

Early Childhood Education Today: Kindergarten Teachers' Beliefs, Practices, and Influences

by

Leanne LeGodais Lloyd

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Approved by

Angela Love, Chair, Associate Professor of Curriculum and Teaching
Joni Lakin, Assistant Professor of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Technology
Paris Strom, Professor of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Technology

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the face of early childhood education in today's world of education. The study examined kindergarten teachers' perspectives on (a) how young children should be taught, (b) the reality of how kindergarten teachers are actually able to teach, and (c) current influences on their ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered. The study took place in three school districts in the southeast United States where 84 teachers completed the Kindergarten Teacher Survey. Descriptive statistics paint a clearer picture for the changing purpose of kindergarten in today's educational system.

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CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Introduction

The face of early childhood education is dramatically changing within a world of high-stakes, standardized testing (Goldstein, 2007; Stipek, 2006). Mandates stemming from educational policy, including accountability measures, do not directly affect early childhood classrooms; however, indirect impacts of the legislation are greatly shifting the dynamics and principles of teaching and learning in early childhood classrooms across America. Pressure to increase mastery in academic skills may lead teachers to neglect the physical, social, and emotional developmental domains so crucial to the development of the whole child (Stipek, 2006). Additionally, teachers wonder how to balance the emphasis on academic skills in an engaging and interactive way that fosters the love of learning within each student. According to Stipek (2006), drill and skill activities such as “whole-group instruction, rigid pacing, and repetitive, decontextualized tasks” (p. 741) are often associated with the faster-is-better, high-stakes world of education. In contrast to drill and skill, the early childhood community believes in capitalizing on the young child’s natural curiosity to learn, enhancing the internal motivation of the child to discover their surrounding world through integrated, meaningful, and purposeful learning experiences.

Current research supports the changing dynamics of early childhood classrooms as teachers face heavy academic pressure (Brown, 2009; Cress, 2004; Gallant, 2009; Goldstein 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b; Graue, 2008; Passman, 2001; Quin & Ethridge, 2006; Rushton &

Juolo-Rushton, 2008; Stipek, 2006a, 2006b; Stipek & Byler, 1997; Williamson, Bondy, Langley, Mayne, 2005; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). However, quantitative research on kindergarten teachers' viewpoints on the changing philosophy and faster-is-better approach to teaching and learning is limited to two studies conducted in Vermont and Michigan (Gehsmann, Woodside-Jiron, & Gallant, 2005; Lipson, Goldhaber, Daniels, & Sortino, 1994). In order to address a gap in the literature, a study was conducted that examined kindergarten teachers' perspectives on (a) how young children should be taught, (b) the reality of how kindergarten teachers are actually able to teach, and (c) current influences on their ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered across three school districts in Georgia.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the face of early childhood education in today's world of education. Federal mandates, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), place a high emphasis on academic accountability, high-stakes testing, and standardization. How are early childhood educators dealing with these recent trends when working with young children? Are early childhood teachers' instructional practices child-centered or have they succumbed to the outside pressure of the faster-is-better motif? How do early childhood teachers today feel children learn best? And, what are the long term implications of academic accountability at the early childhood level? Many unanswered questions face early childhood professionals. The aim of the research is to reveal kindergarten teachers' perspectives on (a) how young children should be taught, (b) the reality of how kindergarten teachers are actually able to teach, and (c) current influences on their ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered across three school districts in Georgia.

Statement of the Problem

As early childhood education becomes a part of the United States' formal schooling process, changes in curriculum and instruction are inevitable. It is important for early childhood professionals to become aware of such changes and their effect on young children's growth and development. A heavy academic focus, as opposed to nourishing the whole child, is a result of recent policy and legislation. Oftentimes pressure to perform academically outweighs the early childhood philosophy of social constructivism when faced with district, state, and federal pressure. By conducting research that revealed teachers' perceptions of the reality of the kindergarten classroom in Georgia, a clearer picture of today's kindergartens was exposed. The results informed policy makers, leaders in education, and early childhood professionals about kindergarten teachers' perspectives on (a) how young children should be taught, (b) the reality of how kindergarten teachers are actually able to teach, and (c) current influences on their ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered. The results are also reported through manuscripts ready for publication in peer-reviewed scholarly journals. The researcher provided executive summaries to the superintendents of the three participating school districts.

Research Questions

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What are current kindergarten teachers' perspectives on how young children learn?
 - a. How do current kindergarten teachers in the three school districts in Georgia believe kindergarten children learn and should be taught?

- b. If under no curriculum or policy restrictions from the school, system, or state, would kindergarten teachers want to implement child-centered literacy instructional strategies or teacher-directed literacy instructional strategies?
2. How are kindergarten teachers actually teaching?
 - a. Are current kindergarten teachers able to teach the way they believe kindergarten children learn and should be taught?
 - b. Do current kindergarten teachers in the three school districts in Georgia actually implement child-centered literacy instructional strategies or teacher-directed literacy instructional strategies?
3. What currently influences kindergarten teachers' ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered?
 - a. What enables/prevents current kindergarten teachers to teach the way they believe kindergarten children learn/ should be taught?
 - b. How autonomous are current kindergarten teachers in the three school districts in Georgia when implementing curriculum?
 - c. What influences teacher autonomy when implementing curriculum?
 - d. What are the major issues confronting kindergarten teachers today?

Hypotheses

Through surveying kindergarten teachers in three school districts in Georgia, the following findings are expected from a descriptive analysis:

1. Current kindergarten teachers believe that young children learn best when taught through child-centered instruction.

- a. Current kindergarten teachers in the three school districts in Georgia believe kindergarten children learn/ should be taught through child-centered instruction.
 - b. If under no curriculum or policy restrictions from the school, system, or state, kindergarten teachers would want to implement child-centered literacy instructional strategies.
2. Current kindergarten teachers are actually teaching children in a teacher-directed manner.
- a. Current kindergarten teachers are unable to teach the way they believe kindergarten children learn and should be taught.
 - b. Kindergarten teachers in the three school districts in Georgia actually implement teacher-directed literacy instructional strategies.
3. Current influences on kindergarten teachers' ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered include issues related to administration, children, educational practice, colleague influences, professional preparation, and educational policy.
- a. Outside influences such as administration and educational policy enables or prevents current kindergarten teachers to teach the way they believe kindergarten children learn and should be taught.
 - b. Current kindergarten teachers in the three school districts in Georgia lack autonomy when implementing curriculum.

- c. Current influences affecting teacher autonomy when implementing curriculum include issues related to administration, children, educational practice, colleague influences, professional preparation, and educational policy.
- d. Major issues confronting kindergarten teachers today include administration and educational policy.

Definitions

Child-Centered Instruction – According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, understanding child development in general, the development of each child specifically, and the cultural and social influences on each child is imperative when planning developmentally appropriate instruction (NAEYC, 2009). Each learning domain, physical, social, emotional, and cognitive, is important to child development and each learning domain is closely related. Young children learn best through authentic, meaningful, and purposeful learning experiences guided by responsive adults, as the experiences of the young child mold their growth and development.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) – No Child Left Behind “is the federal government’s answer to this school-readiness dilemma, concentrating on accountability at all levels of education, from preschool through graduation” (DellaMattera, 2010, p. 36). NCLB emphasis school readiness through accountability measures such as high-stakes testing and aligned academic learning standards.

Social Constructivism – Constructivism emphasizes the belief that children construct their own knowledge through interactions with the environment and others and “do not passively reproduce what is presented to them” (Bodrova & Leong, 2007, p. 9).

Teacher-Directed Instruction – Teacher-directed instruction emphasizes mastery of basic skills through the medium of structured tasks, practice, and repetition (Stipek & Byler, 1997).

Assumptions of the Study

The researcher made the following assumptions relative to this study:

- The participant population was composed of only kindergarten teachers.
- The participant population responded accurately to survey questions.
- Survey questions were stated in a clear, unambiguous manner.
- The survey participants represented their perspectives accurately if they interpreted the questions clearly.

Significance of the Study

The study is significant because it adds to the current body of research that supports bringing awareness to the changing dynamics of early childhood classrooms as teachers face heavy academic pressure stemming from policy changes and recent legislation (Brown, 2009; Cress, 2004; Gallant, 2009; Goldstein 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b; Graue, 2008; Passman, 2001; Quin & Ethridge, 2006; Rushton & Juolo-Rushton, 2008; Stipek, 2006a, 2006b; Stipek & Byler, 1997; Williamson, Bondy, Langley, & Mayne, 2005; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). However, quantitative research on kindergarten teachers' viewpoints on the changing philosophy and faster-is-better approach to teaching and learning is limited to two studies conducted in Vermont and Michigan (Gehsmann, Woodside-Jiron, & Gallant, 2005; Lipson, Goldhaber, Daniels, & Sortino, 1994). In order to address a gap in the literature, the researcher conducted a study that examined kindergarten teachers' perspectives on (a) how young children should be taught, (b) the reality of how kindergarten teachers are actually able to teach, and (c) current

influences on their ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered across three school districts in Georgia. Findings add significantly to the current literature and wide-spread discussion on teachers' perspectives of the changing face of early childhood education under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) that has not yet been studied systematically in Georgia.

Limitations of the Study

The study examining kindergarten teachers' perspectives on (a) how young children should be taught, (b) the reality of how kindergarten teachers are actually able to teach, and (c) current influences on their ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered across three school districts in Georgia was limited in the many ways. First, the study relied solely on the method of self-report. In self-report, participants may exaggerate or neglect to report. The study also utilized convenience sampling that limited the generalizations that can be made toward a larger population. The time allotted to collect the data is another factor that limited the study. In two school districts, there was a two-week period allotted to the participant population for survey response online with a week follow-up period. During the week follow-up period, a hard-copy of the survey was delivered to each school so that the teachers could choose whether to complete the survey online or with paper and pencil. In the third school district, the researcher attended a county-wide kindergarten meeting where surveys were passed out to the teachers. The teachers were not allowed to complete the survey at the meeting; they were asked to complete and return the survey within one week. Finally, the utilization of technology to administer and collect surveys may limit the participant populations' responses as some kindergarten teachers may have been less likely to respond to the survey via the internet.

CHAPTER TWO. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theoretical Framework

The face of early childhood education is dramatically changing within a world of high-stakes, standardized testing (Goldstein, 2007b; Stipek, 2006a). “How the current period of high-stakes testing and accountability is transforming the nature of schooling in the United States is at the forefront of educational criticism and debate” (Gallant, 2009, p. 204). Mandates stemming from educational policy, including accountability measures, do not directly affect early childhood classrooms; however, indirect impacts of the legislation are greatly shifting the dynamics and principles of teaching and learning in early childhood classrooms across America. Pressure to increase mastery in academic skills may lead teachers to neglect the physical, social, and emotional developmental domains so crucial to the development of the whole child (Stipek, 2006a). Additionally, teachers wonder how to balance the emphasis on academic skills in an engaging and interactive way that fosters the love of learning within each student.

According to Stipek (2006a), drill and skill activities such as “whole-group instruction, rigid pacing, and repetitive, decontextualized tasks” (p. 741) are often associated with the faster-is-better, high-stakes world of education. In contrast to drill and skill, the early childhood community believes in capitalizing on the young child’s natural curiosity to learn, enhancing the internal motivation of the child to discover their surrounding world through integrated, meaningful, and purposeful learning experiences. Are teachers implementing the constructivist philosophy of early childhood education in the current standards-based and data-driven world of

education? And if so, how are they able to implement a child-centered curriculum amidst a skill-driven educational system? The following literature defines child-centered and teacher-centered instructional implications, research on the influence of administration and district mandates, and recent legislation's emphasis on academic gains.

Teacher-Centered Curriculum

The academic emphasis and faster-is-better motif of our nation's education policy makers lead early childhood teachers to implement instructional methods in order to explicitly teach reading and writing skills (Gallant, 2009). These explicit teaching strategies replace the integrated, play-based teaching strategies of the past. Teacher-directed instruction emphasizes mastery of basic skills through the medium of structured tasks, practice, and repetition (Stipek & Byler, 1997). Teacher directed instruction is associated with learning theory. In learning theory, knowledge is

transmitted according to the principles of repetition and reinforcement. Learning occurs when children repeat appropriate responses to teacher-produced stimuli, and is facilitated by breaking tasks and responses into discrete, carefully sequenced units. Errors must be corrected to keep children from learning incorrect responses. (p. 306)

Learning theory opposes constructivism in that constructivist theorist such as Piaget and Vygotsky believed that children construct learning from within through their interactions with the environment and others. The majority of early childhood professionals support the theory of constructivism. However, there is debate between developmentally appropriate, child-centered practices and drill and skill, teacher-directed learning (Gallant, 2009).

District-mandated, teacher-centered curriculum limits the promotion of higher order thinking (Miller et al., 2009; Wohlgend, 2008). Children become more concerned with

following conventions than being able to solve problems independently. For example, writing instruction in today's early childhood classrooms now may emphasize mastery of standards instead of writing with an authentic purpose. Children sense pressure from adults to be conventionally correct causing them to become unwilling to take risks. "Programs that stress correct usage of mechanics and limit children's writing to narrowed prompts or patterned fill-in-the-blank assignments stunts writing" (Wohlwend, 2008, p. 47). On the contrast, teachers who employ child-centered and developmentally appropriate practices in teaching writing, such as inventive spelling and scaffolded writing, allow children to connect new information to existing schema through non-threatening, supportive, and encouraging teaching strategies (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Strickland et al., 2004).

Constructivist teachers in early childhood understand the authentic intentionality that is needed in helping children to learn to write (Wohlend, 2008). In the past, young child were excited and confident about their ability to write with a purpose, but now they are afraid to compose much more than words that they can copy from around the room. A paradigm shift must occur in the teacher's ability to manipulate mandates and teaching strategies in order to "restore a balance between social convention and personal intention in early literacy" (p. 47). Katz (2009) suggests the idea that when using homogeneous treatments with a group of diverse learners, heterogeneous results are sure to come. How can schools foster learning when children are afraid to take risks in the classroom because policy makers believe moving everyone along the same exact continuum is best?

Child-Centered Curriculum

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) provides guidelines for professionals working with young children (NAEYC, 2009). "Children are

thinking, moving, feeling, and interacting human beings. To teach them well involves considering and fostering their development and learning in all domains” (p. 11). Through their interactions with the world and with others, children construct knowledge from within. This practice juxtaposes the drill and skill, worksheet-driven classroom where children are often times isolated and working quietly. Instead, NAEYC believes basic skills should be taught through authentic, meaningful, and purposeful activities. Child-centered classrooms refer to those classrooms that implement the NAEYC guidelines stated above.

In an unpublished dissertation, Karnafel (as cited in Stipek & Byler, 1997) compared four kindergarten teachers. Two of the teachers believed in teacher-directed instruction while the other two believed in child-centered instruction. Through the ethnographic study, Karnafel found that the teachers had fundamentally different goals in teaching. The teacher-directed teachers believed in their responsibility to prepare the young children for the academic demands of first grade. The child-centered teachers believed in their responsibility to enable children to become independent problem-solvers, self-confident in their ability to learn.

Stipek and Byler (1997) found in a study among 60 pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade teachers that many were forced to implement a program that was too academic and structured than they believe to be appropriate. School and state mandates and policies along with parental pressure were noted as sources of pressure for an academic focus. A closer look at child-centered practices that meet the needs of all learners is needed to relieve the pressure for academic achievement.

Lipson et al. (1994) (as cited in Gallant, 2009) surveyed 500 kindergarten teachers and found that teachers “felt the emphasis in kindergarten should be play, affective development, and activities selected by the children” (p. 205). The teachers surveyed emphasized exploratory play

contrasting to the 14% that believed formal reading instruction should begin in kindergarten. Twenty years later, a follow up survey that reflected the current state and trends in education was provided to kindergarten teachers in Vermont and Michigan. Results from this follow-up study revealed that “the push to influence instruction through standards, assessment, and grade level expectations is changing the kindergarten experience for students and teachers” (p. 206). Among many notable changes, the 2.6% of teachers, in 1994, who believed seatwork to be appropriate grew to 46% of teachers, two decades later, reporting the use of phonics workbooks. Teachers are moving away from child-centered practices and implementing skill-focused, standards-driven curriculums. Further, survey questions revealed an overwhelming 40% of teachers lack autonomy in making instructional decisions. This contrasts to the 95% of teacher in the 1992 study that felt completely autonomous in programmatic and curricular implementations. Many teachers commented on the “tension between curricular changes and developmentally appropriate practices” (p. 213). It is time to begin thinking about the long-term consequences of pushing children too fast, as they will shape the future of our nation.

The Project Approach

What can early childhood teachers embrace that will allow them to remain child-centered in a standards-driven educational system? Some suggest teachers must learn how to manipulate the standard to the child and not the child to the standard (Mitchell, Foulger, Wetzel, & Rathkey, 2009; Quinn & Ethridge, 2006). In order to combat this one-mold-fits-all approach to education, early childhood educators must embrace a philosophy of education that best serves young children and the way young children learn. A child-centered, inquiry-based, interest-driven approach to education will intrinsically motivate children to become life-long learners (Mitchell, Foulger, Wetzel, & Rathkey, 2009). Through the project approach, “young children learn basic

skills within the context of meaningful learning activities as opposed to rote drill and practice” (Hertzog, 2007). The project approach is a developmentally appropriate practice because teachers can implement projects in a way that fits the young child’s development, according to both their chronological age and developmental stage as well as to their cultural background (Charlesworth et al., 1993).

The project approach is not a new approach to early childhood education; in fact, the project approach is closely aligned with Dewey’s Progressive Education Movement from the early 1900’s and his beliefs about how young children learn (Helm & Katz, 2001; Herzog, 2007; Souto-Manning & Lee, 2005). Dewey and others involved in the Progressive Education Movement believed that the purpose for education was not to prepare children for life, but that education is life itself (Souto-Manning & Lee, 2005). They believed that children learn best through authentic experiences and that these experiences must come from the interest of the child. The teacher’s role is to facilitate and guide student learning, not to deposit basic information and skills into children’s heads as they sit passively. Children must be active and engaged in order to construct knowledge from the inside (Kim & Darling, 2009).

According to Katz and Chard (as cited in Souto-Manning & Lee, 2005) “a project can be defined as an in-depth investigation of a topic in which ‘children’s ideas, questions, theories, predictions, and interests are major determinants of the experiences provided and the work accomplished’” (p. 8). In the project approach, the teacher observes children’s natural curiosities and interests into the world (Beneke & Ostrosky, 2009; Souto-Manning & Lee 2005). Project topics emerge from these observations of student interest. Projects typically follow a three phase process (Mitchell, Foulger, Wetzel, & Rathkey 2009). First, topics of interest emerge and prior knowledge discussions follow. Second, students research and investigate from first-hand sources

questions and inquiries that stem from their natural curiosity. The final phase culminates the study in a way that allows the students to share with others the knowledge they gained through the project experience. Through the project approach, student interest drives the learning experience. Children are intrinsically motivated to take responsibility for their learning endeavors; the project approach “challenge[s] them to elicit their full potential” (Souto-Manning & Lee 2005, p. 536). Projects also result in increased student self-efficacy, autonomy, and regulation.

The Reggio Emilia approach incorporates child-led learning through the use of projects into the heart of their philosophy (Kim & Darling, 2009; Maynard & Chicken, 2010; Mitchell, Foulger, Wetzel, & Rathkey, 2009). Kim and Darling (2009) state the four basic principles that guide the Reggio Emilia approach include the “image of the child, negotiated learning, documentation, and social relationships” (p. 138). In Reggio Emilia, children are viewed as naturally curious, competent, and fully capable of discovering truths through hands-on experimentation and research. Projects take children on a journey of learning rather than to a direct pre-determined objective (Maynard & Chicken, 2010). Through projects, the valued image of the child is manifested as teachers work as co-investigators rather than dispensers of knowledge.

Example of a Project Implementation

A case study was conducted as two first grade teachers attempted to change their instructional methods from a teacher-centered classroom to a child-centered project approach (Hertzog, 2007). A study conducted by Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, and Bradley (2002) found that

settings high on child-centered aspects of the classroom were notable for the teacher allowing children some freedom and choice, the absence of negativity among peers or between adults and children, and the presence of a positive, supportive emotional tone to interactions. (p. 236)

To begin the project, the two first grade teachers were given the opportunity to attend a weekend workshop presented by Katz and Chard (Hertzog, 2007). They also received ongoing professional development by remaining in continual conversation with the researcher/facilitator. This constant conversing with an expert is needed in order to sustain insight gained from professional conferences. Approximately 90% of the school's student population came from low-income families and the school came very close to being put on the state's watch list as a failing school. Data were collected through observations, student work samples, interviews, lesson plans, and student materials. The researcher observed the classrooms 74 times, staying an average of 60 minutes each visit. "Data were chunked, analyzed, and categorized throughout the study. Twenty-five coding themes were categorized into salient themes that were reflected in the discussion and implications sections" (p. 544). According to Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Hertzog, 2007) prolonged engagement, triangulation, and persistent observation are means of establishing credibility in qualitative research.

One teacher implemented one project on *seeds* and another on *chicks*. The second teacher implemented one project on *seeds* and the other on the *pond*. With the project on seeds, the teacher first had students brainstorm what they know about seeds. She then had them draw their memories of seeds. A survey was sent home to parents to collect and send in seeds that they find in and around their homes. Students estimated how many seeds would be in their apples, and the teachers posed questions such as, if your apple is bigger, will it have more seeds

or fewer seeds? Students also planted seeds and the teacher asked questions such as, why is the grass in the closet not green? Students responded with answers including vocabulary such as chlorophyll, stigma, and shoots. While aspects of the two teachers' experiences are very positive, they also came across some obstacles along the way.

The two teachers ran into some barriers as they attempted to implement the project approach. Their low socio-economic student population made it difficult to implement all of the strategies of the project approach. Working in small groups was difficult for one of the teachers because she had trouble keeping the other 19 engaged in independent activities. Also, the age of the children made it difficult for them to research on their own as many were not independent readers and writers. Another barrier that was posed was the behavior management system the district had in place. The district-wide policy was based on rewards and punishments, a behavioral system that does not promote project work goals of intrinsic motivation and autonomy. Projects also require more time to prepare; serving as a facilitator is different than serving as the dispenser of knowledge. While acknowledging the barriers these teachers faced is crucial, it is also important to examine the benefits that they found.

The two teachers found several benefits in adopting the project approach. Student engagement was drastically enhanced; when writing about field trips and guest speakers, students wanted to continue writing for a period much longer than the teacher anticipated. Also, during project work, student's behavior improved and motivation increased.

As a result of this study, the school decided to adopt a school-wide project based approach to teaching and learning. "Research supports better long-term results for students who are active learners, have choices about their own learning, and who become socially competent

in their early years” (p. 559). The school aims to improve achievement for all students, not only for the short term, but most importantly, the long term.

While early childhood teachers claim to believe in child-centered approaches, often times what they believe in is not what they practice. As one particular first-grade teacher was assembling a packet of Thanksgiving worksheets, she claimed that she was not a worksheet teacher and then laughed at the hypocrisy behind her statement (Hertzog, 2007). Also, Maynard and Chicken (2010) found that “while in the seminars [teachers] maintained their commitment to traditional ‘child-centered’ values, [and] many teachers became aware that the activities they devised and the pedagogical approaches they implemented were not consistent with these values” (p. 36). Teachers believe in the unique qualities of early childhood that instill a desire to learn in young children, but somehow have trouble implementing those practices. Supporting child-led learning and setting up experiences for children is much more difficult than presenting children with information. Matching early childhood educational philosophy to actual teaching methods in the present day standards-driven world of education is an area of need in future research.

The Whole Child

Contrary to what many believe, in order to meet higher academic standards, early childhood professionals must become more concerned with the nonacademic side of development (Stipek, 2006a). “The American Academy of Pediatrics issued a report saying that play is essential for children’s healthy development” (Jacobson, 2008). However, forms of play are being eliminated from the structured school day and workbooks and worksheets are taking its place (Gallant, 2009; Jacobson, 2008).

Recent brain research supports the use of constructivist practices within the classroom (Rushton & Juola-Rushton, 2008). Both brain research and the constructivist theory promote the use of child-centered instructional practices for several reasons.

For example, learning environments that provide student choice and empowerment of students, created through the utilization of hands-on, differentiated instruction also children to be actively responsible for their learning, thus engaging several areas of the brain simultaneously. Such environments aid in the development of neurons, thickening the myelination sheaf and stimulating serotonin and other neurochemicals which enhance the child's well-being. (p. 88)

While those unqualified in early childhood and brain-based research may view the activity in a child-centered classroom as unorganized chaos, or play, early childhood professionals recognize the value of such experiences for both the short and long-term benefit of the child. Deeper synaptic connections in the brain are made through a curriculum that meets the needs of the child across all developmental domains.

According to Clements (as cited in Santa, 2007), forty percent of schools are limiting recess in order for children to focus on academic subjects. Approximately 20% of schools have reduced the amount of time children spend at recess by 50 minutes a week to allow for more instructional time in the classroom (Ramstetter, Murray, & Gardner, 2010). Benchmark testing, data-driven district pressure, and state academic mandates drive teachers to focus their attention toward structured classroom lessons rather than spontaneous learning that occurs beyond the confines of the classroom (Ramstetter, Murray, & Gardner, 2010; Santa, 2007; Vygotsky, 1962/1986).

There are many benefits of recess that include but are not limited to increased attention to academic tasks, development of social skills, and physical health (Santa, 2007). Cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development occurs within children at recess; recess promotes the development of the whole child (Ramstetter, Murray, & Gardner, 2010). Also, while physical education compliments recess, it should not become an alternate for recess. Recess is an unstructured time that allows for spontaneous, creative, active play. Taking recess away for reasons such as increasing academic time or punishing inappropriate behavior “deprives students of the health benefits important to their well-being” (p.518). Recess is as essential to school and child development as any core academic subject.

Because of the pressure many schools and districts face, not only is recess time being eliminated, but physical education time is decreasing as well. Chomitz et al. (2009) note “14% of school districts report decreasing PE time to accommodate more math and English” (p. 31). However, with aroused public attention directed toward the trend in childhood obesity, more people are showing concern toward these diminishing statistics. A recent study examined whether student achievement on a standardized test can be associated with achievement on a standardized physical fitness test. Using a group of fourth through eighth grade urban public school children during the 2004–2005 school-year, state assessment data in math and English combined with a fitness achievement variable comprised the data for the analysis.

Multivariate logistic regression models were constructed to evaluate the strength of the association between the fitness achievement and the odds of a passing score on the Math and English MCAS tests after controlling for gender, SES, weight status, grade, and ethnicity (p. 32).

The results from the data analysis showed a strong relationship between the academic achievement on the math and English state standardized test and the physical fitness test. The physical fitness test included five elements: flexibility, cardiovascular shape, agility abdominal shape, and upper body strength. Possible theories for the relationship between academic achievement and physical fitness achievement include: highly motivated students are competitive academically and physically, positive mental health may come from physical activity, good health may increase academic achievement, physical activity may increase attention in class, cognitive functions are affected by physical activity, and physical activity may eliminate undesired classroom behaviors. In order to increase student achievement and well-being, an increase in physical activity time is imperative.

Current research links physical activity to student achievement. Also, early childhood educators continue to believe in the importance of educating the whole child. To deprive children of an opportunity to play spontaneously outdoors may inhibit their cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development. More research is needed to combat the current academic pressure faced by administrators and teachers so that fear of inadequate test scores can be replaced by a belief in healthy, well-rounded children. Vivian Paley stated, as cited in Jacobson (2008), “It is the teachers themselves and the parents who are understanding and recognizing the pendulum has gone too far” (p. 1). Early childhood educators are called to advocate for the children of today in order to develop world leaders of tomorrow.

Teachers as Professionals

Child-centered curriculum emphasizes experiences that are integrated and authentic. Scripted instructional material does not meet the needs of each individual student because

variance from the curriculum jeopardizes the fidelity associated with its implementation (Stipek, 2006a).

While standards are in place, it is still possible for teachers to teach authentically while simultaneously covering mandated academics; however, Wills and Sandholtz (2009) coin this “constrained professionalism.” In Goldstein’s study in 2007b, she found that collaboration among teachers and professionals may increase the potential of remaining unscripted and dedicated to best teaching practices. “The goal would not be to standardize curriculum practices but to maintain uniformly high levels of intellectual integrity and richness in all classrooms. These conversations could enhance teachers’ decision-making abilities rather than squash them” (Goldstein, 2007b, p. 461). Most educators in the field of early childhood desire continual growth as educators; however, the one-mold-fits-all approach is not the direction that is best for young children.

School districts may provide detailed daily lesson plans for teachers to follow. These lesson plans address all academic standards and serve as scripts for teachers to employ to ensure that they cover all mandated content. At the school where Goldstein (2007b) conducted her qualitative study, the district adopted Instructional Planning Guides (IPGs). The use of IPGs may benefit the novice teachers as a supplementary resource, but it diminishes the perception of the teacher as a professional who is well qualified to make curricular decisions to benefit the unique needs of the students in individual classrooms. Through data collection, the researcher found that some teachers do not follow the IPGs as intensely as they were designed. They may glance at the documents weekly to see what standards the district suggests that they cover, but then they put the paper down in order to meet students at their current level. Other teachers modify the IPGs plans. For example, they may change the order that literature is presented in a

reading series. Also, if IPGs designate science materials that are not appropriate, teachers may disregard the methods section of the document and teach the standards in a more appropriate manner.

“The extant literature recognizes that restricting teacher autonomy undermines good teaching, has negative impacts on student learning, and decreases school effectiveness” (Goldstien, 2007b, p. 473). Teachers are professionals who can make educated decisions in regards to meeting the needs of the children in their classroom. In upper-middle class schools where test scores in upper elementary grades exceed state expectations, principals are open to teacher autonomy. If officials from the district were to approach the school and question the freedom of the teachers’ instructional methods, the principal would simply show test scores in defense. However, if hindering teacher autonomy decreases school performance, then what about those schools that house the at-risk students? “Teaching high-needs students requires more teacher flexibility and more room for creative problem solving for a variety of reasons” (p. 474). Teacher independence and professionalism should not be condemned in lower performing schools; it may be the missing quality that hinders those schools from producing higher student performance levels.

There are some kindergarten teachers that are remaining child-centered throughout this time of state and district mandates of standardization (Cress 2004; Paris & Lung, 2008). Paris and Lung (2008) determined that there are four distinct qualities found in those teachers who exemplify best teaching methodologies despite the pressure from higher officials. First, teachers who are autonomous in their decision making abilities are more likely to foster child-centered classrooms. Autonomous teachers make decisions based on professional knowledge and they are less willing to practice a teaching strategy that they do not believe is best for young children.

Second, self-efficacy can be described as a teacher's belief in herself to conquer prevalent challenges. The teacher believes in their ability to problem solve because they have been resourceful in past challenging experiences. The final two teacher characteristics that Paris and Lung (2008) outline are intentionality and reflectivity. Teachers who are intentional believe that everything they do is for a purpose. Their intentional actions are in line with their philosophy of education. Reflective teachers are continually thinking about their "purposes, values, and actions" (p. 265). Teacher preparation programs should aim to foster the skills of teacher autonomy, efficacy, intentions in actions, and reflective practices. These personal attributes may help novice teachers to affectively combat external pressure to practice standardization in a classroom full of individuals.

Middle Ground

Kindergarten teachers are faced with the demands of teaching state-mandated academic standards but are obligated to the early childhood profession to teach students in a way that is developmentally appropriate for the young learner. A shift in educational reform turns kindergarten instruction from child-centered activities to content-driven activities (Graue, 2008). Goldstein (2007b) found that stakeholders, policy makers, administrators, and parents do not know the value in teaching young children in developmentally appropriate ways; therefore, they encourage more traditional, inappropriate methods of teaching in kindergarten. They believe that the young child learns in the same way as the older child. Also, districts adopt teacher-centered curriculum series which limit the teacher's ability to let child interest drive the curriculum. Through a qualitative study, Goldstein (2007b) found several strategies that kindergarten teachers may utilize in order to bring the worlds of standards-based learning and

developmentally appropriate teaching practices together. Those strategies include integration, demarcation, and acquiescence.

Through integration, teachers can examine state standards and district curriculum maps but supplement the learning objectives with hands-on interactive materials. For example, a kindergarten teacher in Texas teaches math through math center games. The games teach the academic standards, but in an individualized developmentally appropriate manner. Some children may follow the center game rules extensively, but others may create those meaningful experiences for themselves simply with the material and procedures established by the teacher. All children are engaged in meaningful experiences and meeting their individualized but standardized learning objectives. This teaching strategy appears simple, but actually requires “detailed knowledge of the standards, a storehouse of ideas for learning activities, and a wealth of personal practical knowledge to bring to bear on the process of synthesis” (Goldstein, 2007b, p. 390). Also, administrators must support deviating from the scripted curriculum material provided by the district and trust the kindergarten teacher’s professional ability to teach independently.

Through demarcation, kindergarten teachers are able to teach both state mandated academic standards and allow for developmentally appropriate teaching practices. Goldstein (2007b) observed a teacher who implemented this strategy into the daily routine. Every morning a literacy block included standards-based activities such as handwriting practice, letter-sound relationship, cut and paste worksheets, or science sequencing activities. The material is taken from the adopted curriculum and daily lesson plans developed by the district. This portion of the day is strictly standards-based. As the children finish up their activities, a 60 minute free play block of time follows. During this time child-centered and child-directed activities occur.

Standards are not practiced in isolation, but are integrated into meaningful child driven experiences. Through this strategy, the teacher knows that she is both teaching the standards and allowing children time to learn in developmentally appropriate ways.

The third strategy that Goldstein (2007b) found to be effective in merging developmentally appropriate practices and standards-based learning is acquiescence. Acquiescence is the use of inappropriate techniques in order to appease parents. This may include sending occasional homework or the infrequent use of worksheets in an effort to establish peaceful partnerships between parents and teachers. The trust established in a child's early learning career between home and school will set the stage for that continued partnership. These three strategies, though not ideal for the teachers or the students, help the teachers to meet district demands while not completely neglecting their own philosophies of education.

Relational Changes

The impact of the legislation also affects relational aspects of the school community (Gallant, 2009; Goldstein, 2008b). According to Goldstein (2008b), dynamics between kindergarten teachers and first grade teachers may be tense. First grade teachers may scrutinize the efforts and progress of kindergarten teachers. Or, first grade teachers may judge the quality of the kindergarten teachers depending on a child's academic performance at the beginning of the first grade school year and the child's previous kindergarten teacher. First grade teachers are under pressure to have students master standardized tests. However, the administration of standardized tests before the age of eight can produce large error and should not be a concern of all teachers in early childhood (Miller et al., 2009).

Children today are experiencing a different kindergarten than that of their parents (Gallant, 2009; Miller et al., 2009). Parents of kindergarten students may understand the buzz of

academic intensity, but may not understand best teaching practices in the early childhood classroom. Kindergarten teachers are called to educate parents. In a qualitative study conducted by Goldstein (2008b) parents were demanding math homework sheets for the children. The teacher appeased the parents request by making math games with game boards and manipulatives that children could check out nightly. Early childhood professionals must educate parents on the importance of play and learning. Play is the child's vehicle for cognitive, emotional, social, and physical growth and development (Miller et al., 2009).

Standards, Accountability, and Assessment

According to Goldstein (2008b), kindergartens today differ from early childhood professionals' idealized vision of developmentally appropriate programs. Curriculum and instructional practices in kindergarten differ due to No Child Left Behind's (NCLB) standards-based approach to teaching and learning (Gallant, 2009; Goldstein, 2008b; Stipek, 2006b).

Through NCLB, schools must meet predetermined performance goals on high-stakes tests for upper elementary school grades in order to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). If AYP objectives are not met, consequences, such as state and federal regulation of school improvement plans result. The pressure on upper elementary school channels down to kindergarten through a term coined "accountability shovedown" (as quoted in Goldstein, 2007a, p. 40). The academic emphasis turns the purpose of kindergarten into having each student master state-mandated, academic learning objectives. Assessments in kindergarten are directly in line with state mandated standards (Roach, McGrath, Wixson, & Talapatra, 2010). High stakes testing leads to a narrowed curriculum, disconnect between teachers and students, and the "loss of shared learning journeys" (Williamson, Bondy, Langley, & Mayne, 2005).

Before NCLB, kindergarten fell between the two worlds of early childhood education and public schools, being relatively close to both but a member of neither (Goldstein, 2008b). The grey area that encompassed kindergarten allowed for teacher creativity and independence; early childhood professionals were unregulated in their quest to reach all learners. “Now that kindergarten is considered to be square one of a comprehensive K–12 educational plan, many teachers have found that compliance and standardization have replaced the autonomy they formerly enjoyed” (p. 224). When officials dismiss teacher autonomy, individual classroom quality diminishes.

Unfortunately, rigorous academic standards are being taught through direct instruction (Miller et al., 2009). Paper and pencil seat work is believed to prepare children for high-stakes testing in the years to come. Academic standards are such the focus that our goal of cognitive development surpasses any thought of physical, social, and emotional development (Goldstein, 2008b; Stipek, 2006b). Educating the whole child appears to be a concept of the past.

According to Goldstein (2008b), some kindergarten teachers believe that little to no recess will allow for more academic instruction in the classroom. But also, many teachers feel trapped in the middle; they know what is best for children, but they are faced with mandates from the principal and district that contradict theory and professional beliefs in best practices for educating young children.

“Whether it be leaping, resisting, or being gently shoved, the field of early childhood education continues to move into the age of accountability” (Elliott & Olliff, 2008, p. 551). The systematic approach to learning is the basis for all instructional and curriculum design decisions. Each child is expected to be at certain milestones depending on the time of the year (Graue, 2008). According to the National Association for Young Children, as cited in Goldstein (2007a),

learning objectives are beneficial as long as they are implemented appropriately. Standards should address developmentally appropriate learning objectives that can be assessed in authentic ways that are appropriate for young children (Cress, 2004; Goldstein 2007a). Also, standards should be developed through team work and collaboration so that professionals outline true appropriate learning goals in which parents, teachers, and administrators can support the standards and accountability measures.

Passman (2001) narrates his experiences in a fifth-grade classroom as somewhat of a university mentor. He worked collaboratively with a fifth-grade teacher in an effort to instill child-centered values and practices into the classroom in the Midwest. Constructivism and child-centered pedagogy had not been implemented before his arrival.

One summer, the fifth-grade teacher, Esther, was required to attend training on keeping children at the center of the curriculum. Although the training was intended to be voluntary, it was evident that this teacher attended against her will. As the new school year began, the researcher found himself observing and working in Esther's room. Initially, the researcher walked into a room where the teacher employed very teacher-directed means of instruction where the children were disengaged and disruptive. When the researcher was leaving the room on his first visit, to his surprise, Esther asked him what she could do to make her room more child-centered. He stated to think about grouping the children's desks in small groups as opposed to the rows that were currently in the room. When he returned the following week, the classroom set-up had changed and he noticed a willingness to change from Esther.

As their time together went on, the two team taught a project-based unit on explorers. The children listed what they knew about the topic, asked questions about what they wanted to find out, and researched in teams the questions they originally developed. They presented their

findings along with concrete representations to the community and to their classmates. This is an example of a curriculum that had the children thinking about concepts the standards would never have allowed, and their motivation was higher than ever because they were interests drove the curriculum. The teacher commented on how much the children were learning and how nice it was to teach in a constructivist way.

However, at a December faculty meeting, the principal talked to the teachers about the importance of teaching to the test. He expressed his belief that nothing should be talked about in class unless it was going to be part of the Iowa State test. He “spoke about probation, testing success, and job security” (p. 195). From that point on, the teacher rearranged the desks back into their isolated rows and began teaching as she had once before. This experience with high-stakes testing and pressure from administrators disheartened the researcher like it disheartens many. Teaching to the test does the children, teachers, and parents in American schools a disservice. Why narrow their thinking when we are preparing them for a future world of technology and change that adults cannot begin to fathom?

Negative physiological reactions occur in one’s body when presented with a threat (Rushton & Juola-Rushton, 2008). When taking high stakes assessments,

the hair shafts on the back of a child’s neck can become erect, their bronchial tubes can be caused to open for deeper breathing, their heart may begin to beat faster, their eyes can dilate, or even the palms of their hands may become sweaty, all natural physiological responses when a threat is perceived. (p. 90)

When children are exposed to too much stress through high-stakes testing, dendrite production slows. It is the job of educators to educate the whole child. Direct instruction, drill and skill, and emotionless work do not promote the well-being of the child. Teaching children through

natural, interest driven, hands-on experiences that allow for plenty of physical activity will result in happier, autonomous, self-regulated children.

Accountability in early childhood education is important. However, since the implementation of NCLB, in addition to high-stakes testing, too much emphasis falls on early childhood environmental checklists (Brumbaugh, 2008). While environmental checklists provide educators and administrators with information, the implementation of developmentally appropriate learning environments goes beyond their identifiers. A framework for establishing an “environment that would facilitate DAP simply takes a little RESPECT: R for Relationships, E for Experiences, S for Space and Security, P for Play, E for Expectations, C for Caring, and T for Time” (p. 170). If the seven REPECT qualities guide the foundation of the program, the classroom environment will enhance the well-being of each individual child.

Learning Environments

Learning environments for young children must reflect the developmental needs of the children. The learning environment includes more than the physical environment, it include the social/emotional environment as well. The relationships established between teachers and parents effect the learning environment. It is crucial for early childhood teachers to get parents on board and active with their child’s formal schooling experience. Teachers must establish and maintain relationships with parents. A parent can offer an infinite amount of information on their child that can enable educators to better meet the child’s needs. Also, educators must provide an environment that fosters learning experiences for children. Many children come to school without any experiences in the outside world. It is the job of an educator to provide those experiences to each child. Children must experience the outside world and the community in which they live. It is the knowledge that they create by experiencing the outside world that will

enable them make new connections when introduced to varying experiences within the classroom.

In order for children to learn, they must feel safe in their learning environment (Brumbaugh, 2008; Goldstein 2007b). It is through a caring early childhood professional and the environment that they create that will allow a child to feel safe in their learning environment. Children need to feel successful as a learner and they need to love the act of learning. The teachers in Goldstein's study (2007b) were supported by their principal in their efforts to bring learning to life. The principal encouraged authentic teaching strategies as long as the teachers could justify the development of academic standards. Through authentic teaching, teachers can differentiate instruction in an effort to meet the needs of all learners. Children create a sense of autonomy when they are provided the freedom to move in their surrounding space (Brumbaugh, 2008). It is the ability to choose activities and playmates that provides the sense of security needed for the young child to take risks in their learning environment.

Play is an essential element in establishing an appropriate learning environment (Brumbaugh, 2008). Centers must hold appropriate learning materials that will foster experiments, reenactments, and conversation amongst children. Through their heightened interest level, the teacher maintains high expectations where child interest drives the schedule, not the clock. The children's sense of autonomy and their ability to choose appropriate activities leads to differentiation, which meets the needs of each individual learner.

A charter school in Miami, Florida embraces inquiry-based instructional strategies to teach state-mandated standards (Quinn & Ethridge, 2006). While many schools depend on teacher-directed instruction that falls within a narrow realm of possible standardized test concepts, the charter school in Florida does not conform to the trend. Administration, teachers,

and parents support teacher autonomy and the importance of student-driven instruction.

Although instructional methods remain child-centered, it is important to note that the district recognizes the school as successful because of their test results, even though testing data does not drive decision making at the school. Therefore, it is possible to do both; authentic teaching can occur within a standardized world.

A low socio-economic school composed primarily of children of color received an “F” from the state department of education because of performance on standardized tests (Williams et al., 2005). The majority of the student population lived in poverty and only 5% of students did not qualify for free and reduced lunch. However, in this school, two teachers’ students performed well on the high-stakes exam. Williams et al. (2005) researched the instructional strategies that the third and fifth grade teachers employ in order to help other teachers of low-income students better meet the needs of their children.

The researchers found that the two teachers remained child-centered in their instructional strategies amidst the high pressure associated with high-stakes testing. For example, the teachers facilitated learning through working cooperatively with the students. The teachers promoted language and literacy through all activities, enhancing the children’s written as well as oral language skills. Instructional material was related to life outside of school which enabled the children to connect new information to existing schema. Teachers held high expectations for students to become problem-solvers, as opposed to merely regurgitating memorized information. And finally, teachers used open-ended questions in order to maximize the level of thinking children practiced in the classroom. These instructional strategies enabled the children to not only master the state’s high-stakes test, but also to become true, independent life-long learners.

Preparing Preservice Teachers for Today's Kindergarten

Kindergarten today can be portrayed as a “frenetic, high pressure work environment. Teachers are afforded less freedom, given fewer choices, and expected to do more, to do it more quickly, and to do it more effectively than ever before” (Goldstein, 2007a, p. 48). The shift to academic emphasis is forcing kindergarten teachers to neglect the domains of physical, social, and emotional development. Kindergarten is now fully embedded in the 1–12 school structure as the kindergarten academic standards lay the groundwork for the remainder of a child’s schooling career. In a qualitative study conducted by Goldstein (2007a), kindergarten teachers struggle in defending play as a child’s vehicle for learning. Home living centers and recess times are being removed from kindergartens’ daily routines and skill and drill teacher-centered activities are replacing child-initiated activities and experiments. Often, first grade teachers expect students to enter first grade reading on a preprimer level so that they can progress throughout the ever challenging first grade academic standards. According to Goldstein (2007a) the following was found:

The progressive, incremental nature of the state standards means that the first grade teachers’ success is dependent on the skill, dedication, and success of the kindergarten teachers and this intricate interdependence creates vulnerabilities and fear for the teachers at both grade levels. (p. 50)

Pressure from upper grade levels funnels into kindergarten. Standards are designed to build on one another from one grade level to the next. While the linear design appears appropriate, the content of the standard becomes the issue; and, if closely analyzed, the standards and assessment of kindergarten students can be integrated into classrooms that are developmentally appropriate, in a manner that does not disrupt the learning process (Cress, 2004).

Students in early childhood education feel as though there is a deviation in what collegiate classes promote and teaching methodologies that are implemented in the actual classroom (Brown, 2009; Cress 2004). High stakes testing promotes teacher-centered curriculum; early childhood programs promote a student-centered, community oriented, interest driven curriculum. In the preservice teacher interviews conducted by Brown (2009), the future teachers believed the implementation of teacher-directed instruction to be more manageable in the face of accountability. However, it directly opposes the content of their coursework. Teacher education programs must adhere to the politically changing face of early childhood education. Participants in such programs experience a disservice if they enter their profession ill-equipped to conquer the challenges they will inevitably face. Early childhood programs must prepare teachers to teach in the ways in which students learn best. If teachers employ appropriate teaching methods, high stakes testing can be an afterthought.

Paris and Lung (2008) conducted a study that examined eighteen novice teachers (teaching less than five years) and their use of child-centered practices in the early childhood classroom. The researchers found that teachers who employ child-centered practices despite the academic pressure from administration, parents, and co-workers have four distinguishable characteristics. The novice teachers demonstrated autonomy, self-efficacy, intentionality, and reflectivity. The autonomous teacher understands their philosophy of education and pedagogical convictions. Even when faced with pressure from the administration, the autonomous teacher is confident in their instructional practices as they are thinking about what is best for children as opposed to mindlessly following a curriculum. Teachers who demonstrate self-efficacy face challenges with confidence. They can reflect on past experiences of success and remain self-reliant even in the face of adversity. Intentionality is present in the child-centered teacher's daily

interactions with the children. Everything is purposeful, authentic, and intentional. Likewise, the constructivist teacher continuously reflects on each moment of the school day. The reflective teacher can remain confident in their instructional practices because student reactions to presented stimuli have been analyzed. Teacher preparation programs must focus on developing autonomy, self-efficacy, intentionality, and reflectivity in their teacher candidates so that future teachers may enter the workforce ready to face the challenges associated with today's world of education.

Through the implementation of NCLB, accountability in education changes the regulation inside early childhood programs. Early childhood professionals must educate stakeholders in what high-quality early childhood facilities promote. Maturation is a process that takes time (Strickland et al., 2006). Young children learn in specific ways that cannot be compromised because our nation believes that faster-is-better (Graue, 2008).

Success Story

Quinn and Ethridge (2006) conducted an exploratory case study of a charter school who met state accountability measures while implementing child-centered and inquiry based teaching strategies. Trinity School for Children is a charter school that serves infants through grade eight based on the Bank Street model of education. Bank Street emphasizes the active, social participation of the learner within their world.

The researchers interviewed four teachers and one administrator, all of whom were part of the school's founding faculty. Semi-structures interviews addressed the history and reason for starting the school, "the philosophical foundation of the school's mission... the beliefs and the psychologies of the people who care for and work with the children; and the customs of the school (with regard to curriculum and practice) (p. 118). Findings from these interviews depict

“wise practices” as opposed to “best practices.” According to Davis, as cited in Quinn and Ethridge (2006), “wise practices” are case specific where “best practices” may be applied to all situations, regardless of the specific circumstances and individuals that compose the school and/or class. Because every situation carries individualized, specific needs, “wise practices” replaces the failed rhetoric associated with the term “best practices.” Therefore, it cannot be assumed that simply adopting the qualities and characteristics that makes this case study a success will in turn make another school a success.

Through the interviews, the researchers found several key elements that contribute to the success of the school. The family and school connection is bonded by the school’s desire to best meet the needs of the children. The dedication to serving “our children” (p. 120) motivates each faculty member. Teachers are better able to meet the needs of their students because the administration promotes teacher autonomy in instruction. As long as the teachers are aware of the standards, the manner in which they cover the material is open to their pedagogical beliefs and the needs of their individual students. Teachers are trusted and encouraged to be the professionals. Teachers also encourage the same autonomy in their students. The fostering of mutual respect between teachers and students and the element of discovery learning embedded in the school core philosophy promotes autonomous learners.

While growing student numbers and funding remain challenges for the school, Trinity School for Children celebrates in their success. The principal stated that the biggest success is remaining true to meeting the needs of children despite how the state deems success. Teachers believe their greatest success is found in the children who leave Trinity School for Children and continue to embrace a love of learning. Children believe in their ability to learn because their belief in their ability to learn has not been hindered by academic pressure or drill and skill

activities (Stipek, 2006a). This exploratory case study can certainly serve to inspire and motivate early childhood teachers to continue to stand up for the developmental needs of the young child.

Conclusions

The above literature review reveals recent research findings associated with the current trend in education to push academic standards and expectations downward across all grade levels. The accountability from high-stakes testing adds additional stress to district leaders, administrators, teachers, students, and parents; those in education argue that “high-stakes assessment conflicts with the goal of truly educating students” (Passman, 2001, p. 189). Despite current trends in education, early childhood professionals must remain loyal to the employment of child-centered instructional practices. Child-centered instructional practices will foster the development of the whole child. By developing the whole child, we develop a brighter future.

CHAPTER THREE. METHODOLOGY

Overview

Early childhood teachers face immense pressure to increase academic achievement in young children (Brown, 2009; Cress, 2004; Gallant, 2009; Goldstein 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b; Graue, 2008; Passman, 2001; Quin & Ethridge, 2006; Rushton & Juolo-Rushton, 2008; Stipek, 2006a, 2006b; Stipek & Byler, 1997; Williamson, Bondy, Langley, Mayne, 2005; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). Recent policy legislation, including No Child Left Behind (NCLB), emphasizes academic achievement regardless of the means of instruction. Some argue the academic emphasis results in performance on high-stakes testing taking precedence over providing a genuine education (Gallant, 2009; Miller et al., 2009; Stipek, 2006a; Wohlgend, 2008). While early childhood education is not directly affected by such mandates, indirectly, this faster-is-better approach to education is dramatically changing the face of early childhood education.

Quantitative research on kindergarten teachers' viewpoints on the changing philosophy and faster-is-better approach to teaching and learning is limited to two studies conducted in Vermont and Michigan (Gehsmann, Woodside-Jiron, & Gallant, 2005; Lipson, Goldhaber, Daniels, & Sortino, 1994). In order to address a gap in the literature and update these findings, the researcher conducted a study that examined kindergarten teachers' perspectives on (a) how young children should be taught, (b) the reality of how kindergarten teachers are actually able to

teach, and (c) current influences on their ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered across three school districts in Georgia.

Research Questions

The research was guided by the following questions:

1. What are current kindergarten teachers' perspectives on how young children learn?
 - a. How do current kindergarten teachers in the three school districts in Georgia believe kindergarten children learn and should be taught?
 - b. If under no curriculum or policy restrictions from the school, system, or state, would kindergarten teachers want to implement child-centered literacy instructional strategies or teacher-directed literacy instructional strategies?
2. How are kindergarten teachers actually teaching?
 - a. Are current kindergarten teachers able to teach the way they believe kindergarten children learn and should be taught?
 - b. Do current kindergarten teachers in the three school districts in Georgia actually implement child-centered literacy instructional strategies or teacher-directed literacy instructional strategies?
3. What currently influences kindergarten teachers' ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered?
 - a. What enables/prevents current kindergarten teachers to teach the way they believe kindergarten children learn and should be taught?
 - b. How autonomous are current kindergarten teachers in the three school districts in Georgia when implementing curriculum?

- c. What influences teacher autonomy when implementing curriculum?
- d. What are the major issues confronting kindergarten teachers today?

Hypotheses

Through surveying kindergarten teachers in three school districts in Georgia, the following findings were expected from a descriptive analysis:

1. Current kindergarten teachers believe that young children learn best when taught through child-centered instruction.
 - a. Current kindergarten teachers in the three school districts in Georgia believe kindergarten children learn/ should be taught through child-centered instruction.
 - b. If under no curriculum or policy restrictions from the school, system, or state, kindergarten teachers would want to implement child-centered literacy instructional strategies.
2. Current kindergarten teachers are actually teaching children in a teacher-directed manner.
 - a. Current kindergarten teachers are unable to teach the way they believe kindergarten children learn and should be taught.
 - b. Kindergarten teachers in the three school districts in Georgia actually implement teacher-directed literacy instructional strategies.
3. Current influences on kindergarten teachers' ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered include issues related to administration, children, educational practice, colleague influences, professional preparation, and educational policy.

- a. Outside influences such as administration and educational policy enables or prevents current kindergarten teachers to teach the way they believe kindergarten children learn and should be taught.
- b. Current kindergarten teachers in the three school districts in Georgia lack autonomy when implementing curriculum.
- c. Current influences affecting teacher autonomy when implementing curriculum include issues related to administration, children, educational practice, colleague influences, professional preparation, and educational policy.
- d. Major issues confronting kindergarten teachers today include administration and educational policy.

Design of the Study

The study utilized quantitative methods where data was collected through a survey design. The purpose of the study was to reveal kindergarten teachers' perspectives on (a) how young children should be taught, (b) the reality of how kindergarten teachers are actually able to teach, and (c) current influences on their ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered across three school districts in Georgia.

Recruitment and Site

The participant population included approximately 180 kindergarten teachers across three school districts in Georgia. The three districts represented a convenience sample of schools. The number of kindergarten teachers per district varied because the size and population of the three districts varied: approximately 10 (3 elementary schools), 50 (13 elementary schools), and 110 (34 elementary schools). All three school districts were accredited by the Georgia Department of Education and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Exhaustive

sampling within the schools was used to recruit participants because all teachers in the district were invited to participate. In the smallest district, all three elementary schools are Title I distinguished schools and have met Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for 6-9 consecutive years. In the middle-sized district, all 13 elementary schools are Title I distinguished schools, having met AYP for three consecutive years. In the largest district, 50% of the elementary schools, both Title I (8) and non-Title I schools (9), met AYP in 2011.

A hard copy of the information letter was provided to all kindergarten teachers from each of the three school districts; two of the three school districts also received an additional copy via email. The information letter stated the purpose of the study and contact information for the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The information letter also stated that participation was completely voluntary and that if participants decided to participate in this research study, they would be asked to complete a survey that would take approximately fifteen minutes to complete. The information letter informed participants that no risks were associated with participating in this study and that no compensation would be awarded. Participants who completed the online version of the survey were informed that if they changed their mind about participating, they could withdraw at any time by closing the browser window. However, anonymous data could not be withdrawn after submission. Only anonymous data was collected; no identifiable information was associated with survey responses. A link to the survey was found at the bottom of the information letter. In order to proceed with the survey, participants had to indicate their informed consent through the survey website. The informed consent form was approved by the university's IRB.

Two school districts allowed for the survey to be emailed to the kindergarten teachers. The initial recruitment letter identified a two week period for participants to complete the survey

online. Several additional reminder emails followed the initial email. Following the two week period, the researcher hand delivered hard copies of the survey to each of the K–5 schools in the two school districts. Kindergarten teachers were asked to complete either the online survey or the hard copy of the survey within the week and return the document in the attached, postage-paid envelope. The third school district did not allow for an online version of the survey to be emailed to the kindergarten teachers. Instead, the district invited the researcher to distribute the survey at a county-wide kindergarten meeting. Each teacher was provided with the information letter, a hard copy of the survey, and a postage-paid envelope. The information letter asked the teachers to complete the survey within one week. The district did not support any follow-up contact with the teachers that fell within the timeframe of this research study.

Stated earlier, the participant population included approximately 180 kindergarten teachers who were teaching kindergarten during the 2011–2012 school year. Of the 180 kindergarten teachers, 47% teachers completed the survey, resulting in a final sample of 84 kindergarten teachers. On the kindergarten survey, participants identified how long they had been teaching (see Table 1).

Table 1

Years of Experience

Years of Experience in Kindergarten	Number (n = 84)	Percentage
5 or fewer years	26	31.0%
6–14 years	32	38.1%
15 or more years	25	29.8%

Did not answer	1	1.2%
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Instrumentation

A survey adapted for use in this study examined the reality of the current kindergarten classroom. The survey was adapted with permission from two studies conducted in Vermont and Michigan (Gehsmann, Woodside-Jiron, & Gallant, 2005; Lipson, Goldhaber, Daniels, & Sortino, 1994). Specifically, the instrument measured kindergarten teachers' perspectives on (a) how young children should be taught, (b) the reality of how kindergarten teachers are actually able to teach, and (c) current influences on their ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered. Below lists the research questions and the survey sections that address each research question. See Appendix A for a copy of the survey.

1. What are current kindergarten teachers' perspectives on how young children learn?
 - a. How do current kindergarten teachers in the three school districts in Georgia believe kindergarten children learn and should be taught? Q2
 - b. If under no curriculum or policy restrictions from the school, system, or state, would kindergarten teachers want to implement child-centered literacy instructional strategies or teacher-directed literacy instructional strategies? Q4b; Q5b

2. How are kindergarten teachers actually teaching?
 - a. Are current kindergarten teachers able to teach the way they believe kindergarten children learn and should be taught? Q3.1; Q4a vs. Q4b; Q5a vs. Q5b

- b. Do current kindergarten teachers in the three school districts in Georgia actually implement child-centered literacy instructional strategies or teacher-directed literacy instructional strategies? Q4a; Q5a
 3. What currently influences kindergarten teachers' ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered?
 - a. What enables/prevents current kindergarten teachers to teach the way they believe kindergarten children learn/ should be taught? Q3.2
 - b. How autonomous are current kindergarten teachers in the three school districts in Georgia when implementing curriculum? Q6
 - c. What influences teacher autonomy when implementing curriculum? Q7
 - d. What are the major issues confronting kindergarten teachers today? Q8

The authors of the original survey presented survey findings at two professional conferences (Gehsmann, Woodside-Jiron, & Gallant, 2005; Lipson, Goldhaber, Daniels, & Sortino, 1994). The original authors addressed reliability and validity measures in their studies. For the purposes of this study, the survey was modified and adapted; therefore, reliability and validity was established again.

In order to rate the items in sections Q2 (A kindergarten teacher should...), Q4 (Instructional Material), and Q5 (Instructional Methods and Procedures) of the instrument as either child-centered or teacher-directed, expert ratings were collected (Fink, 1995; Ross & Shannon, 2008). Four kindergarten teachers rated each item on a three point continuum with one indicating a child-centered belief or practice and three indicating a teacher-directed belief or practice. The mean of each item rated was calculated. Using a Fleiss' kappa, ratings that fell below the moderate agreement range, less than 0.40, were dropped from the instrument (Fleiss'

kappa, 2011). Fleiss' kappa was utilized, as opposed to Cohen's kappa, because more than two raters were involved. Ratings that fell within the moderate agreement range, 0.41-0.60, were discussed with each rater until 100% agreement was reached. Items that were in the 0.60-1.0 range were kept. At the conclusion of the interrater reliability process, only items in 100% agreement between the four raters as either a child-centered belief or practice or a teacher-directed belief or practice, after discussion, were included in the survey.

To further refine the instrument, the researcher conducted think-aloud interviews with a current kindergarten teacher with 33 years of experience and another with 7 years of experience. Through the think-aloud, the veteran kindergarten teacher of 33 years voiced areas of confusion and the researcher revised several questions in order to clarify the survey items. For example, the researcher changed the font size to emphasize key words such as *are* and *are not*, clarified the instructions, and added an optional open-ended follow-up question to clarify survey responses for a set of items. In the second think-aloud, the kindergarten teacher with seven years of experience did not see any areas of concern that needed further clarification in the survey.

In addition to the item classification and think-aloud interviews, the researcher also had four professors of education serve as an expert panel. Three of the professors were from the same institution but were members of differing departments. Generally, their academic background emphasized early childhood education, statistics, and educational psychology. The fourth professor was from another university system with an academic background in reading education. The panel provided feedback regarding the readability of the references at the conclusion of the survey. All members of the panel agreed that the items accurately and broadly sampled the domain of interest. The researcher asked one of the original authors of the survey to serve on the panel as well, but due to time restraints and previous commitments, the original

author was unable to commit yet expressed support of the research and interest in the research findings.

Internal consistency (which is commonly used as a proxy for reliability in survey development) was only appropriate for analyzing the questions about how teachers believe young students learn because the researcher believed that teachers would consistently endorse either the child-centered or teacher-directed items. After calculating Cronbach's alpha index of internal consistency, the researcher found that the child-centered items showed higher consistency of responses by participants than teacher-directed items (.79 vs. .54, respectively). This indicates that those who used child-centered practices tended to endorse most other child-centered practices while there was less consistency in whether participants endorsed the various teacher-directed practices; this may be due to the items, not to their beliefs. The teacher-directed items may not have actually measured consistently the intended purpose of them being perceived as teacher-directed.

Data Collection

The researcher received approval and permission from three school systems in Georgia to conduct survey research with the kindergarten teachers in each of the three school districts. Permission letters are on file with the university's IRB. Two school districts allowed for the survey to be emailed to the kindergarten teachers. The initial recruitment letter identified a two week period for participants to complete the survey online. Several additional reminder emails followed the initial email. Following the two week period, the researcher hand-delivered hard copies of the survey to each of the elementary schools in the two school districts. Kindergarten teachers were asked to complete either the online survey or the hard copy of the survey within the week and return the document in the attached, postage-paid envelope. The third school

district did not allow for an online version of the survey to be emailed to the kindergarten teachers. Instead, the district invited the researcher to distribute the survey at a county-wide kindergarten meeting. The researcher provided each teacher with the information letter, a hard copy of the survey, and a postage-paid envelope. The information letter asked the teachers to complete the survey within one week. The district did not support any follow-up contact with the teachers that fell within the timeframe of this research study.

The researcher utilized Qualtrics, a survey tool provided by the university, in order to adapt the survey, administer the survey online, and collect and organize the survey data. Participants in the two school districts that allowed the survey link to be emailed to the teachers were allotted two weeks to complete the survey before an additional week to complete the survey, either the online version or paper and pencil version. When activating the survey, Qualtrics offered an Anonymous Survey Link options. By employing the Anonymous Survey Link, no identifiable information was gathered from survey responses. Also, the researcher turned off the collection of IP addresses by accessing Survey Options and selecting Anonymize Response. In order to address any technical errors, the researcher piloted the survey with a sample of four professionals in education. All data were collected and stored on the Qualtrics' server. The researcher had access to the survey results. IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Statistics 20 was used to analyze the data. The output from SPSS was used to report descriptive statistics, such as frequencies.

Data Analysis

Three research questions guided the study: (1) What are current kindergarten teachers' perspectives on how young children learn and should be taught? (2) How are kindergarten teachers actually teaching? (3) What currently influences kindergarten teachers' ability or

inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered?

Descriptive statistics provide a glimpse into the current face of kindergarten in today's classrooms.

Limitations

The study examining kindergarten teachers' perspectives on (a) how young children should be taught, (b) the reality of how kindergarten teachers are actually able to teach, and (c) current influences on their ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered across three school districts in Georgia was limited in several ways.

- The study relied solely on the method of self-report. In self-report, participants may exaggerate or neglect to report.
- The study utilized convenience sampling of schools that limited the generalizations that can be made toward a larger population. The survey was simply conducted in three school districts in one state.
- The time allotted to collect the data is another factor that limited the study. In two school districts, there was a two week period allotted to the participant population for survey response with a additional week follow-up period. In one school district, the teachers had one week to complete and return the survey.
- The utilization of technology to administer and collect surveys limits the participant populations' responses as some veteran kindergarten teachers may be less likely to respond to the survey via the internet.

CHAPTER FOUR. FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of kindergarten is changing amidst the standards-based world of education in which we currently live (Goldstein, 2007; Stipek, 2006). What are current kindergarten teachers' beliefs about instructional practices? Are kindergarten teachers able to implement the instructional practices in which they believe? And, what currently influences the instructional practices kindergarten teachers utilize in the kindergarten classroom? Survey data collected from three school districts in Georgia provides awareness in regards to the questions listed above.

The study's purpose was to gain greater insight into the current face of kindergarten classrooms in Georgia. The Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) begin in kindergarten and serve as the minimum state curriculum. The GPS for kindergarten are directly assessed on the Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (GKIDS). This assessment is administered and recorded electronically for every kindergartener in the state of Georgia.

Review of Hypotheses

Through surveying kindergarten teachers in three school districts in Georgia, the following findings are expected from a descriptive analysis:

1. Current kindergarten teachers believe that young children learn best when taught through child-centered instruction.

- a. Current kindergarten teachers in the three school districts in Georgia believe kindergarten children learn/ should be taught through child-centered instruction.
 - b. If under no curriculum or policy restrictions from the school, system, or state, kindergarten teachers would want to implement child-centered literacy instructional strategies.
2. Current kindergarten teachers are actually teaching children in a teacher-directed manner.
- a. Current kindergarten teachers are unable to teach the way they believe kindergarten children learn and should be taught.
 - b. Kindergarten teachers in the three school districts in Georgia actually implement teacher-directed literacy instructional strategies.
3. Current influences on kindergarten teachers' ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered include issues related to administration, children, educational practice, colleague influences, professional preparation, and educational policy.
- a. Outside influences such as administration and educational policy enables or prevents current kindergarten teachers to teach the way they believe kindergarten children learn and should be taught.
 - b. Current kindergarten teachers in the three school districts in Georgia lack autonomy when implementing curriculum.

- c. Current influences affecting teacher autonomy when implementing curriculum include issues related to administration, children, educational practice, colleague influences, professional preparation, and educational policy.
- d. Major issues confronting kindergarten teachers today include administration and educational policy.

Data Analysis and Results

“A Kindergarten Teacher Should...” Instructional Results

The first research question examined kindergarten teachers’ perspectives on how young children learn. Specifically, the survey examined how kindergarten teachers believe children learn and should be taught. In order to analyze the data, items were sorted into two groups: child-centered items and teacher-directed items.

- Child-centered items included:
 - provide children with many open-ended materials and experiences
 - design the classroom to challenge children's problem-solving
 - expect children to be motivated if the curriculum is appropriate, encourage children to explore building materials
 - make individual decisions about the curriculum based on each child's abilities and interests
 - base curriculum decisions on observations of children's use of materials
 - allocate major segments of each day for free play
 - show more interest in how children work/play than in what they produce, and use centers as a primary method for teaching (Q2).
- Teacher-directed items included:

- use privileges, prizes, rewards or competitions to motivate children
- involve all children in formal scripted or prescribed reading instruction
- teach skills in sequence to mastery before exposing children to knowledge and skills that are more complex
- base judgments about learning on completion of behavioral objectives
- make decisions about the curriculum based on the expectations of the teacher(s) in the next grade
- require all children to take part in every activity, provide substantial workbook and other seatwork activity
- involve children in whole-class activities for most of the day (Q2).

Findings indicate that teachers believe in both child-centered practices and teacher-directed practices. Of the teachers surveyed, 50% or more believe in each of the child-centered instructional practices. Over 90% of the teachers surveyed believe in encouraging children to explore building materials, expecting children to be motivated if the curriculum is appropriate, designing the classroom to challenge children's problem-solving, and providing children with many open-ended materials and experiences. Less than 60% of teachers surveyed believe in using centers as a primary method for teaching, showing more interest in how children work/play than in what they produce, and allocating major segments of each day for free play. See Table 2 for data regarding child-centered instructional practices.

According to the data regarding years of experience, more teachers who have been teaching for over 15 years or less than 5 years endorse more of the child-centered practices than teachers who have been teaching between 6 and 14 years. For example, 53.8% of teachers who have been teaching for 5 or fewer years, 43.8% of teachers who have been teaching 6 to 14

years, and 56% of teachers who have been teaching for 15 or more years believe in the use of centers as a primary method for teaching; similarly, 100% of teachers who have been teaching for 5 or fewer years, 84% of teachers who have been teaching 6 to 14 years, and 100% of teachers who have been teaching for 15 or more years believe in designing the classroom to challenge children’s problem solving. For the belief in encouraging young children to explore building material, 96.2% of teachers who have been teaching for 5 or fewer years, 75% of teachers who have been teaching 6 to 14 years, and 100% of teachers who have been teaching for 15 or more years agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. See Figure 4.1 for data regarding child-centered instructional practices by years of teaching experience.

Table 2

Percent Agreement Regarding Child-Centered Instructional Practices

Child-Centered Practices	Agree or Strongly Agree
Use centers as a primary method for teaching	50.0
Show more interest in how children work/play than in what they produce.	53.6
Allocate major segments of each day for free play	58.5
Base curriculum decisions on observations of children’s use of materials	60.2
Make individual decisions about the curriculum based on each child's abilities and interests	85.7
Encourage children to explore building materials (e.g. blocks, Legos™)	90.4

Expect children to be motivated if the curriculum is appropriate	92.9
Design the classroom to challenge children's problem-solving	94
Provide children with many open-ended materials and experiences	95.2

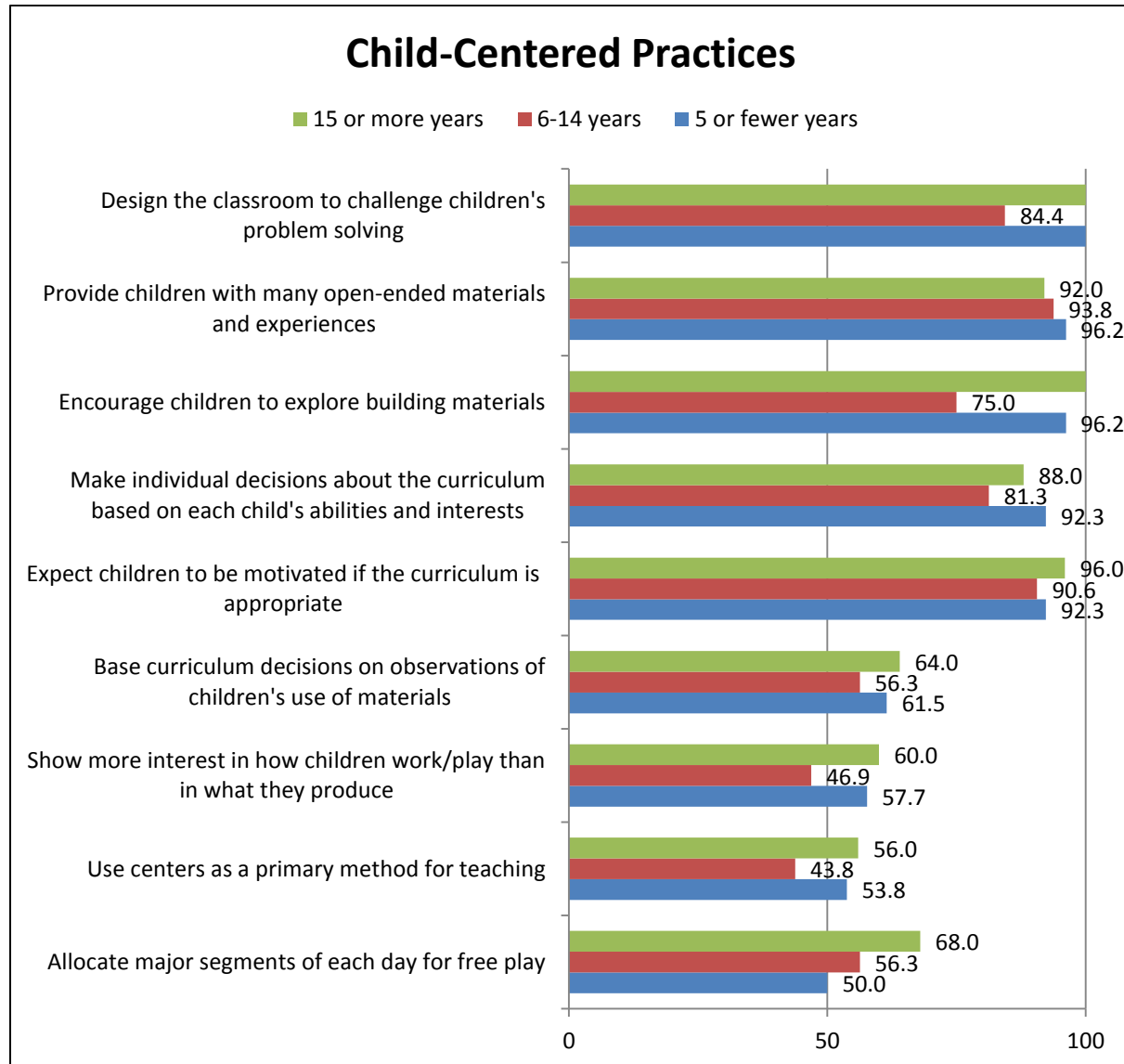


Figure 1. Percent Agreement Regarding Child-Centered Instructional Practices by Years of Experience

The majority of teachers also agreed with the use of teacher-directed practices in the kindergarten classroom, although none of the teacher-directed practices depict universal endorsement. Several items showed low endorsement. For example, less than 50% of the teachers believed in providing substantial workbook and other seatwork activity and involving children in whole-class activities for most of the day. See Table 3 for data regarding teacher-directed instructional practices.

According to the data per years of experience, the teachers who have been teaching for more than 15 years showed less support for teacher-directed practices than the teachers who have been teaching for less than 15 years. Specifically, 73.1% of teachers who have been teaching for 5 or fewer years, 71.9% of teachers who have been teaching 6 to 14 years, and 52% of teachers who have been teaching for 15 or more years believe in teaching skills in sequence to mastery before exposing children to knowledge and skills that are more complex; 76.9% of teachers who have been teaching for 5 or fewer years, 78.1% of teachers who have been teaching 6 to 14 years, and 60% of teachers who have been teaching for 15 or more years believe in using privileges, prizes, rewards, or competitions to motivate children; and 15.4% of teachers who have been teaching for 5 or fewer years, 21.9% of teachers who have been teaching 6 to 14 years, and 8% of teachers who have been teaching for 15 or more years believe in providing substantial workbook and other seatwork activity. See Figure 2 for data regarding teacher-directed instructional practices by years of teaching experience.

Table 3

Percent Agreement Regarding Teacher-Directed Instructional Practices

Teacher-Directed Practices	Agree or Strongly Agree
Involve children in whole-class activities for most of the day	14.5
Provide substantial workbook and other seatwork activity	15.5
Require all children to take part in every activity	52.4
Make decisions about the curriculum based on the expectations of the teacher(s) in the next grade	60.7
Base judgments about learning on completion of behavioral objectives	62.5
Teach skills in sequence to mastery before exposing children to knowledge and skills that are more complex	68.3
Involve all children in formal scripted or prescribed reading instruction	69.9
Use privileges, prizes, rewards or competitions to motivate children	72.6

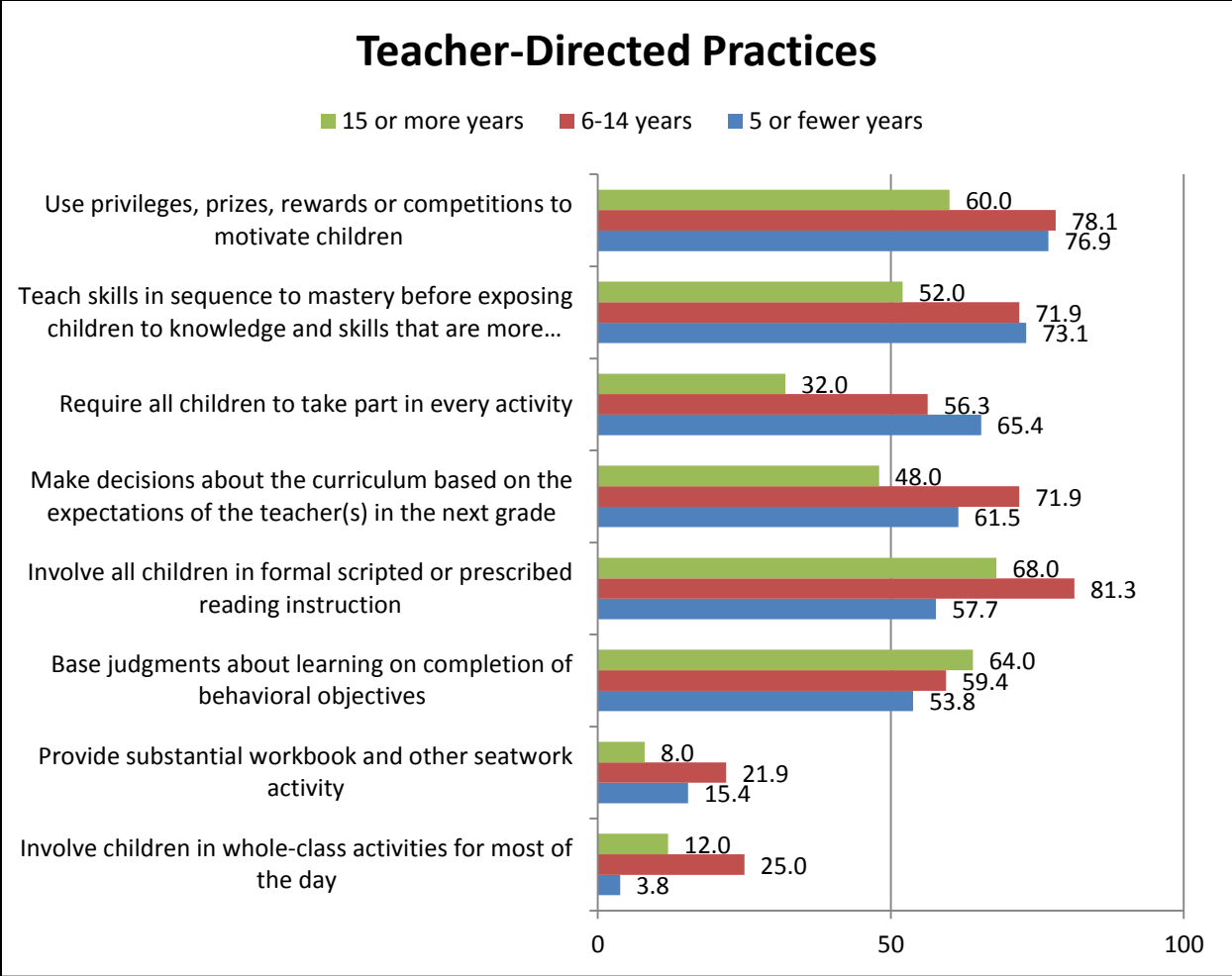


Figure 2. Percent Agreement Regarding Teacher-Directed Instructional Practices by Years of Experience

Belief in Effective Instructional Materials, Methods, and Procedures

Another research question examined kindergarten teachers’ perspectives on how young children learn in that if under no curriculum or policy restrictions from the school, system, or state, would kindergarten teachers want to implement child-centered literacy instructional strategies or teacher-directed literacy instructional strategies? Items were coded as either child-centered or teacher directed (Q4 & Q5). For each element, teachers indicated whether they

believe in the instructional material, method, or procedure and if they actually do use the instructional material, method, or procedure.

Child-centered instructional materials, methods, and procedures included the following:

- Chants, songs, and poetry
- Journals
- Fiction trade books
- Big books
- Nonfiction/information trade books
- Writing center
- Reading center
- Student-made books
- Listening center
- Shared reading
- Interactive writing
- Storytelling
- Dramatic play
- Puppetry

Teacher-directed instructional material, methods, and procedures included the following:

- Flashcards
- Phonics workbook and practice sheets
- Supplemental reading programs
- Handwriting practice books
- Systematic comprehensive core reading programs

- Commercial kits
- Systematic phonics
- Letter of the week
- Handwriting instruction
- Spelling instruction
- Round robin reading

The teachers claim to both believe in and use the most child-centered instructional materials, methods, and procedures. Over 50% believe in and use storytelling, readings centers, writing centers, nonfiction and information trade books, interactive writing, big books, fiction trade books, shared reading, journals, and chants, songs, and poetry. From the teacher-directed instructional materials, methods, and procedures, over 50% of teachers surveyed believe in and use flashcards and systematic phonics. See Tables 4 and 5 for further findings.

Table 4

Percent of Use v. Belief Regarding Most Effective Child-Centered Instructional Materials, Methods, and Procedures

Child-Centered Instructional Materials, Methods, and Procedures	Use the Most	Believe are the Most Effective
Puppetry	3.6	11.9
Dramatic Play	13.1	34.5
Listening Center	29.8	41.7
Student-Made Books	44.0	46.4
Storytelling	50.0	54.8
Reading Center	54.8	57.1
Writing Center	58.3	57.1
Nonfiction/Information Trade Books	64.3	60.7
Interactive Writing	64.3	72.6
Big Books	66.7	66.7
Fiction Trade Books	70.2	63.1
Shared Reading	77.4	76.2
Journals	83.3	73.8
Chants, Songs, Poetry	92.9	90.5

Table 5

Percent of Use v. Belief Regarding Most Effective Teacher-Directed Instructional Materials, Methods, and Procedures

Teacher-Directed Instructional Materials, Methods, and Procedures	Use the Most	Believe are the Most Effective
Commercial Kits (e.g. Storybox, SRA used to fidelity)	15.5	13.1
Round Robin Reading	17.9	20.2
Spelling Instruction	19.0	16.7
Systematic Comprehensive Core Reading Program (e.g. commercially published basal)	20.2	19.0
Handwriting Practice Books	32.1	21.4
Supplemental Reading Programs (commercially published)	36.9	31.0
Handwriting Instruction	38.1	33.3
Letter of the Week	39.3	42.9
Phonics Workbook and Practice Sheets	48.8	44.0
Flashcards	75.0	65.5
Systematic Phonics	83.3	77.4

The data indicates discrepancies between the instructional material, methods, and procedures that teachers believe to be the most effective and what they use the most. More teachers indicated that they use systematic phonics, flashcards, phonics workbooks and practice

worksheets, handwriting instruction and practice books, and supplemental reading programs than teachers indicated that they believe these particular instructional materials, methods, and procedures are effective for teaching kindergarten children. All of these instructional materials, methods, and procedures were categorized as teacher-directed. On the other hand, more teachers believe puppetry, dramatic play, storytelling, the listening center, and interactive writing are effective, yet fewer teachers indicated that they utilize these materials, methods, and procedures. All of these particular instructional materials, methods, and procedures were categorized as child-centered. See Figure 3 for visualization of findings.

Combined Instructional Material, Methods, and Procedures

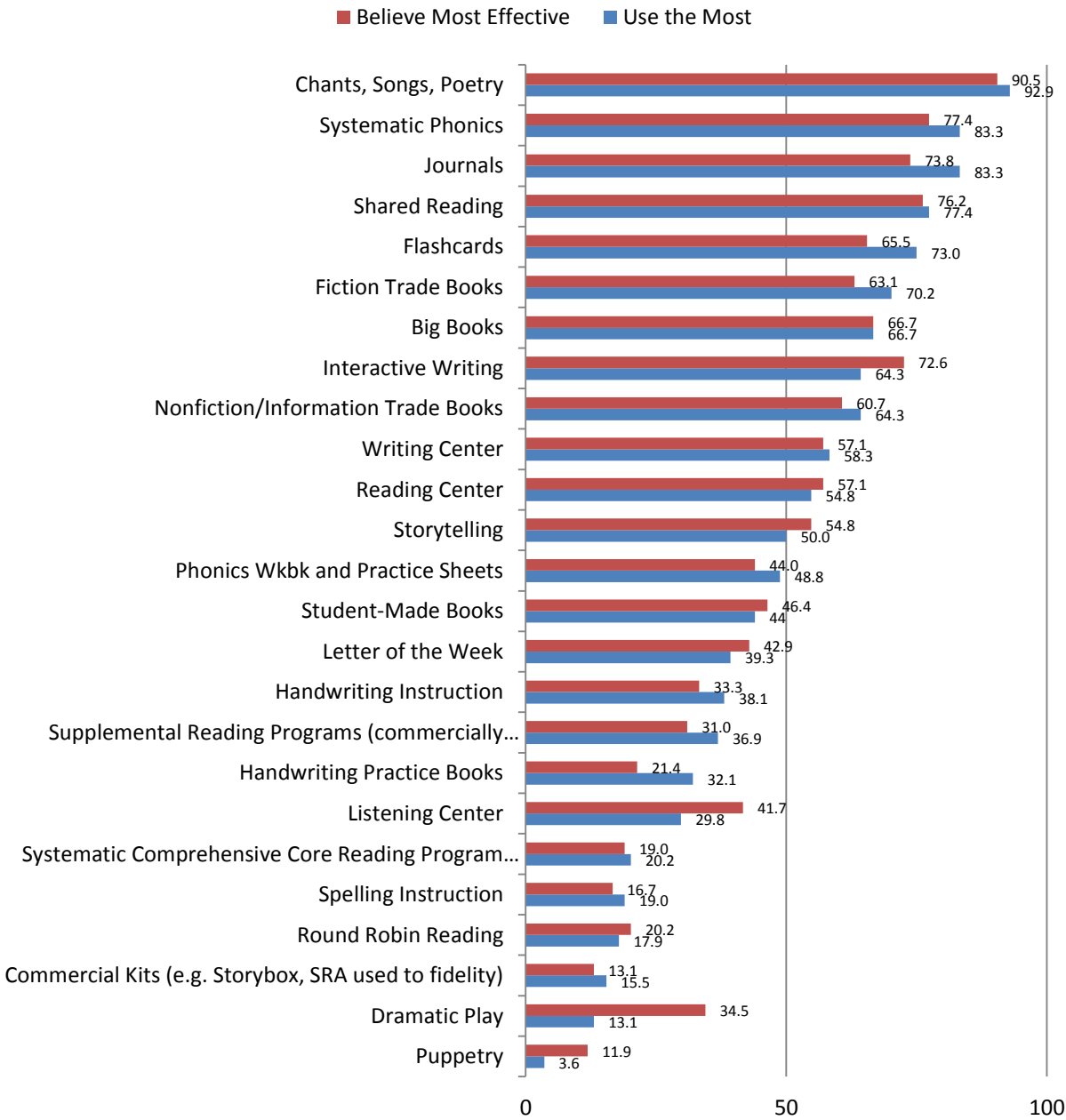


Figure 3. Combined Instructional Materials, Methods, and Procedures

Response to “I Teach the Way I Believe I Should” Statement

Another research question examined how kindergarten teachers today are actually teaching. Specifically, the survey examined if current kindergarten teachers able to teach the way they believe kindergarten children should be taught, what enables or prevents them from implementing instruction that matches their philosophical beliefs? In response to the statement, “I am able to teach the way I believe I should teach kindergarten,” 56.6% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed while 46.2% of teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed. See Figure 4 teachers’ response to the question by years of experience.

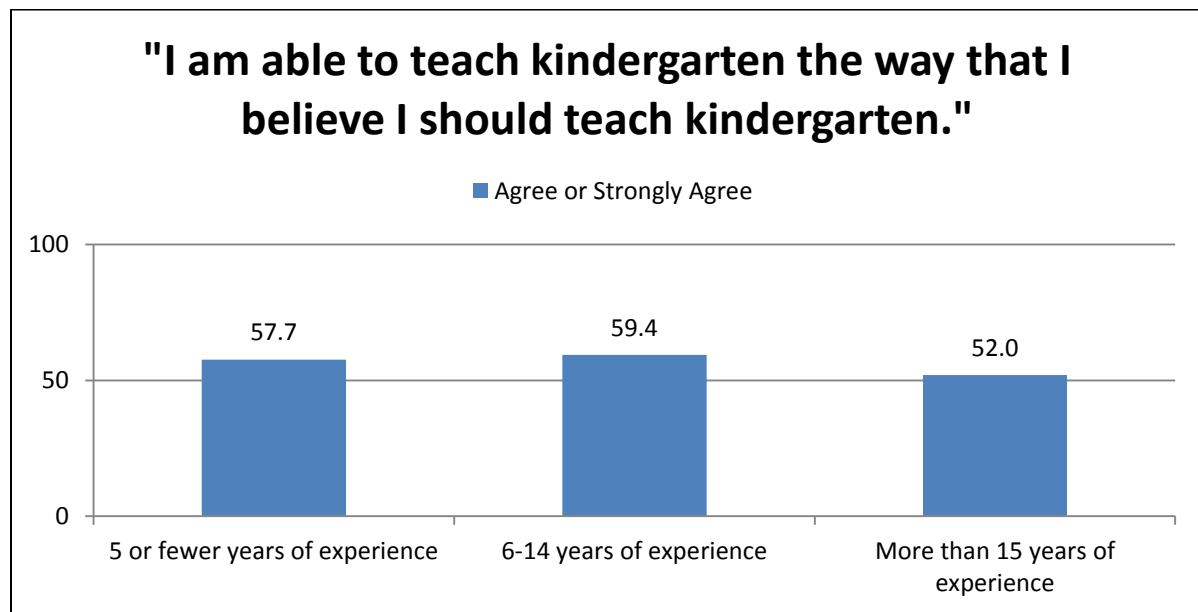


Figure 4. Belief Statement

Teachers were also asked an open-ended question regarding their ability or inability to teach the way that they believe they should teach kindergarten. The teachers addressed significant areas of concern through the open-ended survey question. Those teachers who agreed or strongly agreed that they are able to teach the way that they believe they should teach kindergarten offered explanations such as supportive building level administration, having an

adequate number of resources, having the freedom to use curriculum guides to then plan lessons appropriate for their individual classroom, assistance from paraprofessionals in the classroom, and parental support. Teachers who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, implying that they are unable to teach the way that they believe they should teach kindergarten, cited reasons such as the demand to teach developmentally inappropriate skills, unrealistic expectations from administrators on all levels, lack of play and hands-on experiences, lack of parental involvement, inappropriate standards, student behavior issues, assessments and documentation take away from the teachers ability to teach students, and the lack of teacher autonomy in the classroom.

Teacher Autonomy and Influences

The final research questions looked into current influences on kindergarten teachers' ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered. Specifically, the survey explored what enabled or prevented current kindergarten teachers from teaching the way they believe they should teach, how autonomous current kindergarten teachers are in three school districts in Georgia when implementing curriculum, what influences teacher autonomy when implementing curriculum, and the major issues confronting kindergarten teachers today (Q6).

The survey asked teachers a series of questions regarding teacher autonomy. Of the teachers surveyed, 88.1% of teachers believed that they received much or very much curriculum guidance from the school, district, or state, 76.2% of teachers believed that they were trusted as a professional in early childhood education to make instructional decisions in the classroom, and 44.5% of teachers believed that they had much or very much flexibility in deciding their curriculum from day to day (see Figure 5).

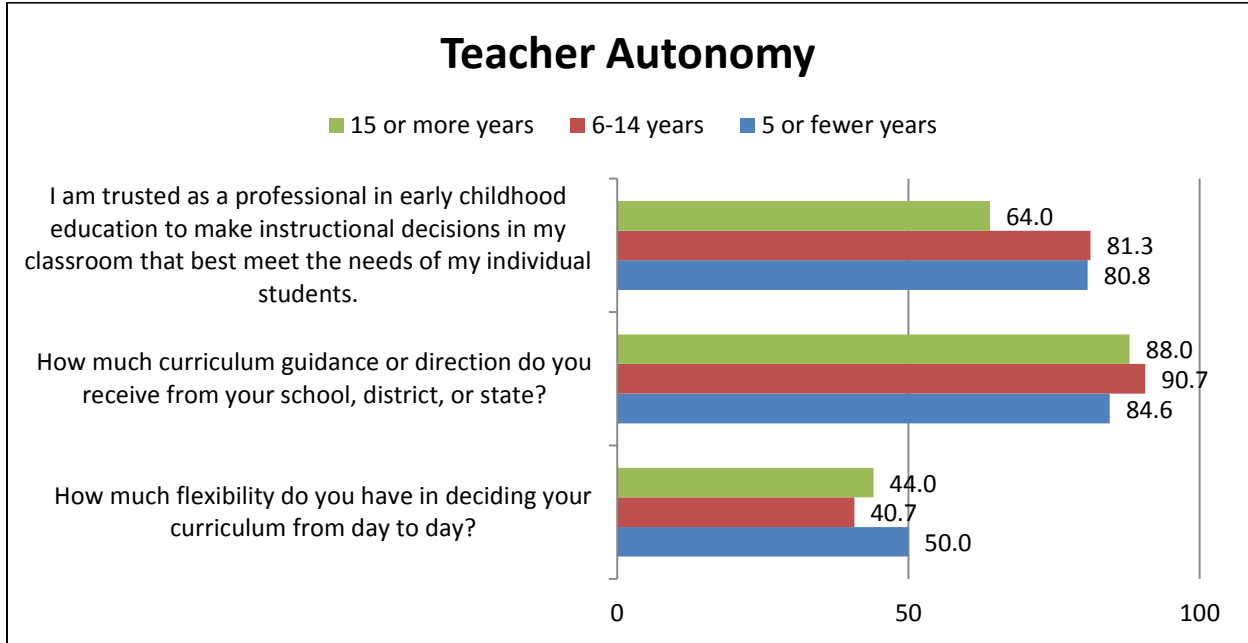


Figure 5. Guidance, Direction, and Flexibility

Another set of questions examined current influences on kindergarten teachers and how they teach.

Issues related to the administration of education programs (Q7a) included the following:

- Local board of education
- Budget considerations
- Teacher evaluation instruments
- School level academic policies
- Availability of instructional materials

Issues related to children (Q7b) included the following:

- Parental expectations
- Children’s preschool experiences

Issues related to educational practice and policy (Q7c) included the following:

- Standardized tests
- Annual yearly progress (AYP) demands
- Other tests
- Common core standards
- First grade expectations
- Data-driven instruction
- Georgia Inventory of Developing Skills
- Georgia state kindergarten standards

Issues related to colleague influences (Q7d) included the following:

- Superintendent
- First grade teachers
- Other kindergarten teachers
- School principal

Issues related to professional preparation (Q7e) included the following:

- School professional development opportunities
- Undergraduate or graduate level college courses
- Professional conferences
- Professional literature

Within the issues related to the administration of education programs, 79.2% of teachers found the availability of instructional materials considerably to most influential, 66.3% of teachers found school level academic policies considerably to most influential, 65.4% of teachers found teacher evaluation instruments considerably to most influential. Of the teachers surveyed,

50.6% found budget concerns considerably to most influential, and 42.7% of teachers found the local board of education considerably to most influential.

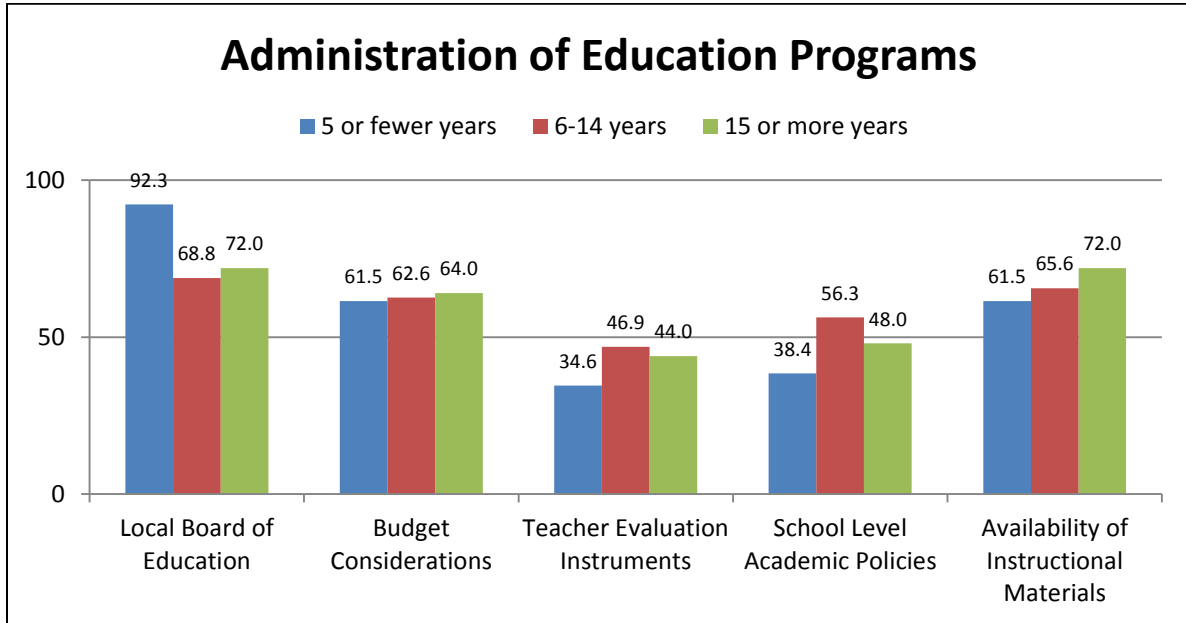


Figure 6. Issues Related to the Administration of Education Programs by Years of Experience

Within the issues related to children, 75% of teachers found children’s preschool experiences considerably to most influential, and 59% of teachers found parental expectations considerably to most influential.

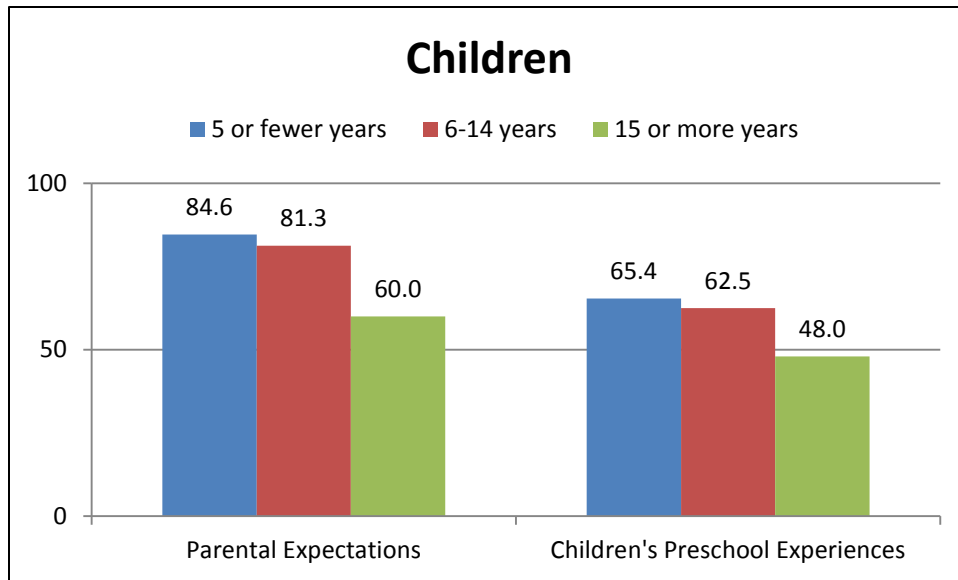


Figure 7. Issues Related to Children by Years of Experience

Within the issues related to educational practice and policy, 98.8% of teachers found Georgia state kindergarten standards considerably to most influential, 89.2% of teachers found the GKIDS considerably to most influential, 81.9% of teachers found data-driven instruction considerably to most influential, 72.3% of teachers found first grade curriculum expectations considerably to most influential, 68.3% of teachers found common core standards considerably to most influential, 61.7% of teachers found other tests considerably to most influential, 61.5% of teachers found annual yearly progress demands considerably to most influential, and 29.6% of teachers found standardized tests considerably to most influential.

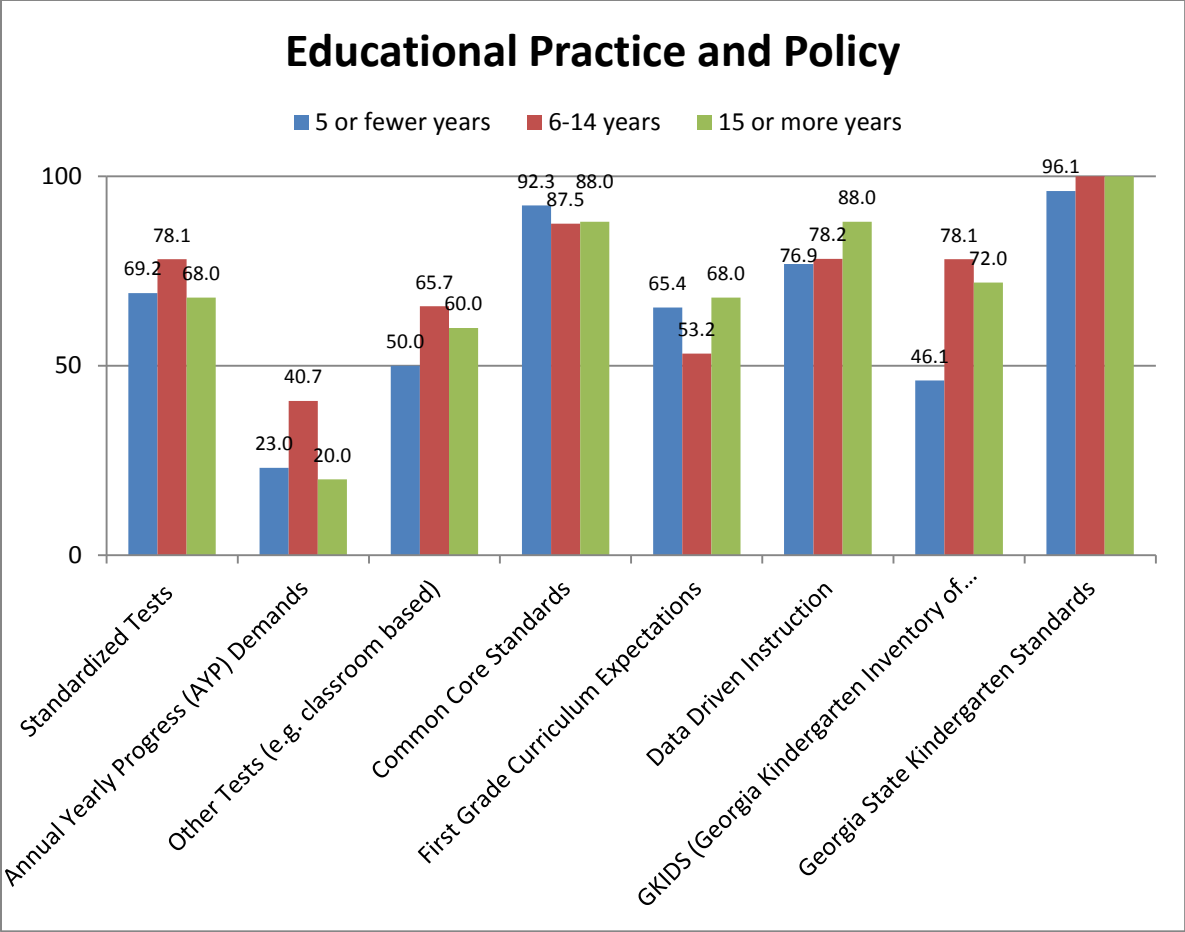


Figure 8. Issues Related to Educational Practice and Policy by Years of Experience

Within the issues related to colleague influences, 82.9% of teachers found the school principal considerably to most influential, 79.3% of teachers found other kindergarten teachers considerably to most influential, 46.4% of teachers found first grade teachers considerably to most influential, and 38.8% of teachers found the superintendent considerably to most influential.

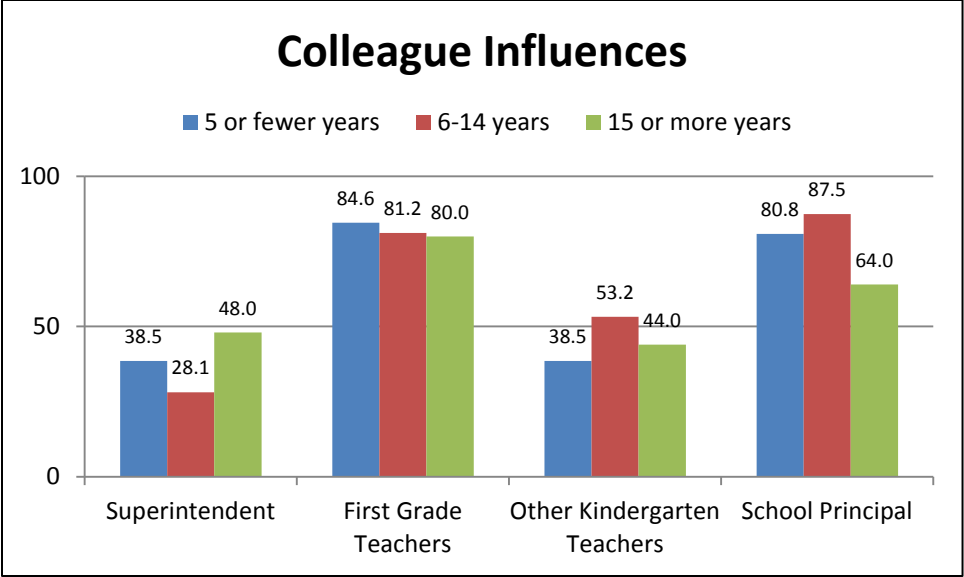


Figure 9. Issues Related to Colleague Influences by Years of Experience

Within the issues related to professional preparation, 72.8% of teachers found school professional development opportunities considerably to most influential, 59.7% of teachers found undergraduate or college level courses considerably to most influential, 54.3% of teachers found professional conferences considerably to most influential, and 40.7% of teachers found professional literature considerably to most influential.

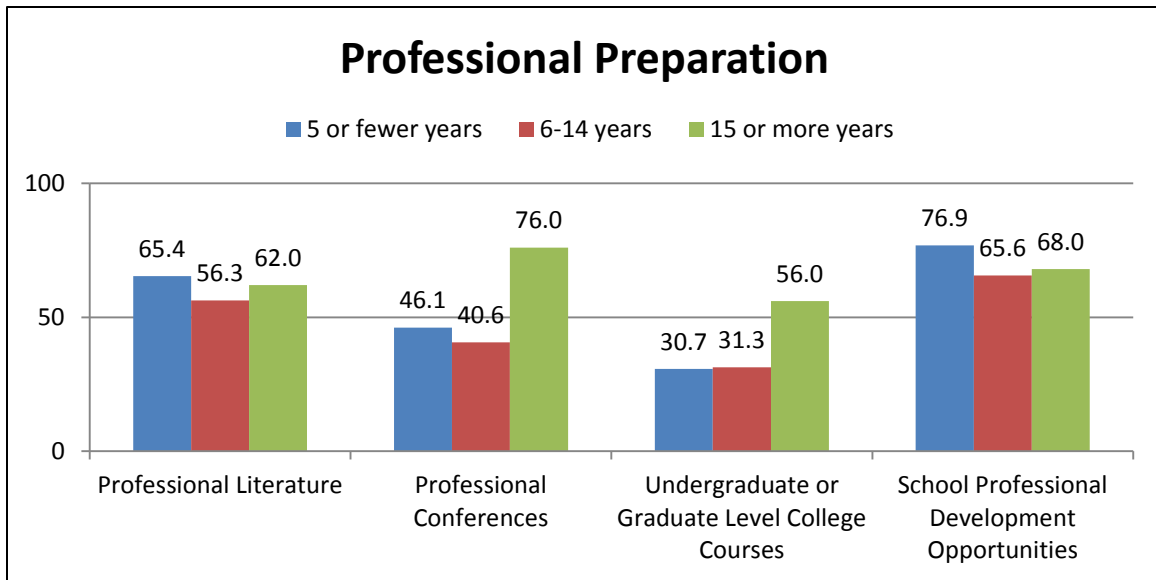


Figure 10. Issues Related to Professional Preparation by Years of Experience

Collectively, the most influential issues include the Georgia state kindergarten standards (98.8%), GKIDS (89.2%), school principals (82.9%), data-driven instruction (81.9%), other kindergarten teachers (79.3%), availability of instructional materials (79.2%), children’s preschool experiences (75%), and school professional development opportunities (72.8%). The least influential issues include parental expectations (59%), professional conferences (54.3%), budget considerations (50.6%), first grade teachers (46.4%), local board of educations (42.7%), professional literature (40.7%), the superintendent (38.8%), and standardized tests (29.6%).

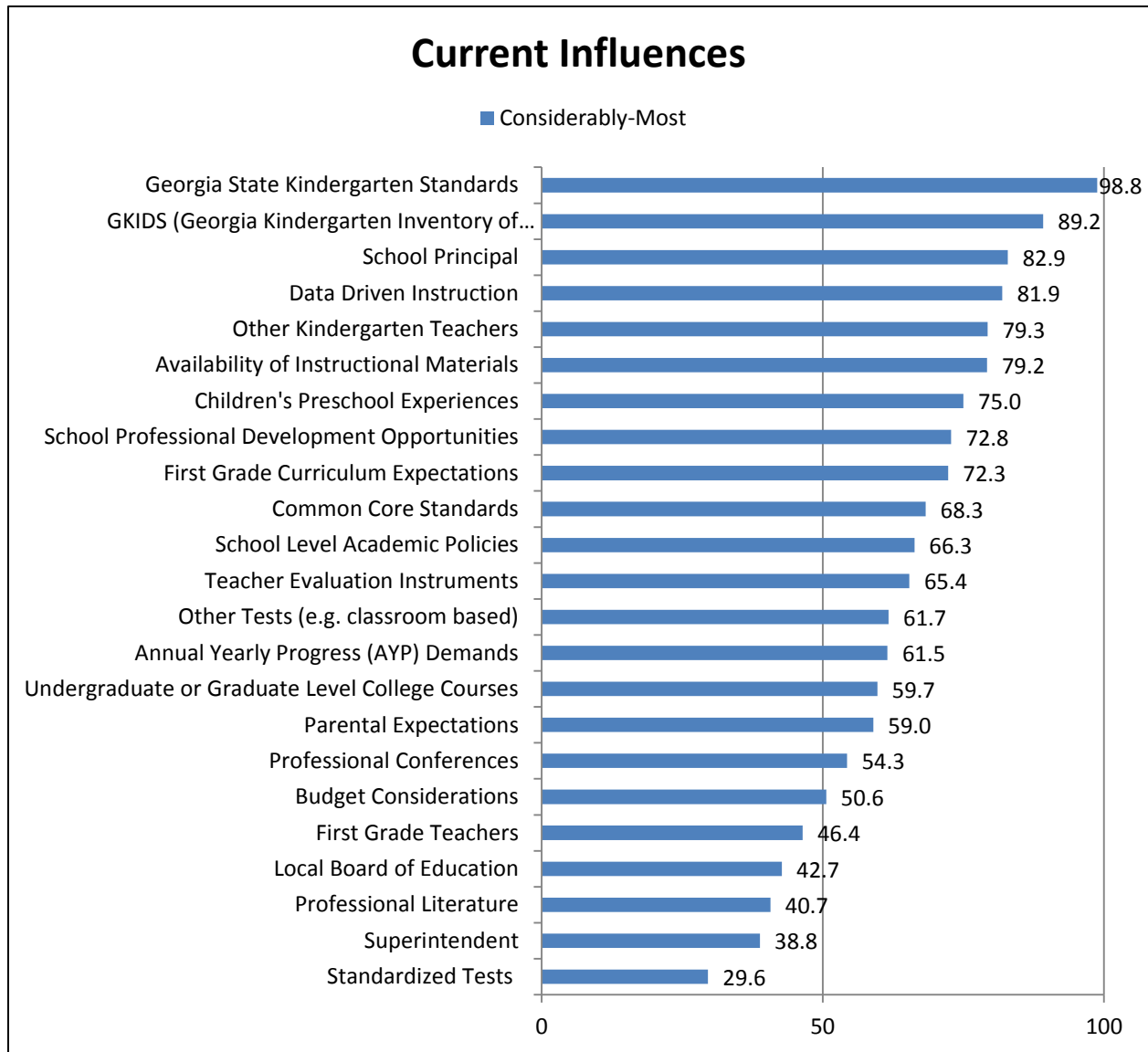


Figure 11. Beliefs about Current Influences on Teaching Kindergarten

When asked an open-ended question regarding the major issues confronting kindergarten teachers today, teachers alluded to many issues including but not limited to: time, having to move all students along the same continuum regardless of individual background experiences, school administrators, GKIDS, standards, developmentally inappropriate requirements, academic demands and the neglect of the social/emotional learning domain, the lack of readiness skills children bring to kindergarten, lack of funding for materials, scheduling demands from

administration, assessments and test scores, and little flexibility in the classroom. Several teachers expressed their concern of diverse students who are all expected to leave kindergarten at the same point. Many critical issues and factors face teachers in kindergarten and directly impact the purpose and role kindergarten plays in the lives of children today.

Summary

The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the reality of the kindergarten classroom in today's world of education. The aim of the research was to reveal kindergarten teachers' perspectives on (a) how young children should be taught, (b) the reality of how kindergarten teachers are actually able to teach, and (c) current influences on their ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered across three school districts in one state in Georgia.

Descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies, reveal a closer glimpse of the reality of kindergarten classrooms in Georgia. Approximately 50% or more teachers believed in all of the child-centered and teacher-directed instructional practices. Teachers claim to both believe in and primarily use child-centered instructional materials, methods, and procedures. However, the data indicated discrepancies between the instructional material, methods, and procedures that the teachers believed to be the most effective and what they actually use the most. Approximately half of the teachers surveyed believed they teach the way they should teach, while half of the teachers surveyed did not believe they teach the way they should teach. Teachers indicated receiving much guidance from the state, district, and school, but have little flexibility in the classroom. Finally, standards, assessment, data-driven instruction, and building-level administration ranked as the most influential factors facing kindergarten teachers today.

CHAPTER FIVE. DISCUSSION

Summary of the Study

Current research reveals the changing dynamics of early childhood classrooms as teachers face heavy academic pressure (Brown, 2009; Cress, 2004; Gallant, 2009; Goldstein 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b; Graue, 2008; Passman, 2001; Quin & Ethridge, 2006; Rushton & Juolo-Rushton, 2008; Stipek, 2006a, 2006b; Stipek & Byler, 1997; Williamson, Bondy, Langley, Mayne, 2005; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). However, quantitative research on kindergarten teachers' viewpoints on the changing philosophy and faster-is-better approach to teaching and learning is limited to two studies conducted in Vermont and Michigan (Gehsmann, Woodside-Jiron, & Gallant, 2005; Lipson, Goldhaber, Daniels, & Sortino, 1994). In order to address a gap in the literature, a study was conducted that examined kindergarten teachers' perspectives on (a) how young children should be taught, (b) the reality of how kindergarten teachers are actually able to teach, and (c) current influences on their ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered across three school districts in Georgia. The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the face of early childhood education in today's world of education.

The Kindergarten Survey (Appendix A) was administered to approximately 180 kindergarten teachers across three school districts in Georgia. The Kindergarten Survey was adapted with permission from an original survey (Gehsmann, Woodside-Jiron, & Gallant, 2005;

Lipson, Goldhaber, Daniels, & Sortino, 1994). Teachers in the three school districts either completed the online version of the survey or the paper and pencil version of the survey. Responses were recorded into Qualtrics and analyzed using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Statistics 20.

Limitations

The study is limited in several ways. First, the study relied solely on the method of self-report. In self-report, participants may exaggerate or neglect to report. With self-report, teachers may simply say what they understand in theory, but not what they practice in reality. Findings may be greatly skewed because of the factor of self-report. Classroom observations with instructional checklists may help to validate results.

The study also utilized convenience sampling in a small geographical area that limited the generalizations that can be made toward a larger population. Three neighboring school districts in Georgia participated in the study. Administration of the survey in varying geographical locations with a greater participant population may increase the significance of the generalizations.

The time allotted to collect the data is another factor that limits the study. In two school districts, there was a two week period allotted to the participant population for online survey response with an additional week follow-up period. During the week follow-up period, the researcher delivered a hard-copy of the survey to each school so that the teachers could choose whether to complete the survey online or with paper and pencil. In the third school district, the researcher attended a county-wide kindergarten meeting where surveys were passed out to the teachers. The teachers were not permitted to complete the survey at the meeting; they were

asked to complete and return the survey within one week. Follow-up opportunities in the third school district did not meet the time restraints of this research.

Finally, the utilization of technology to administer and collect surveys may limit the participant populations' responses. Some kindergarten teachers may be less likely to respond to the survey via the internet. Also, in one school district, I relied on the principals' participation in forwarding an email with the research information to the teachers. Therefore, teachers received the research information depending on the principal's priorities and schedule.

Discussion of the Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

Quantitative research on kindergarten teachers' viewpoints on the changing philosophy and faster-is-better approach to teaching and learning can be found in two studies conducted in Vermont and Michigan (Gehsmann, Woodside-Jiron, & Gallant, 2005; Lipson, Goldhaber, Daniels, & Sortino, 1994). It was with permission from the original authors of this study that the researcher adapted the original survey to meet the needs of the current research. Gallant (2009) reported on the research findings from both 1994 and 2005. The results from the current research study compliment the findings from the 2005 study conducted in Vermont and Michigan. As in Gallant's work, "Results affirm that research on early literacy, and/or the push to influence instruction through standards, assessment, and grade level expectations, is changing the kindergarten experience for students and teachers" (p. 6). Throughout the discussion reference to Gallant's study is made, as her work indirectly led to the present research.

"A Kindergarten Teacher Should..." Instructional Implications

The first research question examined kindergarten teachers' perspectives on how young children learn. Specifically, the survey examined how kindergarten teachers' believe children learn and should be taught. Findings indicate that teachers believe in both child-centered and

teacher-directed practices. For child-centered instructional practices, more than 90% of the teachers surveyed believed in the importance of providing open-ended materials and experiences, challenging children's problem solving, expecting motivation from the students if the curriculum is appropriate, and encouraging children to explore building material. The use of open-ended materials, problem-solving, children's intrinsic motivation, and exploration of building material are all characteristics or qualities of free play and traditional kindergarten centers. Gallant (2009) also found these teaching practices to be heavily emphasized (80–97%).

However, in the current study, approximately 50% of teachers believe in the importance of free play and the use of centers as a primary method for teaching. How can 40% of teachers believe in the characteristics or qualities of free play and centers, yet not believe in the instructional means to provide such opportunities? According to Rushton and Juola-Rushton (2008), “student choice, engagement and self-regulation provide activation of a diversity of parts of the brain” (p. 89). Centers and play experiences enhance the element of choice, the level of engagement, and self-regulation in young children (NAEYC, 2009). However, forms of play are being eliminated from the structured school day and workbooks and worksheets are taking its place (Gallant, 2009; Jacobson, 2008). If teachers are not providing instructional means such as centers and free play to develop such skills, what exactly does their instruction look like? A follow-up focus group with kindergarten teachers would allow such questions.

According to the data per years of experience, more teachers who have been teaching for over 15 years or less than 5 years believe in the majority of child-centered practices than teachers who have been teaching between 6 and 14 years. Examples of this are found in the data pertaining to the use of centers as a primary method for teaching, designing the classroom to challenge children's problem solving, make individual decisions about the curriculum based on

each child's abilities and interests, and encouraging children to explore building material. Pure speculation as to why this occurred may be that the novice teachers understand the early childhood theory freshly taught through their educational preparation program; the veteran teachers may have seen academic movements come and go for many years and through their experience, they may value these child-centered strategies despite tension to move an entire class systematically through state-standards. The group of teachers who have been teaching for 6-14 years may have felt the most impact from the standards and accountability movements that have impacted the educational system. A shift in educational reform has resulted in turning kindergarten instruction from child-centered activities towards more content-driven activities (Graue, 2008). A child-centered, inquiry-based, interest-driven approach to education will intrinsically motivate children to become life-long learners while a district-mandated, teacher-centered curriculum limits the promotion of higher order thinking (Miller et al., 2009; Mitchell, Foulger, Wetzel, & Rathkey, 2009; Wohllwend, 2008).

More than 50% of teachers also agreed with the use of teacher-directed practices in the kindergarten classroom, with much less agreement overall than child-centered practices.

Approximately 70% of teachers believe in the use of privileges, prizes, rewards, or compensations to motivate children. This contradicts Gallant's (2009) finding that 12–34% of teachers in Vermont and Michigan believed in the use of privileges, prizes, rewards, or compensations to motivate children. Intrinsically motivated children with the desire to be life-long learners should not need the use of privileges, prizes, and rewards to be motivated. If teachers are relying on privileges, prizes, and rewards, then why do over 90% of teachers also believe that children should be motivated if the curriculum is appropriate? These two findings indicate that in fact the use of privileges, prizes, and rewards may be because the standards and

curriculum are inappropriate for kindergarten students. When teachers were asked open-ended questions on the survey regarding their ability or inability to teach the way that they would like to teach, developmentally inappropriate expectations was the number one reference (12/28). It is possible that these expectations lead to inappropriate instruction in which the teachers must resort to prizes and rewards to motivate students both in an academic and behavioral manner.

Belief in Effective Instructional Materials, Methods, and Procedures

A research question examined kindergarten teachers' perspectives on how young children learn in that if under no curriculum or policy restrictions from the school, system, or state, would kindergarten teachers want to implement child-centered literacy instructional strategies or teacher-directed literacy instructional strategies. The teachers claim to both believe in and use the most child-centered instructional materials, methods, and procedures. Over 50% believe in and use storytelling, readings centers, writing centers, nonfiction and information trade books, interactive writing, big books, fiction trade books, shared reading, journals, and chants, songs, and poetry. From the teacher-directed instructional materials, methods, and procedures, over 50% of teachers surveyed believe in and use flashcards and systematic phonics. The belief and use of both child-centered and teacher-directed instructional material, methods, and procedures is supported by the tension between developmentally appropriate, child-centered practices and drill and skill, teacher-directed learning (Gallant, 2009).

The majority of teachers believed in every child-centered instructional practice except for the use of student-made books and the listening center. Only 41.7% of teachers believe in the effectiveness of the listening center, the lowest ranking child-centered instructional material. This may be because of the changes in technology where tape recorders are outdated and inconvenient and newer technology is expensive and limited. Computer websites and

applications that read aloud storybooks may have taken the place of the traditional listening center. Future uses of this survey might use a more inclusive, updated term.

From the child-centered instructional methods, only 34.5% of teachers believe in dramatic play and 11.9% of teachers believe in puppetry. A possible explanation of this may be that the academic, content-focused approach to teaching the standards does not allow for dramatic play. Ironically, 76.2% of teachers believe in the effectiveness of shared reading where dramatic play and puppetry are important elements of the shared reading approach (Fisher & Medvic, 2000). If 76.2% of teachers believe in shared reading, how do they define and implement shared reading? Promotion of Fisher and Medvic's (2000) shared reading model may enable teachers to confidently embrace puppetry and dramatic play in their literacy instruction.

Interestingly, the current survey categorized instructional materials, methods, or procedures as child-centered that were identified as explicit, curriculum-driven instructional tools in Gallant's (2009) research. Examples of this include shared reading, shared writing, journals, and big books. Gallant also found that teachers employ "phonics workbooks and worksheets (46%)—a dramatic change from 1992 in Vermont, when only 2.6%" (p. 6) employed such practices. In the current study, 48.8% of teachers use phonics workbooks and worksheets.

Another part of this research question examined if the teachers surveyed reported actually implementing child-centered literacy instructional strategies or teacher-directed literacy instructional strategies. The researcher hypothesized that teachers do not use the strategies that they in fact believe to be the most effective. It is interesting to note that there are some minor discrepancies between the instructional material, methods, and procedures that teachers believe to be the most effective and what they use the most. More teachers indicated that they use systematic phonics, flashcards, phonics workbooks and practice sheets, handwriting instruction

and practice books, and supplemental reading programs than teachers indicated that they believe in these particular instructional materials, methods, and procedures. All of these instructional materials, methods, and procedures were categorized as teacher-directed. On the other hand, more teachers believe puppetry, dramatic play, storytelling, the listening center, and interactive writing to be the most effective, yet fewer teachers indicated that they utilize these materials, methods, and procedures. All of these particular instructional materials, methods, and procedures were categorized as child-centered. This finding supports the teachers' belief in, yet inability to implement child-centered instructional practices in kindergarten classrooms across three school districts in Georgia. Professional development in preparing teachers to teach in a child-centered manner amidst a standards-based world of education is needed so that teachers can learn how to manipulate the standard to the child and not the child to the standard (Mitchell, Foulger, Wetzel, & Rathkey, 2009; Quinn & Ethridge, 2006).

Response to “I Teach the Way I Believe I Should” Statement

In response to the statement, “I am able to teach the way I believe I should teach kindergarten,” approximately half of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed while half of teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed. The mixture of feelings associated with this statement is alarming. Why is there such a divide in the teachers who are teaching the way they believe they should teach kindergarten versus the teachers who are not teaching the way they believe they should teach kindergarten? When looking at frequencies of teachers according to years of experience, a greater number of the teachers who have been teaching for 15 or more years disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. The changing face and purpose of kindergarten may make these teachers feel less like they are actually able to teach kindergarten the way that they believe they should be teaching kindergarten (Goldstein, 2007; Stipek, 2006).

Teachers were also asked an open-ended question regarding their ability or inability to teach the way that they believe they should teach kindergarten. Those teachers who agreed or strongly agreed that they are able to teach the way that they believe they should teach kindergarten offered explanations such as supportive building level administration (6/29), having an adequate number of resources (9/29), having the freedom to use curriculum guides to then plan lessons appropriate for their individual classroom, assistance from paraprofessionals in the classroom, and parental support. Many teachers also expressed that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, yet they offered insight into criticisms such as no time for hands-on learning experiences, too heavy of an emphasis on an inappropriate number of sight words, and developmentally inappropriate expectations. One teacher who agreed that he/she was able to teach the way he/she believed he/she should teach stated, “I am not an ‘old school’ kindergarten teacher. I teach more like 1st grade—but the children rise to the occasion every year.” Another teacher expressed the purpose of kindergarten:

Children at the kindergarten level are not developmentally ready for what they have to do in kindergarten but we have to help them get developmentally ready and keep them toward learning to be able to have the skills and abilities to make them successful in first grade. Kindergarten is not like it used to be with play all day and nap time, which is pre-kindergarten now. Kindergarten now is preparing the student for first grade and success in life.

While these teachers expressed that they are teaching kindergarten the way that they believe they should teach kindergarten, the statements above reflect the dynamic shift in kindergarten’s purpose as evidenced in the literature (Goldstein, 2007b; Stipek, 2006a).

Teachers who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, implying that they are unable to teach the way that they believe they should teach kindergarten, cited reasons such as the demand to teach developmentally inappropriate skills and standards (12/28), unrealistic expectations from administrators on all levels (5/28), lack of play and hands-on experiences (5/28), lack of parental involvement, student behavior issues, assessments and documentation take away from the teachers ability to teach students, and the lack of teacher autonomy in the classroom. One teacher stated,

We push the skills down to kindergarten when they are not developmentally ready to learn those skills. Teachers should be able to encourage the kids to explore their world and learn through experience—not know how to add and subtract instead of play with peers.

Again, these elaborated explanations focus on the issues expanded on by much of the existing literature emphasizing the shift from child-centered pedagogy (Gallant, 2009).

Teacher Autonomy and Influences

The final research question examined teacher autonomy and influences on kindergarten teachers' ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered. Specifically, the study examined what enables or prevents current kindergarten teachers to teach the way they believe they should teach, how autonomous current kindergarten teachers are in three school districts in Georgia when implementing curriculum, what influences teacher autonomy when implementing curriculum, and the major issues confronting kindergarten teachers today.

The survey asked teachers a series of questions regarding teacher autonomy. Approximately 90% of teachers stated that they receive curriculum guidance from the school,

district, or state. Possibly because of this guidance, less than 50% of the teachers believe that they have flexibility in deciding their curriculum from day to day. This trend follows Gallant's (2009) findings in the survey she conducted with kindergarten teachers in Vermont and Michigan. "Over 40 percent of the respondents, however, reported a low level of flexibility in making curricular decisions. This contrasts significantly with the 1992 study in Vermont, in which 95% of the teachers reported total autonomy over their programs" (p. 12). How can schools, districts, and states support teachers in the classroom without eliminating their ability to act as professionals? It is imperative to educate policy makers and educational leaders on appropriate instructional strategies for young children (Elliott & Olliff, 2008).

Another set of questions examined current influences on kindergarten teachers and how they teach. The most influential issues included the Georgia state kindergarten standards, the Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (GKIDS), school principals, data-driven instruction, other kindergarten teachers, availability of instructional materials, children's preschool experiences, and school professional development opportunities. The evidence that Georgia state kindergarten standards, GKIDS, and data-driven instruction are among the most influential factors facing kindergarten teachers in today's classroom is supported by the current literature which generally shows the impact of standards and accountability on early childhood education (Brown, 2009; Cress, 2004; Gallant, 2009; Goldstein 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b; Graue, 2008; Passman, 2001; Quin & Ethridge, 2006; Rushton & Juolo-Rushton, 2008; Stipek, 2006a, 2006b; Stipek & Byler, 1997; Williamson, Bondy, Langley, Mayne, 2005; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009).

One of the least influential issues was professional literature which indicates a need for more effective practitioner publications to directly impact the field of early childhood education.

In today's world of academic tension and pressure, where approximately half of the teachers surveyed are unable to teach kindergarten the way that they believe they should teach kindergarten, it is pertinent that theory and research-based publications impact the practitioners. After all, what is the purpose of professional literature and publications if there is no impact from this work? Another finding was that standardized tests were viewed as the least influential. This may stem from in fact that standardized tests do not directly impact the world of kindergarten, yet indirectly, they may be the cause for the dramatically changing face of early childhood education through the other influences, such as standards and GKIDS that were seen as highly influential (Gallant, 2009).

When asked an open-ended question regarding the major issues confronting kindergarten teachers today, teachers alluded to many issues including but not limited to: academic standards that do not take into account varying individual differences and are often developmentally inappropriate for many of the students, assessments and test scores driving instruction and daily routines, a lack of funding for hand-on materials, and a lack of flexibility for instructional decisions in the classroom. One kindergarten teacher emphasized the purpose of kindergarten. The teacher stated, "Kindergarten is no longer a place of play and fun, it is now a learning institution just as the other grades are and should be thought of in this way."

Several teachers expressed their concern of diverse students who are all expected to leave kindergarten at the same point.

The most critical issue facing kindergarten teachers is implementing a standards-based curriculum to a very diverse group of kindergarten students. A class can vary greatly from a student that has been exposed to an enriching environment to a student that has

hardly been spoken to for the first five years of his/her life. Meeting all of their needs is difficult!

Many critical issues and factors face teachers in kindergarten and directly impact the changing purpose and role kindergarten plays in the lives of children today. As results indicated in Gallant's study (2009), if teachers continue to feel tension and pull that leads to dissatisfaction in the classroom as a professional, the early childhood experience is likely to decline for both the teacher and the student.

Need for Further Research

There is a need to further the results of this study. In order to extend this research study, there is a need for in-field classroom observations that would allow for an even greater look into the face of kindergarten in today's classrooms. Unfortunately, with survey research teachers may report beliefs and practices that differ from reality. In-field observations to verify the study findings may enhance the educational implications. Another way to strengthen this research study is to follow-up the survey data with teacher interviews. While survey data helps to quantify teachers' beliefs, practices, and influences, it does not offer opportunities to further probe for information. The researcher found that new questions stemmed from each survey result.

Researchers must take a closer look into the standards movement. While setting high expectations for students is very appropriate, we must not sacrifice their development. The good intentions of the policymakers to increase achievement may in fact have more negative implications in the future. Young children construct knowledge through their interactions and experiences with the world and other people. If we take away young children's time to interact and experience, and instead try to impose adult knowledge onto them through superficial

teaching strategies, development does not occur. In the long run, the children will enter adulthood without ever receiving the fundamental background needed to build knowledge and understanding. A research focus on standards and early childhood is needed in order to protect our young people.

Much of the data regarding teacher beliefs, practices, and influences is split with many teachers believing in both child-centered and teacher-directed practices. An all kindergarten, constructivist-based school exists in another state. If the survey could be available to the teachers at that particular school, survey results may differ from the results of the larger population. While data from one school would be limited in generalizability, it would be interesting to see how the philosophy of the school as a whole may impact survey findings.

Conclusion

The first hypothesis stated that current kindergarten teachers believe that young children learn best when taught through child-centered instruction. Although the data supports this hypothesis, teachers also believe in teacher-directed instruction. The second hypothesis stated that current kindergarten teachers are actually teaching children in a teacher-directed manner. Although teachers claim to primarily utilize child-centered instruction, it is evident from the data that teachers often implement a combination of child-centered and teacher-directed practices. The third hypothesis stated that current influences on kindergarten teachers' ability or inability to implement instructional and curriculum decisions that are child-centered include issues related to administration, children, educational practice, colleague influences, professional preparation, and educational policy. Data supports the hypothesis that standards, assessments, the principal, and data-driven instruction influences the instructional and curricular decisions of current kindergarten teachers.

It is evident that the face of kindergarten is changing. While teachers expressed belief in child-centered practices, the state standards and expectations of administration of all levels is a major influence. Educating policymakers and administrators in the constructivist theory of early childhood education may help to support teachers as they struggle to remain child-centered in a content-focused educational system.

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Appendix A
Kindergarten Teacher Survey

Q1. I have been teaching kindergarten for

- 5 or fewer years 15 or more years
 6-14 years Do not want to answer

Q2. Indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. Kindergarten teachers SHOULD...

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Allocate major segments of each day for free play	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Base curriculum decisions on observations of children's use of materials	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Base judgments about learning on completion of behavioral objectives	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Design the classroom to challenge children's problem-solving	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Encourage children to explore building materials (e.g. blocks, Legos™)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Expect children to be motivated if the curriculum is appropriate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Involve all children in formal scripted or prescribed reading instruction	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Involve children in whole-class activities for most of the day	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Make decisions about the curriculum based on the expectations of the teacher(s) in the next grade	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Make individual decisions about the curriculum based on each child's abilities and interests	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Provide children with many open-ended materials and experiences	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Provide substantial workbook and other seatwork activity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Require all children to take part in every activity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Show more interest in how children work/play than in what they produce.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Teach skills in sequence to mastery before exposing children to knowledge and skills that are more complex	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Use centers as a primary method for teaching	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Use privileges, prizes, rewards or competitions to motivate children	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q3.1 Indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statement:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am able to teach the way that I believe I should teach kindergarten.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q3.2 If you **ARE** able to teach the way you believe, what enables you to provide the type of program you would like? **OR** If you **ARE NOT** able to teach the way you believe, what would make a difference in your ability to provide the type of program you would like?

Q4a. From the following list of **INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS**, please select the materials that you **USE THE MOST** in your literacy instruction.

- Big Books
- Chants, Songs, Poetry
- Commercial Kits (e.g. Storybox, SRA used to fidelity)
- Systematic Comprehensive Core Reading Program (e.g. commercially published basal)
- Fiction Trade Books
- Flashcards
- Handwriting Practice Books / Materials
- Journals
- Listening Center
- Nonfiction / Informational Trade Books
- Phonics Workbooks and Practice Sheets
- Reading Center
- Student-Made Books
- Supplemental Reading Programs (commercially published)
- Writing Center

Q4b. From the following list of **INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS**, please select the materials that you **BELIEVE ARE THE MOST EFFECTIVE** when teaching literacy to young children.

- Big Books
- Chants, Songs, Poetry
- Commercial Kits (e.g. Storybox, SRA used to fidelity)
- Systematic Comprehensive Core Reading Program (e.g. commercially published basal)
- Fiction Trade Books
- Flashcards
- Handwriting Practice Books / Materials
- Journals
- Listening Center
- Nonfiction / Informational Trade Books
- Phonics Workbooks and Practice Sheets
- Reading Center
- Student-Made Books
- Supplemental Reading Programs (commercially published)
- Writing Center

Q5a. From the following list of INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS AND PROCEDURES, please select the methods or procedures that you **USE THE MOST** in your literacy instruction.

- Dramatic Play
- Handwriting Instruction
- Interactive Writing
- Letter of the Week
- Puppetry
- Round Robin Reading
- Shared Reading
- Spelling Instruction
- Storytelling
- Systematic Phonics

Q5b. From the following list of INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS AND PROCEDURES, please select the methods or procedures that you **BELIEVE ARE THE MOST EFFECTIVE** when teaching literacy to young children.

- Dramatic Play
- Handwriting Instruction
- Interactive Writing
- Letter of the Week
- Puppetry
- Round Robin Reading
- Shared Reading
- Spelling Instruction
- Storytelling
- Systematic Phonics

Q6. Please answer the following questions.

	Almost None	Slight	Much	Very Much
How much flexibility do you have in deciding your curriculum from day to day?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How much curriculum guidance or direction do you receive from your school, district, or state?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am trusted as a professional in early childhood education to make instructional decisions in my classroom that best meet the needs of my individual students.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

If you would like to explain your answer(s) to any of the three statements above, please do so here. (optional)

Q7. Which of the following sources has been **influential** in determining the way that you **actually teach** your kindergarten children?

Q7.a Issues Related to Administration of Education Programs

	Not Influential	Slightly Influential	Considerably Influential	Most Influential
Availability of Instructional Materials	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Teacher Evaluation Instruments	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Local Board of Education	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Budget Considerations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
School Level Administrative Policies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q7.b Issues Related to Children

	Not Influential	Slightly Influential	Considerably Influential	Most Influential
Children’s Preschool Experiences	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Parental Expectations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q7.c Issues Related to Educational Practice and Policy

	Not Influential	Slightly Influential	Considerably Influential	Most Influential
First Grade Curriculum Expectations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Standardized Tests	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other Tests (e.g. classroom based)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
GKIDS (Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) Demands	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Data-Driven Instruction	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Common Core Standards	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Georgia State Kindergarten Standards	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Which of the following sources has been **influential** in determining the way that you **actually teach** your kindergarten children? (Cont.)

Q7.d Colleague Influences

	Not Influential	Slightly Influential	Considerably Influential	Most Influential
Superintendent	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
School Principal	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
First Grade Teachers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other Kindergarten Teachers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q7.e Issues Related to Professional Preparation

	Not Influential	Slightly Influential	Considerably Influential	Most Influential
Undergraduate or Graduate Level College Courses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Professional Conferences	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Professional Literature	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
School Professional Development Opportunities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q8. Based on your response to this survey, what are the 1-2 most critical issues, factors, and/or individuals confronting kindergarten teachers and curriculum implementation today?

Thank you for your participation.

The survey instrument was adapted with permission from an existing survey.

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