, T., Melaku, R., & Mergo, R. (2020). Impact of corona pandemic on educational undertakings and possible breakthrough mechanisms. *BizEcons Quarterly*, *11*, 3-14.

Holod, A. (2020). *Three ways early childhood educators can support young children and their caregivers during the COVID-19 health crisis.* Message posted to https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/

McNally, S., & Slutsky, R. (2018) Teacher–child relationships make all the difference: Constructing quality interactions in early childhood settings. *Early Child Development and Care, 188*(5), 508-523.

Pianta, R., Hamre, B., Downer, J., Burchinal, M., Williford, A., Locasale-Crouch, J., Scott-Little, C. (2017). Early childhood professional development: Coaching and coursework effects on indicators of children's school readiness. *Early Education and Development*, *28*(8), 956-975.

Poletti, M. (2020). Hey teachers! Do not leave them kids alone! Envisioning schools during and after the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. *Trends in Neuroscience and Education*, *20*.

Purtell, K. M., Valauri, A., Rhoad-Drogalis, A., Jiang, H., Justice, L. M., Lin, T., & Logan, J. A. (2020). Understanding policies and practices that support successful transitions to kindergarten. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 52*, 5-14.

Saldaña, J. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage Publishing.

Smith, N., & Glass, W. (2019). Ready or not? Teachers' perceptions of young children's school readiness. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, *17*(4), 329-346.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1962). *Thought and language*. MIT Press.

Winter, S. M., & Kelley, M. F. (2008). Forty years of school readiness research: What have we learned? *Childhood Education, 84*(5), 260-266.