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Kindergarten Teachers' Perceptions about the Language and Literacy Skills of Their Students

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Kindergarten Teachers' Perceptions about the Language and Literacy Skills of Their Students

A Thesis Presented to the Graduate Faculty of

Minnesota State University Moorhead

By

Toni Gohman

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Abstract

In the United States, 68 percent of four-year-old children and 86 percent of five-year-old children were enrolled in a preprimary program in 2017 (Institute of Education Sciences [IES], 2019). Preprimary programs are defined as programs that provide educational instruction and childcare, which includes both preschool and kindergarten. Because children entering kindergarten have a diverse array of experiences due to their home environments and previous experience in childcare, they have varying abilities when it comes to skills in language and literacy. Language can be defined as the words that are used to share information and how they are used to communicate, whereas literacy refers to the use and understanding of written language (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association [ASHA], n.d.a). Kindergarten teachers are tasked with the evaluation and teaching of language and literacy skills each year. In order to understand the experience of kindergarten teachers in evaluating and teaching language and literacy skills, as well as how expectations and performance of children have changed over time, the researcher conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with kindergarten teachers who have been teaching for five years or longer. Results revealed that kindergarten teachers' expectations for language and literacy skills upon entrance to kindergarten have increased over the last 10 years, and teachers perceive that their students, particularly students of the 2019-2020 school year, have a wide range in skills and abilities when it comes to language and literacy, causing milestones to be met inconsistently.

Keywords: language, literacy, development, milestones, kindergarten, teachers

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Kindergarten students are a diverse group of children who have a wide variety of skills and abilities. One kindergarten classroom may contain a child who can tie her shoes and correctly identify her body parts as well as another student who struggles to count to ten and cannot identify more than the first letter of his first name. Some children who attend kindergarten were enrolled in preschool programs during the previous year while, for others, this might be their first time spending the days away from their stay-at-home mother, father, family member, or caregiver. The fact that these children enter school with a variety of life experiences means that the locker and cubby areas are a rich estuary of skills and ideas.

Language and literacy begin to develop at birth primarily due to stimuli provided by the developing auditory system (Lee, 2013; Owens, 2005). Language describes the words that humans use to share information and how they are used to communicate (ASHA, n.d.a). Language development occurs concurrently with gross and fine motor skills, which allow a child to explore the world around them and to gain further exposure to vocabulary. Language development occurs rapidly during the preschool years, and, by age five, children have acquired approximately 90 percent of the syntactic structures that are used in adulthood. The aspect of language of most interest for this review is literacy, which describes the use and understanding of written language. Early literacy skills include knowledge of the alphabet, phonological awareness, and print concepts (Girolametto, Weitzman, & Greenberg, 2012). As early as 18-months, a child begins to look at books (Owens, 2005). By 24-months-old, children pretend to read books and as well as imitate writing thanks to better-developed attention and fine motor skills.

The development of language and literacy are both dependent on the environments that children are exposed to as they mature (Cunningham, Zibulsky, & Callahan, 2009). For example,

many children develop early literacy skills prior to being able to read by participating in shared book reading in their home environments (Girolametto et al., 2012). Highly important to the development of successful reading skills, is the exposure to reading early on by the child's parents or family members (Owens, 2005). It has been theorized that an environment that is rich in language and print materials will promote strong language and literacy skills (Cunningham et al., 2009). As such, children who grow up with fewer literacy-based interactions in the home may be disadvantaged in the development of language and literacy.

At the start of kindergarten, despite the variety of environments in which they are raised, children are expected to have certain skills mastered. Since language and literacy skills are highly important to children's academic success, it is important to identify the children who have skills that are lagging behind their same-age-peers.

By the end of kindergarten, children are expected to have mastered certain skills in language and literacy. Some of the language milestones children are expected to reach include answering yes/no questions, retelling a story, and taking turns while having a conversation (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association [ASHA], n.d.b). Some of the expectations regarding literacy development that should be achieved by the end of kindergarten include understanding how to read a book, identifying rhyming words, and saying the sounds associated with letters (ASHA, n.d.b). Identifying children who are struggling to reach milestones at the beginning of the year may help to redirect their paths so that they are able to reach the milestones they need to be successful in the subsequent years of primary school.

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused schools in Minnesota to close in order to prevent the spread of the virus (Executive Order No. 20-19, 2020). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools in Minnesota resorted virtual or distance learning for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year (Executive Order No. 20-41, 2020). Thus, kindergarten teachers provided their kindergarten students with virtual instruction starting in March 2020. Executive Order No.

20-19 and Executive Order No. 20-41 can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B, respectively.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to examine the expectations teachers have about the language and literacy performance of their students at the start of kindergarten. Data for the study was collected through the use of open-ended qualitative interviews with kindergarten teachers from public school districts in the upper Midwest.

Research Questions

In order to understand the language and literacy expectations of kindergarten students, qualitative research was conducted. The current study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What expectations do kindergarten teachers have regarding the language and literacy milestones that children are anticipated to meet at the beginning of the school year?

2. How do kindergarten teachers perceive that their students are performing on the milestones upon entrance to kindergarten?

3. How have kindergarten teachers' expectations for kindergarteners' language and literacy skills changed over the last 10 years?

Significance of the Study

The current study was significant because the researcher examined kindergarten teacher's perceptions and expectations about the language and literacy milestones of their students at the beginning of the school year. This information may be helpful to both kindergarten teachers as well as teachers and SLPs who work in preschool and/or other early childhood education settings.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Factors Influencing Literacy and Language Development

Children begin kindergarten with a wide variety of skills and knowledge, largely due to the experiences and learning opportunities that they have had previously (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d.). The Minnesota Department of Education (2019) maintains that all children eligible for kindergarten (at least five years old by September first of kindergarten year, who have participated in childhood screening, and received appropriate immunizations) are ready to learn, despite the differences in knowledge and skills seen at this age. Skill levels in areas of art, language and literacy, math, scientific thinking, social and emotional development, and social systems vary greatly in kindergarten. Children's knowledge and skills are affected by their early environments, which consist of their families, early childcare programs, and/or communities. Children exposed to high-quality early learning environments and experiences prior to the start of kindergarten may enter with stronger skills and have higher success in kindergarten.

In terms of language and literacy skills, children enter kindergarten with different skill levels due to their home environments and experience in childcare. Research has shown that children who participated in learning activities in the home and attended preschool, regardless of program type, had higher scores in areas of mathematics, reading, and approaches to learning than children who did not have learning activities in the home and/or attend preschool (Nelson, 2005). The study also showed that at-risk children (English as a second language, low parental education, and/or financial aid recipient) scored lower on all assessments than children who did not have any risk factors. Early childhood education programs can take a variety of forms (Head

Start, faith-based childcare, private childcare, care provided by family, friends, or neighbors, or in-home learning experiences provided by parents), thus providing different experiences for children (Minnesota Department of Education, 2019). Additionally, if a child attended an early education program with an educator who was trained in facilitating emergent literacy skills, the child will likely exhibit stronger skills at the start of kindergarten than children who did not have the same experience (Girolametto et al., 2012). Research has shown that attendance of public preschool results in higher literacy skills (at or above benchmark) extending past kindergarten and well into first grade (Haslip, 2018).

Changes in Kindergarten Over Time

Kindergarten, meaning "children's garden," was created by a German educator, Freidrich Froebel, in 1837 (Early Childhood Today Editorial Staff, n.d.). The idea was born from his experiences with children while tutoring, which convinced him that children need to be able to pursue their own interests and explore freely. Thus, the teacher's role in the kindergarten classroom was to mimic that of a supportive parent, to be a guide rather than a lecturer. Up until recently, the kindergarten classroom was initially viewed as a transitionary period between home and school; however, over time, standards have changed, with notable changes occurring after the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001 (Costantino-Lane, 2019; Gottfried, Sublett, & Kirksey, 2019). At that time, the kindergarten curriculum became increasingly focused on achievement rather than play, with the implementation of rigorous academic standards.

Standards for literacy achievement had begun to change prior to the implementation of NCLB, with the belief in the 1930s that reading instruction should not occur until halfway through a child's sixth year (Costantino-Lane, 2020). By the 1960s, reading instruction

previously provided in first grade was implemented in kindergarten. With a higher focus on standards-based curriculum starting in the early 2000s, expectations for literacy in kindergarten have increased.

In addition to a change in academic standards, kindergarten has also changed its daily format over time. Many kindergarten classrooms have moved from half-day or part-day kindergarten to full-day kindergarten in order to have more time to accommodate for the academic standards (Gallant, 2009). This research study was conducted in kindergarten classrooms in Michigan and revealed teachers' concern about having enough instruction time to implement standards, calling for universal full-day kindergarten programs. Studies have shown that children who attend full-day kindergarten perform higher in literacy measures than children who attend half-day or part-day kindergarten programs (Pelletier & Corter, 2019; Zvoch, Reynolds, & Parker, 2008). According to the Minnesota Department of Education (n.d.), 99% of Minnesota's kindergartners attend full-day programs.

Pedagogical Approaches

With the implementation of full-day kindergarten and more rigorous academic standards, kindergarten classrooms have become increasingly more focused on teacher-directed instruction rather than child-directed play (Briggs, Russell, & Wanless, 2017). Research has shown that many educators have a preference for the more traditional kindergarten education envisioned by Froebel, where children play under the supervision of the kindergarten teacher (Gallant, 2009). However, other teachers have reported that the new academic standards don't interfere with their ability to teach through the use of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP), as they are able to incorporate the targeted skills into preferred activities (Goldstein, 2006). One study revealed that teachers who believed that literacy development could be targeted during play were able to

successfully incorporate literacy materials in teacher-led play whereas classrooms in which

teachers did not see a connection between play and literacy development did not exhibit

successful incorporation or use of literacy materials in the play setting (Pyle, Prioletta, &

Poliszczuk, 2018). As such, there may be more ways to implement literacy curriculum in the

kindergarten classroom while still emphasizing play.

Review of Related Literature

    Quantitative studies. A study conducted by Beswick, Wilms, and Sloat in 2005 explored

how teacher ratings of emergent literacy skills compared to formal assessment of emergent

literacy skills. Beswick et al. collaborated with 12 teachers in nine different schools in order to

assess the emergent reading skills of 205 kindergarten students who resided in rural areas of

Atlantic Canada. Information regarding the study was sent to parents of all eligible children

attending one of the nine schools in a large school district, and permission was obtained for the

205 students that participated in the study. The researchers met with the principals of each school

to explain the research design and purpose prior to data collection, after which the principals

relayed the information to the participating teachers and confirmed participation in the study.

Beswick et al. then held a preliminary meeting with each teacher to discuss the teacher rating

scales that would be completed as part of the data. Data collection was a two-step process in

which step one consisted of a discussion of The Teacher Rating Scale-Literacy (TRS), a semi-

structured interview to obtain student demographics, teacher completion of the (TRS) using "rate

by trait" procedure, and training and completion of The Conners' Teacher Rating Scale –

Revised: Short Form (Conners). The TRS is a teacher rating scale for skill-specific emergent

literacy skills such as knowledge of letter names, visual discrimination of letter forms,

knowledge of letter-sound correspondence, phonological awareness, decoding skill, and word

identification. The Conners is a norm-referend rating scale designed for teachers to measure externalizing behaviors (aggression and conduct problems) and internalizing behaviors (anxiety). During the second step of data collection, children were individually administered the Word Reading subtest of the Weschler Individual Achievement Test – Second Edition (WIAT-II), which is a norm-referenced assessment of alphabetic knowledge, visual discrimination, phonological awareness, knowledge of letter-sound correspondence, decoding, and word identification. Results showed that teachers rated emergent literacy skills consistently lower than the students' performance on formal testing, with teacher ratings being more negative for students who were male, repeating kindergarten, had mothers with lower education, and exhibited behaviors in the classroom. Beswick et al. concluded that both teacher rating scales and formal assessments should be used to evaluate student literacy. Additionally, the researchers stressed that kindergarten teachers need to be educated on the importance of accurately identifying students who have needs in literacy, as this is a skill that will impact the rest of their education.

In a study conducted by Walpole, Chow, and Justice in 2004, the relationship between kindergarteners' initial literacy, oral language, and social adjustment skills on literacy outcome at the end of the kindergarten year was explored. The researchers used a cohort of 48 at-risk students from three different classrooms in the same southeastern elementary school that had received a Reading Excellence Act grant that allowed for 30 hours of staff development for the kindergarten teachers, which they used to implement literacy programs. Risk factors for these students included poverty (61% of students attending the school qualified for free or reduced lunch), low school-level achievement, and low language and literacy scores from comprehensive state literacy screening protocol. Data were collected during four different periods across the

school year, with social adjustment measures collected from the classroom teacher and other measures directly administered to students individually by researchers or graduate students. Initial literacy data were collected during two weeks in October by using the Rhyme Awareness, Beginning Sound Awareness, Alphabet Recognition, and Letter-Sound Knowledge subtests of the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening-Kindergarten (PALS-K). Oral language was assessed over a two-week period in January and February by administering the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-III (PPVT-III) to assess receptive language skills and the Expressive One Word Picture Vocabulary Test (EOWPVT) to assess expressive language skills. Social adjustment data were collected throughout three weeks in February when teachers completed the ACTeRS for each student after receiving training on the measure. Literacy outcomes were assessed over a two-week period in June by administering the Rhyme Awareness, Beginning Sound Awareness, Alphabet Recognition, Letter-Sound Knowledge, and Word Recognition in Isolation subtests of the PALS-K in addition to the Letter-Name portion of the Developmental Spelling Inventory. Results of the study showed that of the three predictive factors studied (initial literacy, social adjustment, and oral language), initial literacy was the only significant predictor of literacy outcomes, namely that children with higher initial literacy scores had higher literacy outcomes at the end of kindergarten. Walpole et al. also noted that initial literacy scores were highly correlated with oral language scores. The researchers concluded that kindergarten programs should focus on both language and literacy development.

Another study conducted by Bassok, Latham, and Rorem in 2016 compared existing data from kindergarten classrooms in 1998 to kindergarten classrooms in 2010 to investigate kindergarten teachers' belief about school readiness, time spent on specific subjects, classroom organization, pedagogical approaches, and use of standardized assessments. The data used in the

studies was from the 1998 kindergarten cohort and 2011 kindergarten cohort of the Early

Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K), which included detailed surveys of

parents, teachers, and school administrators as well as direct assessment of the children. The

ECLS-K used a multistage probability design to obtain a nationally representative sample, and

the participants of the current study included 2,500 public school kindergarten teachers in 1998

and 2,700 kindergarten teachers in 2010. To assess teachers' beliefs about school readiness,

teachers completed a survey in the fall and spring and indicated how strongly they agreed with

statements about school readiness and expectations for entering kindergarten in addition to rating

the importance of entry-level skills. To assess curricular focus and time use, the ECLS-K surveys

also included a variety of items to report on areas of curricular focus (frequency of teaching each

subject, how often specific skills were taught, etc.). Additionally, kindergarten teachers indicated

whether their classrooms had ten specific activity areas to determine classroom setup and

materials. To assess the pedagogical approach, teachers were asked to report on the amount of

time that was spent on "child-selected activities" and "teacher-directed whole-class activities"

daily. Finally, teachers were asked to indicate how frequently standardized testing was used as

well as how important various factors were while assessing students. Results were analyzed

using descriptive statistics and revealed that teachers rated academic skills with higher

importance in 2010 than teachers did in 1998. Additionally, while attendance of full-day

kindergarten increased from 56% to 80% from 1998 to 2010, children were spending more time

receiving math and literacy instruction but not additional time learning subjects such as social

studies, science, music, and art. Results also indicated that more kindergarten teachers in 2010

used whole-class activities than child-selected activities and used textbooks and worksheets as

teaching materials more frequently than kindergarten teachers in 1998.

Mixed quantitative/qualitative studies. In a study conducted by McMahon, Richmond, and Reeves-Kazelskis in 2001, the relationship between teachers' perception of literacy acquisition and the participation of students in literacy activities as well as quantity and quality of reading material present in the classroom was explored. Participants in the research included 12 kindergarten teachers from six public school districts in Mississippi as well as 16 randomly selected students from each of their classrooms, resulting in a total of 192 participating students. Data was collected through eight classroom observations as well as the administration of the Inventory of Literacy Indicators (ILI) and as well as the Literacy Acquisition Perception Profile (LAPP). The ILI assesses the quantity and quality of literacy materials present in the classroom, in nine areas identified as essential for promoting early literacy development: library center; listening center; books and other reading materials; writing center; signs, labels, and directions; materials for recording language; written information about the current day; student work displays; and center area integration. The ILI assigns scores on a 6-point scale with scores for quantity (resources) ranging from 0 (none) to 5 (abundant) and quality (environmental) scores ranging from 0 (not present) to 5 (excellent). The LAPP was developed by the researchers for the current study to determine kindergarten teachers' perceptions of language acquisition, with teachers being grouped into one of two categories related to literacy development ideologies: Reading Readiness (RR) and Emergent Literacy (EL). Results indicated the classrooms of kindergarten teachers who aligned with EL ideology contained a higher quality and quantity of literacy materials. Additionally, students in the EL classrooms demonstrated higher rates of participation in a greater variety of literacy activities. McMahon et al. concluded that classroom environment and teachers' perceptions of literacy acquisition are both highly important for student participation in literacy activities and, subsequently, overall literacy development.

Espinosa, Thornburg, and Mathews (1997) conducted a study that explored kindergarten

teachers' perceptions of school readiness, which was then compared to the results of a national

survey conducted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 1990. The

research was performed in 11 rural communities of Missouri (populations less than 2,500

people), with a total of 44 participating kindergarten teachers. Espinosa et al. contacted the

principals of each school and requested that the principal explain the study to the kindergarten

teachers. The questionnaires were sent to the principal while the self-addressed envelopes were

sent directly to the teachers. The survey required teachers to rate their entire class of students on

12 items of school readiness as well as rate their students that were in nonparental care on 12

items of school readiness. Additionally, the survey contained five open-ended questions

regarding school readiness over time. Of the skills related to language and literacy, kindergarten

teachers in rural Missouri reported that 28% of children had poor attention; 25% were not ready

to learn math and literacy concepts; 15% were unable to effectively verbally communicate needs,

wants, and thoughts; 25% showed difficulty with turn-taking and sharing; 18% had difficulty

being sensitive to other children's feelings; 15% were not socially competent. Overall,

kindergarten teachers reported that children were less ready for school than children were five

years ago, reporting that the family breakdown was a major reason for this; however, teachers

that reported that children were ready for kindergarten cited quality childcare as the largest

contributor. Based on the results, Espinosa et al. called for easier, universal access to high-

quality childcare, as this resource is often lacking in rural areas.

In another study conducted by Shaughnessy and Sanger in 2005, teachers' perceptions of

language and literacy development, roles of speech-language pathologists (SLPs), and literacy

and language interventions were investigated. The researchers developed a 40-item survey which

consisted of questions regarding demographic information and background, training and experience with SLPs, Likert-type questions related to literacy and language development, and two open-ended questions about teachers' experiences teaching language and literacy. The surveys were mailed to 1,036 kindergarten teachers along with a cover letter explaining the survey and a pre-addressed and stamped envelope. The teachers received a follow-up reminder to complete the survey a month after the initial survey was sent. Respondents included a total of 484 kindergarten teachers, which comprised the study participants. Descriptive analysis was conducted for background information and Likert-type items were rated as agreement or disagreement to statements (1.00-2.49 indicated agreement, 2.50-3.50 indicated neutral, and 3.51-5.00 indicated disagreement). Some questions were left blank by participants, and these "no responses" were considered during calculations. The open-ended questions were analyzed by using a modified procedure in order to identify core themes from nonrepetitive statements. The results indicated that kindergarten teachers were more knowledgeable on language and literacy development than anticipated, teachers valued the work of SLPs and collaborate with them successfully, and that teachers were more unsure about SLPs' role in literacy intervention. In the open-ended responses, teachers reported on wanting to individualize instruction for students, noted that language and literacy skills seemed to be declining in recent years, and expressed frustration with the current curriculum standards.

A study was conducted by Gallant in 2009 to explore teachers' perceptions of implementing current literacy standards. The researcher revised Lipson, Goldhaber, Daniels, and Sortino's (1994) kindergarten survey to reflect the current literacy standards and provided original open-ended questions in addition. The surveys, along with explanatory letters and stamped return envelopes, were then mailed to public elementary school principals in Michigan

with the request to distribute them to kindergarten teachers. Of the approximately 500 kindergarten teachers who received the surveys, 229 teachers responded. The results of the 5-point Likert scale questions indicated that the participating kindergarten teachers preferred a child-centered approach to learning. Constant comparative thematic analysis of the open-ended questions was completed, which revealed two themes: issues related to working conditions and issues related to literacy instruction. Within these themes, teachers reported concern about curriculum appropriateness and a desire for more professional development opportunities in order to teach literacy effectively in light of increased demands. Teachers expressed frustration regarding increased curriculum demands without increased instructional time, particularly calling for mandatory full-day kindergarten as opposed to half-day kindergarten. Additional frustration was expressed about large class sizes and lack of instructional materials. Researchers concluded that teachers perceive current literacy standards to be too high for kindergarteners and they do not feel supported in the implementation of these standards.

Costantino-Lane (2020) performed a study that explored California kindergarten teachers' perceptions of school readiness and reading instruction. The researcher used a researcher-designed questionnaire that contained 35 closed-ended questions and two open-ended prompts. Participants were given a cover letter, consent form, and a paper copy of the questionnaire or weblink and were contacted through the mailing list from the kindergarten conference sponsored by Staff Development for Educators, the California Kindergarten Association, network sampling, or known contacts. There was a total of 103 completed questionnaires from public school teachers in California that were used in the study. The closed-ended questions of the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics whereas the open-ended questions were analyzed using manual coding. The results showed that 49.5% of kindergarten

teachers rated effective communication as being the most important factor to school readiness and being ready to read, with teachers noting that learning to read being dependent on oral language development. Additionally, at the beginning of the school year, many kindergarten teachers perceived that many students did not have adequate oral language skills and were not speaking in full sentences by the end of kindergarten. Costantino-Lane (2020) concluded that kindergarten should be focused on oral language development and social skills and that the standards need to be redesigned if children continue to not meet expectations at the end of the school year.

Qualitative studies. Briggs et al. (2017) conducted a study in which the relationship between kindergarten teachers' attitudes regarding kindergarten curriculum standards and implementation of curriculum standards was investigated. Based on previous research, the researchers posited that two factors would affect kindergarten teacher buy-in to curriculum standards: professional identity and reform context. Briggs et al. conducted interviews with a nested sample of 15 teachers in five schools across two school districts in California. The kindergarten teachers were interviewed up to five different times, including semi-structured formal individual interviews that were recorded and transcribed as well as informal interviews in the schools. Multiple waves of coding of interview transcripts were conducted independently but simultaneously by the first and second authors of the study, with the third author being consulted to resolve discrepancies. The results showed that three different factors appeared to influence teacher buy-in: kindergarten teachers' professional identity, leadership interactions, and perceptions of control. The researchers found that some teachers reported strong support and buy-in for standards reform, with the rationale being that higher academic focus in kindergarten was beneficial to students. Other teachers had consistent negative responses regarding standards

reform, reporting that a more academically focused kindergarten was not best for the students, as they would be giving up time originally devoted to play. Another group of teachers expressed negative reactions to standards reform while also reporting buy-in, indicating that their reservations were due to students not being ready for the academic standards. Researchers found that teachers with higher buy-in to standards reform tended to view themselves as elementary educators rather than early educators, had positive interactions with leadership in the school, and felt they had a sense of control over their classroom. Researchers stressed the importance of kindergarten teacher buy-in based on these factors, as kindergarten teachers ultimately implement the new standards.

In a study conducted by Goldstein in 2006, the researcher explored kindergarten teachers' response to the demands of the curriculum, specifically the shift from DAP to academic standards. The participants of the study were two kindergarten teachers from the same elementary school in Texas. Goldstein observed participants three to four times weekly for 90-240 minutes each visit over a 12-week period, with a total of 25 hours total spent in each classroom. Additionally, the researcher conducted individual interviews with the participants which consisted of a standard interview protocol as well as individualized questions for each participant based on observations. The field notes were reviewed extensively and, when no further insights could be gathered, the interview transcripts were analyzed using a constant comparative method and then a cross-case analysis was performed. The results indicated that both teachers were able to incorporate the standards into their classrooms without compromising the use of DAP, with both teachers feeling that the dichotomy between the two methodologies was a nonissue due to the overall stability of the curriculum. The results also indicated that the

high academic standards of first grade are an important driving factor for kindergarten teachers when implementing curriculum standards.

In 2019, Costantino-Lane used a phenomenological approach to examine long-term teachers' perceptions of the current kindergarten curriculum (academic) in comparison to the previous curriculum (developmental). Costantino-Lane contacted participants through the school district the researcher was employed in, through an email letter sent through the California Kindergarten Association, and through networking for a total of ten long-term teachers (average 24 years teaching) from five different school districts in California. The researcher conducted individual interviews with the ten participants, of which nine were in-person and one was performed via email. The data was analyzed through code mapping. Results showed that participants stated that the development of effective oral communication requires interactions (parent-child, teacher-child, and child-child), which are occurring less frequently in the homes and, due to the new curriculum standards, in the schools. As a result, kindergarten teachers perceived that children were not developing as effective oral language or social skills as children previously developed in kindergarten when the focus was developmental. All ten of the participants reported that the new curriculum for academic kindergarten was stressful to implement and felt rushed, with half of the participants admitting that they covertly taught developmentally when their doors were closed. Costantino-Lane questioned whether literacy concepts and skills can be taught more effectively using a developmental model and urged further research in additional states.

Conclusion

While many studies have examined the development of literacy and language in kindergarten children as well as the kindergarten teachers' perceptions of language and literacy

standards, there has been little research in the area of teachers' perceptions of the language and

literacy development of kindergarten children or their experiences in assessing and teaching

literacy and language at the kindergarten level. Furthermore, there has been little research done

regarding literacy and language development of kindergarten children living in rural Minnesota.

Thus, there is a need to explore kindergarten teachers' perceptions of literacy and language

development of children living in rural Minnesota, which is the focus of the current research.

The next chapter will describe the methodology used in the current study.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Qualitative Research

Research in the field of Communication Sciences and Disorders can be conducted using either a quantitative or qualitative design. In order to better understand the research methods available, it is important to provide a brief description of the difference between the two methods. Quantitative research focuses on direct measurement and subsequent statistical analysis of a particular phenomenon (Maxwell & Satake, 2006). In contrast, qualitative research explores a phenomenon through descriptive measures to better understand the topic of interest. For example, qualitative research is conducted to perform functions such as, "describing peoples' lives, social relationships, cultural values, thought processes, personal likes and dislikes, feelings and emotions, or how they function within the structure of various groups, organizations, or nations" (p. 246). Rather than specifically measuring the intensity or frequency of variables influencing a phenomenon, researchers who use qualitative research intend to describe what an experience was like without attempting to control any of the variables. Data collected during qualitative research can include pictures, narratives, and words (Maxwell & Satake, 2006). Because the current research study was focused on exploring and understanding the language and literacy expectations of kindergarten children and the factors related to their achievement of these goals, qualitative research was the most appropriate design to examine the research questions.

Phenomenology

There are several different methodologies available to choose from when conducting qualitative research. The current study used a phenomenological approach. This approach is based on the philosophical questions, "'What is being? And 'How do we know what we know?'" (Maxwell & Satake, 2006, p. 257). When using phenomenology, researchers aim to identify and understand the view of reality that people hold. Particularly important to studies conducted using phenomenology is the use of open-ended questions, which allow people to fully express their views so that the researcher can better attempt to understand their experiences without imposing clinical perspectives on the participants (Maxwell & Satake, 2006). The current study used the phenomenological approach to determine the lived experience of kindergarten teachers as those related to judging the language and literacy skills demonstrated by their students at the beginning of the school year.

Negotiating Entry

The current study included interviews conducted between the researcher and kindergarten teachers. A list of potential candidates for the interviews was obtained by asking school-based speech-language pathologists who have worked with Early Childhood and Family Education (ECFE) or Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) through sixth grade, and thus have been in contact with kindergarten teachers regularly, for the names of candidate they believed might be interested in participating in the study. The kindergarten teachers were contacted by the researcher using a personal email address, and interviews were conducted outside of work hours. Participant demographics are attached as an appendix to this research paper.

Participants

Participants in this study included three kindergarten teachers teaching full-day

kindergarten who were employed in public schools in a moderate-sized city located in the upper

Midwest. Two potential gatekeepers were contacted in order to gain access to the target

population. These gatekeepers, both speech-language pathologists, provided the researcher's

information to teachers who met the study criterion and were thought to be willing to participate.

The gatekeepers provided the researcher with a personal email for any of the professionals who

indicated a willingness to participate. Those professionals then contacted by the researcher via

their personal email address to schedule an interview outside of working hours. Participant

sampling was used in this study. This sampling procedure involved the selection of individuals

who could address the research questions. The participants were selected using purposeful

sampling because they were qualified to provide information about the central phenomenon

(Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). In particular, the type of purposeful sampling that was used was

homogenous sampling; the participants were selected because they fit the inclusion criterion and

were all employed by a single large school district (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015).

Data Collection

Interviews. As is consistent when conducting a phenomenological study, the current

research used open-ended questions asked in one-on-one semi-structured interviews between the

researcher and the participant (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). One-on-one interviews are the

best method to understanding a person's experience of a phenomenon. The use of open-ended

questions allows the participant to share his/her own experience without being influenced by the

opinion of the researcher (Maxwell & Satake, 2006). To get a thorough understanding of the

participants' experiences, the one-on-one interviews lasted for 30 to 50 minutes (Plano Clark &

Creswell, 2015). Finally, semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to ask predetermined questions in a systematic order, thus maintaining organization and consistency, while also allowing for deviations from the script to elaborate on additional ideas brought to light by the interviewee (Maxwell & Satake, 2006). An interview protocol, including all interview questions and probes, was used to guide the interview and is attached as an appendix of this research paper. Throughout the interview process, the researcher took notes on the participants' answers and recorded the interview via digital recording for later analysis.

Researcher Expectations and Biases

The researcher conducted the current research independently and did not receive any financial contributions. Potential biases that the researcher would like to disclose include being a resident of Minnesota as well as being a recipient of a Minnesota school education.

Methods of Validation

To ensure the results of the current qualitative research accurately represent the experiences of the participants, methods of validation were used to ensure the results are reliable and valid. First, interviews conducted during the research were transcribed word-for-word by transcription software. Second, participants gave permission to be contacted to clarify statements made during the interviews in order to confirm that their experiences were accurately represented. It should be noted that none of the participants were contacted for clarification purposes. Third, triangulation of ideas was performed by analyzing interview results to identify commonalities among participant answers (Maxwell & Satake, 2006). Themes hold more significance if they are presented by more than one participant rather than being presented by the same participant several times.

Data Analysis

       Exploring the data. Following the interviews, the digital recordings were transcribed word-for-word by using a software application. Additionally, the researcher used notes taken during and after the interview along with the direct transcription to analyze the data. The data was examined by performing constant comparative analysis. As such, each interview was transcribed and read through several times before assigning codes in order to get an overview of the information presented.

       Identification of codes. While reading the transcriptions through the second or third time, codes were assigned to segments of the interview discourse in order to make the data more manageable to analyze. Codes were assigned to meaningful themes, concepts, and constructs to help identify important ideas that emerged from the interviews (Maxwell & Satake, 2006). Hand coding was used during this portion of the analysis.

       Initial coding. The initial coding process occurred by assigning codes as the researcher interpreted the content of the interviews during the second or third reading. This process sometimes resulted in more than one code being assigned to one segment of the interview because the content fit different ideas.

       Lean coding. The process of lean coding was then used to narrow down the number of codes that were used. Through lean coding, the researcher identified whether more than one code had been assigned to the same idea and then removed the unnecessary code once the most relevant code had been identified.

       Identification of categories. Once all the coding had been completed and lean coding had been performed, the researchers identified categories from the codes. Categories are the main

ideas that begin to emerge from the data. They included all codes that are directly related to each other.

Identification of themes. Once the categories were identified, themes were then assigned to each category. Themes are statements that accurately represent the category that they describe, and as such, also accurately describe each code that is contained within the category.

Final assertion. After the themes were identified, a final assertion was made. The final assertion is a statement that is created by summarizing the main concepts presented by the themes that have been identified. The final assertion accurately encompasses the entirety of the research based on the themes and should answer the research questions.

Figure 1

Flowchart of Categories, Themes, & Assertion

Research Questions

1. What expectations do kindergarten teachers have regarding the language and literacy milestones that children are anticipated to meet at the beginning of the school year?
2. How do kindergarten teachers perceive that their students are performing on the milestones upon entrance to kindergarten?
3. How have kindergarten teachers' expectations for kindergarteners' language and literacy skills changed over the last 10 years?

Categories with Related Codes

Students of 2019-2020 School Year

- Overall impression of class
- Variety of entry-level skills
- Family/home life
- Distance learning
- Students receiving services
- Challenging behaviors

Teachers' Expectations

- Skills over time
- Definitions
- Expectations over time
- End-of-year skills
- Entry-level expectations

Assessment and Teaching

- Support staff
- Format of training
- Assessment methods
- Perception of SLP and SLP roles
- Teaching methods
- Prioritization of teaching

Themes

Students of the 2019-2020 school year were challenging overall, and there was a wide range in their language and literacy skills

The language and literacy skill expectations at the beginning of the school year have increased over time and are being met inconsistently

Assessment of language and literacy is ongoing throughout the school year and teaching methods often involve multiple modalities

Final Assertion

Kindergarten teachers' expectations for language and literacy skills upon entrance to kindergarten have increased over the last 10 years, and teachers perceive that their students, particularly students of the 2019-2020 school year, have a wide range in skills and abilities when it comes to language and literacy, causing milestones to be met inconsistently.

Chapter 4

Results

The research questions, *What expectations do kindergarten teachers have regarding the language and literacy milestones that children are anticipated to meet at the beginning of the school year, How do kindergarten teachers perceive that their students are performing on the milestones upon entrance to kindergarten,* and *How have kindergarten teachers' expectations for kindergarteners' language and literacy skills changed over the last 10 years*, were answered after interviews were completed with experienced kindergarten teachers. Data analysis revealed three categories, three themes, and one final assertion based on the coding process. The final assertion that emerged after data analysis was: *Kindergarten teachers' expectations for language and literacy skills upon entrance to kindergarten have increased over the last 10 years, and teacher perceived that their students, particularly students of the 2019-2020 school year, have a wide range in skills and abilities when it comes to language and literacy, causing milestones to be met inconsistently.* In the following sections, the codes, categories, and themes will be explored through the words used by the participants during the interview process.

The first theme to emerge from the data was, *Students of the 2019-2020 school year were challenging overall, and there was a wide range in their language and literacy skills.* This theme was comprised of category one, which will be discussed in the following section with quotes from the interview participants.

Category 1: Students of the 2019-2020 School Year

The first category included codes related to the kindergarten students of the 2019-2020 school year and factors that influenced their language and literacy development and skills.

Questions in the interview protocol included, "How would you describe the students you have in this school year's kindergarten class?" The teachers included in the study agreed that the students of the current school year had their challenges. Codes that emerged from the data included: overall impression of class, variety of entry-level skills, family/home life, distance learning, students receiving services, and challenging behaviors. Each code included in this category will be described in greater detail next.

Overall impression of class. All the participants included commentary on the difficulties posed by the 2019-2020 class of students. Two of the three participants noted that the students of the current class were some of the more challenging students that they had ever taught. For example, Jennifer noted that the students posed the greatest challenge for her as a teacher:

...And it was across the board, and all of the classrooms, we noticed it big time this last year, but like, like I said this was by far the hardest group of kids I've ever taught and everywhere, spanning anywhere I taught, so.

Mary mentioned that the students in her class were diverse in skills, with some being more challenging than others:

...I had some very [pauses] on-task, wonderful students. I had a handful of those, and I had a handful of ones that were very, very challenging, off-task. [Pauses and looks up] I don't want to say underachievers, but children – students that really needed help.

In the third example, Patricia recounted that the class of 2019-2020 students had both difficulties and triumphs:

...But the overall – it was, it was a good group of kids. They – they worked well together, played well together. They were good friends. So, overall a really – a pretty lovely group

of kids, obviously there's hiccups along the way, but thinking about it as a whole – it was

good.

Variety of entry-level skills. Participants all reported that the students of the 2019-2020 school year demonstrated a wide range of skills in language and literacy at the start of the school year. The teachers noted that they had some students performing above expectations with language and literacy tasks while others were not meeting expectations. In the first example, Patricia described the wide range of language and literacy skills that she saw in her classroom:

> *…I did have a couple that did know how to read and – but only just one or two. As – as far as literacy, they, like I said, you know, some came knowing what their name was and what it looked like, but there were others that for several weeks into the – into the school year would say, "[Miss Patricia], is this my name?" You know, they just didn't even know what their name looked like in print.*

For Mary, the range of skills in language were particularly noticeable when it came to verbal output and vocabulary:

> *…Okay, at the beginning of the year, there were some that v – had limited language. One little boy that spoke very little. It wasn't that he couldn't, it was that he was very – extremely shy. And then I had some that spoke, you know, like – like they had an encyclopedia with their – in their repertoire, anyway so.*

Jennifer noted that some of the students in her class struggled with language and social skills:

…Well they're, you know, like they're – they're – they have a hard time sharing or knowing what to say to play with somebody, or how to get a toy they want, how to, you know, take turns, play games like that for a lot of kids that was really hard and – .

Family/home life. The participants identified several factors related to the home and family lives of the students in the 2019-2020 school year that could affect performance in language and literacy. Some of the factors identified included socioeconomic status, parental work schedules, and potential trauma. For example, Patricia reported that the differences noted in language skills potentially had to do with socioeconomic status:

…And then as far as language, again, I feel like a lot of that socioeconomic status just played into it, you know, some of my kids that would be considered living in poverty are the ones who had low language and not a very big vocabulary at all. Whereas some of the kiddos who live in, you know, higher socioeconomic status came with a much bigger vocabulary.

Jennifer reported a variety of factors that could have affected the language and literacy of her students but noted that she was able to successfully collaborate with parents and guardians:

…There was a whole gamut. There's a lot – I mean there – there were a lot that had situations going on that were like, probably trauma situations or where there was just one parent in the household, or both parents having to work night jobs and older siblings taking care of them. There were a few where it was, you know, there probably a lack of resources and money. There was, you know, a few where you know they have some mental health issues and things like that, but, and a couple only children. But mostly the

parents I had good relationships with the families and so I – we were able to, you know,

work together.

Mary similarly noted that, despite the myriad of factors affecting students' language and literacy skills, collaboration with parents and guardians was successful:

…Family situations, let's see, most of my families were a two-parent family. So, for

conferences, most of the time, I had two parents come, which was really amazing to me. I

think that's huge. If parents are on-board and both of them want to be or else they would

share information. And I said, if any of them have any questions, they can get ahold of

me, but only – I think I had one divorced family, but otherwise everybody as a two-parent

family, so that was amazing.

Distance learning. The school year of 2019-2020 came with its own unique challenges, as the COVID-19 pandemic caused schools to resort to online, "distance" learning. Participants identified distance learning as a factor that may have influenced the language and literacy skills of the students in their classes. Mary noted that distance learning appeared to have had a positive impact on one of her students in particular:

…Yes, I – I do have to tell you about one – that little boy that barely talked at the

beginning of the year, when I first did the calling to him when we were on distant

learning, he wouldn't talk to me. He'd shake his head or something and his mom would

say, "You have to – you have to answer 'cuz she can't see you." And it took like three

times and then after about the third time, he spoke to me like I'd never heard him speak

[gestures with hands]. And he would have his mom send me pictures of what he was

doing and his family and, I mean, I – it was probably one of my biggest success stories

because he was going to repeat kindergarten again. But just to get him to verbally talk

with me and she with me was like [gestures with hands] amazing to me, because I just

didn't – I never saw – I never got to see that glimpse of him so it was very important to

me…

In the second example, Jennifer reported how distance learning was a positive experience

for herself and her own students:

… So, like, the energy that I was bringing I think was good and positive, and I was able

to reach out to the parents in a way that I probably would never been able to do before,

so they have – there was a lot of buy-in on their end. And the kids in my class did really

well, and a lot of them have probably really high anxiety when they're in a classroom

and being like distance learning is a great format for high anxiety kids. And so, actually

honestly, I think distance learning was a great thing for my class, and I think they really

came a long way. And what they were able to do how they interacted with each other

when we had other kids in the meets with them and obviously is not the same thing as in

person, but I was really impressed. And like the connections I have with them are deeper

than the connections that I have with any other kids that I've had and that's probably

going to be the same for everybody who had to go to distance learning.

Additionally, the teachers noted that distance learning provided a unique opportunity to

gain a better understanding of their students' homes. For example, Patricia noted how she got a

better idea of her students' environments through distance learning:

…Yeah, so honestly, distance learning kind of opened my eyes a little bit more to that

because, through the computer, we're in each other's spaces. And then at the end of the school

year I got permission to go to each of my kindergarten kiddos' homes to just send off them – send

them off into summer with a little gift and that sort of thing which was something that was really

eye-opening to me…

Students receiving services. Another factor related to the students of the 2019-2020

school year that teachers commonly identified was whether the students in their class were

receiving services through the school. All three of the teachers noted that there were students in

the classroom during the 2019-2020 school year who were receiving services. Patricia reported

that several students in her classroom were receiving speech therapy:

…It's not uncommon in kindergarten, as I'm sure you know to – for students to be

receiving speech services. You know, some of those common speech sounds that just

maybe aren't developed yet, so I had probably about five kids who received speech. One

who – significant – significantly lower than his peers in regards to language, not just –

not just articulation but language in particular, so – .

Mary noted that, at the beginning of the school year, it may be difficult to identify which

students should qualify for services because of their unique backgrounds:

…We don't – we have Title One services that we can access, but we don't usually – we

want to usually have that period where we're – we're just seeing – sometimes it's just the

fact that they've never been in school, they have no clue about, you know, what to do,

how to hold a pencil, any of those kind of things, so we try hard to do to just work within

our classroom with students. And then if they are identified later on through that Star

Testing the – the lower students that needed help, would get additional services but – .

And then – and then, I should say too some students are already identified is in early

childhood, because they would have been – there's – they are identified in – in the

preschool program that they may need some special help and that would be how I would

get help at the beginning of the year. Otherwise, it would be, you know, you have to do

your interventions and things and find out if they – if those – if those needs that are more

than just a Title One where they're not quite where they need to be.

Similarly, Jennifer noted that even after identifying a student who may need additional

services and support, qualifying students for services requires a great deal of documentation and

may be challenging to do:

…Yeah, as far as for special ed goes, like, or even speech, you have to have a lot of

documentation. And it – it's months, I even think it might be six months' worth, but just

you know what they're – what they're doing. But it's so hard to get enough of a

discrepancy in like their academic performance in kindergarten because you need a big

discrepancy and there's just not enough curriculum to cover in a kindergarten year for

that discrepancy to show up as big as it needs to be so, it's sort of, I would say one of the

downsides of public education and how they, you know, qua – have kids have to qualify. I

just sort of think we should help everybody so they can be successful, but that's not really

how it works.

Challenging behaviors. This code was explicitly identified by one of the three

participants, but it seemed to contribute greatly to her experience with and opinion of the 2019-

2020 school year's students, so it was included. Mary identified one student in particular that

demonstrated behaviors that made the year especially challenging for herself and her other

students:

> *…And then I had one student that was a behavior student that would often, I mean, I'm*
>
> *guessing three or four times during the school year, throw – start throwing things and I*
>
> *would have to get my students out of the classroom while she kind of destroyed the room*
>
> *and – and then we'd be able to go back in once she'd picked everything up.*

Category 2: Teachers' Expectations

The second category was composed of codes related to the expectations that teachers had regarding language and literacy. Questions in the interview protocol included, "Describe the language and literacy skills that you would expect a child to have already acquired by the time they start kindergarten?" The participants included in the study were in agreement about the language and literacy expectations at the beginning of the school year. Additionally, two of three teachers noted that expectations have increased over their time as educators. Codes that emerged from the data included: skills over time, definitions, expectations over time, end-of-year skills, and entry-level expectations. Each code included in this category will be described in greater detail in the following text.

Skills over time. The participants in this study were asked to evaluate how children's performance in language and literacy skills at the beginning of the year have changed over time. Two of the three participants reported that the skills at the beginning of the school year have decreased over time, with technology being a potential culprit to this change. For example, Jennifer noted:

> *…This last year was the worst it's ever been, and this was the hardest group of kids I*
>
> *ever had in my classroom…I mean, I don't know why it is that way, but all I can think of*
>
> *is that they're spending more time on screens they're not interacting with other people*

like they don't have as many of those receptive language skills. They don't have – they can't even, you know, understand how to form a sentence correctly, which you would think by the time you're in kindergarten, you would have an idea of how to do that. The letters and the numbers – that's not quite as alarming to me, but it's just, you know, the speech and the talking and interacting and all that that just, they were really, really lacking.

Similarly, Mary commented that there seems to be a larger difference between students' communication abilities based on their use of technology:

…Well, I think – I think the gap between what kids are able to – took – how they're able to communicate and those that aren't. I think that gap has definitely widened with, whether it's home life, or like I said, the, the nonverbal communication that goes on with just using devices and those kinds of things.

In contrast, Patricia noted that in the five years that she has been teaching, she has not noticed a difference in skills at the beginning of the school year:

…Not necessarily very much variation. I would say it's been pretty, pretty steady in regards to like how many kids receive services or, you know, the pattern for when they come into school. The – it always seems to be a pretty large gap in regards to, like, the kids that don't know much of anything and then the kids who have had, you know, lots of preschool experience and, you know, been read to a lot and that sort of thing. So, the gap has always kind of been big, especially at the beginning of kindergarten. I guess I haven't seen – I don't know that I would say that that's changed significantly in the five years

that I've taught, I mean, five years really isn't a lot of time though either. So, but, yeah, I

think it's, it's been pretty consistent and steady.

Definitions. During the interviews, the teachers were asked to provide their own definitions of literacy and language. The teachers each had their own unique definitions to describe the two, with literacy appearing to be more challenging to explain than language. Jennifer provided a concise definition for language:

…The skills you need to communicate, like the – yeah, whatever you need to be able to communicate in your day-to-day life.

In contrast, Patricia provided a bit of an expansion of the definition by discussing the idea that size of vocabulary matters when it comes to language:

…I think when I think of language I also think of vocabulary, you know, and just language com - , you know, we – our language is, you know, bigger when we have a bigger vocabulary and that sort of thing.

Mary provided a definition of literacy that expanded on the use of language, reporting that literacy both uses and expands language:

…Literacy is a combination of those things too but it's – but added in are additional things like listening and following directions and being able to complete tasks and communicate, I guess, as far as with one on one or be able to relate things to their lives and those kind of things.

Expectations over time. Another area of interest that was identified during the interviews was that expectations for language and literacy skills have changed over time. More

specifically, teachers seemed to identify that expectations have increased over recent years. For example, Mary, who had been a kindergarten teacher for over 36 years stated:

> *…[The expectations] very much added. They – they've increased 100%. When I first taught, it was strictly learning your letters, your numbers, your colors. And now with kindergarten students, most of them, if not all of them, are reading before they leave kindergarten. A lot of them come with skills that are – they're ready to be reading. So, the curriculum for kindergarten has definitely almost moved more and more like a first-grade classroom and first grade is more like second. I think we've, we've really increased our expectations. And so, especially when we went to full-day, all day every day…And now when we're there all day every day, we can expect more of them.*

Patricia, who has worked as a kindergarten teacher for 5 years noted that, while she has not personally seen the increase in expectations, she believes it occurred before she started teaching:

> *…[The expectation] has [increased]. I came in to teaching after, I think, just a year or two after kindergarten went from half-day to full-day in Minnesota. And so once it became full day, obviously the rigor and the expectations, kind of increased it – as well and so I came in after a full day had already been implemented for a year or two. And so, I think the expectation continues to be the same, we're still using the same standards to evaluate kids so that expectation has stayed the same.*

Jennifer, who taught for a couple of years at a French immersion school prior to teaching kindergarten at an English-speaking school, compared her experience at the two when it comes to expectations regarding literacy:

…I mean, I guess I really started noticing that [change] when I came to [current school district] it was a little different teaching French immersion…But when I came to [current school district], it was just – it – to me, it's really sad just how much we harp on "you'd better be reading at this level now." I mean, and obviously, we don't say it like that to the kids but that's what our actions must speak when we're, you know, really pushing, pushing, pushing. And over time, like I haven't seen that be very successful. Like it was most successful for me when like this past year, I really focused on the letters and sounds, and I said, "you know, I'm going to administer the assessments that the district is telling me to administer, but I'm not going to be teaching guided reading," which is so hard and focused at these levels trying to push them when they're not ready. So, I had way more success doing it that way.

End-of-year skills. The teachers identified both expectations for end-of-year skills as well as student performance on skills at the end of the school year. Some of the teachers noted that the students' performance increased over the school year whereas some did not meet end-of-year expectations. For example, Jennifer stated:

…But by the end of the year, they were pretty – they di – they did pretty good. They were able to navigate their own, you know, Google Meet by themselves and all kinds of things, so they were pretty resourceful, I would say.

In contrast, Mary noted that some of the children in her class repeated kindergarten due to their skills remaining low at the end of the year:

…And I had four that were repeating kindergarten because [gestures with hand] they were just not ready to go to first grade and parents decided that they wanted them to stay in kindergarten, so, so it was challenging.

Finally, Patricia revealed one of the end-of-year expectations that may prevent some children from moving on to first grade:

All right, so, many of them did not know how to read. That's a goal for the end of kindergarten.

Entry-level expectations. Throughout the interviews, the teachers provided insight into the language and literacy skills that would be expected to be mastered by the time a child entered kindergarten. Teachers agreed that children should have basic conversational skills and know many of the letters of the alphabet. For example, Mary stated:

…I would, okay, I would expect them to be able to tell me their name, and hopefully know the letters in their name. I would hope that they would be able to have a conversation with me, and just, or even answer a question that I had for them. Because some absolutely, you know, ha- ha- have – weren't able to do that. I would – I would like them to write their name, but I can't ab- absolutely positively tell you that. But have some understanding of what a letter and a number is so that they're not mixing those two things up. The colors. And just have an idea of – of, tell you, be able to talk to you about their family or what their favorite color is or just have some kind of conversation with you, so I can at least get to know them a little better and also to be able to expand on those language skills so that they're able to have a conversation with me or with another child or another adult that would be in the room, so.

Similarly, Jennifer commented on not only demonstrating understanding of letters and conversation but also having skills in syntax to be able to formulate a full sentence:

…The language and liter- I – I mean, I would expect that they should know most all of the letters. That's really what I expect that they would know most – they would know all the letters in their name for sure, they would know how to spell their name, how to recognize their name. They would know the sounds of some of the letters. I don't know that, that they should know all of that, but they would know some of them. They should be able to tell like – answer basic questions about themselves, about their family, to tell you the things they like, to be able to talk, you know, in a complete – mostly complete sort of sentence with basically correct grammar structure…

Patricia noted that evaluation of these basic conversational skills can be complicated by the students' personality:

…And so, a lot of like typical or normal performing child would come with a handful of letter names and sounds, not necessarily all letter names and sounds but they would know a good chunk of letter names and sounds. And as far as language, just being able to, like, converse with peers using their words to, you know, ask or answer questions, share those sorts of things…

Category 3: Assessment and Teaching

The third category consisted of codes related to the experience of teachers in assessment and teaching of language and literacy skills. Questions in the interview protocol included, "Describe any specific training that you have received in evaluating language and literacy skills?". From this category, the theme of ongoing assessment and the use of multiple modalities

in teaching emerged. Codes that appeared from the data included: support staff, the format of training, assessment methods, perception of SLP and SLP roles, teaching methods, and prioritization of teaching. Each of the codes included within this category will be examined further.

Support staff. One commonality that was identified in the teachers' experience was the presence of support staff in the classroom. The teachers reported that there is usually at least one person present in the classroom to provide additional support. For example, Mary stated:

...And some more in and out. One – one paraprofessional was pretty, a program para, and she was mostly consistently with me all the time, except for a few times when she would be out, but, otherwise, I would have a couple others that would come in and some of the students did not need one on one, they needed just additional help during certain academic times.

Similarly, Patricia commented on her experience with having help from paraprofessionals as well as special education teachers:

...Last year and this year – so the last two years, I've had a para. And then just working with special education teachers for students in my classroom. So, sometimes they push in, but that's not super typical, so.

Finally, Jennifer stated that she has help from paraprofessionals as well as family members:

... Occasionally, a paraprofessional. Every once in a while, I do have a parent volunteer.

Perception of SLP and SLP roles. Each teacher that participated in the study reported working with SLPs in some capacity. The teachers were in agreement that working with SLPs is relatively easy; however, the role of SLPs in the assessment and treatment of literacy seemed to be less known to kindergarten teachers than the other roles that SLPs perform. Patricia commented on her positive experience in collaboration with SLPs:

…Overall, my experience has been really lovely. I think especially when I first started teaching kindergarten, the number of like [participant laughs] speech errors, I was like, "oh boy," you know, and then we know, you know, obviously when kids come with a lot of speech errors, then letter names and sounds are hard to grasp because they maybe aren't even forming the sound correctly or – . And so, I find myself often going to the speech pathologists to say like, "Hey, you know, is this normal? Is this, you know, is this developmentally appropriate for this age?" And so, I – and I often, even if my kids who are in – or receiving speech services, you know, we often communicate with the speech pathologist about what they're working on and, you know, continuing to work on modeling that in our classroom for them and so it's been a lovely working experience while I've been at – in [current school district]."

Jennifer also noted that her experience working with SLPs has been positive overall:

…Yeah. Oh, really, I would just send an email and then they'll respond and then they come and sit in my room. And then we talk about it and – and sometimes there's follow up then, you know, I'll come again and see if things got better before we want to make a referral before we try and usually it's a pretty – they're pretty open to, to at least listening.

When commenting on the role of SLPs in the assessment and treatment of literacy over time, Mary commented:

> …So, I think their job has been, it's probably advanced like our, our jobs have because there's a lot of – there's, there's a big gap of students that – that they have to, have to address and I think they – there are so many needs that students have, I mean, there are some that have OT, PT, you know, LD.

Format of training. The teachers involved in the training all reported having formal training in both the assessment and teaching of language and literacy. All three participants had previously participated in in-service training provided to teachers in their school district. For example, Patricia noted:

> …A lot of [training] is in-service, so like our professional development days. A – a lot of those usually contain some sort of literacy training.

Similarly, Mary commented that her training primarily consisted of in-service trainings and workshops:

> …Yes, they were – they were, yes, they were – it was, it was in-ser- in-service. Or we would b – we woul – possibly we would be going – we would go to like, a workshop or – ."

In contrast, Jennifer noted that in addition to the training she received from the school district, she had training from courses that she had been taking through a university:

> …So, right now I'm working on my reading certificate. And so, I have spent the last year taking courses through [university] – literacy courses and literacy instruction le- the last

course I just took was literacy assessment. I have two more left, and then I will have that

certificate accomplished. And we've had various professional development thi- around

guided reading, especially which is the format that [current school district] uses to teach

a lot of literacy, and we've had, you know, different – we collaborate as a team on – in

our PLCs and things on that as well.

Assessment methods. The teachers that participated in the study reported using both

formal and informal methods to conduct assessments of literacy and language. Specifically, the

teachers reported using informal methods of assessment for language and formal methods of

assessment for literacy. For example, Patricia commented on her experience with assessment of

language and literacy:

…So, there are some formal assessments that the state requires us to do for literacy. And

those are timed tests, and then anything beyond the for – there are a couple other formal

assessments some of ph – phonemic awareness literacy assessments that we complete at

the very beginning of school, and then language would just, again, be through

observation. [Participant pauses] However, I mean, I feel like we can, within our literacy

assessments, usually gain a pretty good understanding of language. Just whether or not

they even understand, you know, directions and that sort of thing, so.

Mary outlined her experience in the assessment of language and literacy skills at the

beginning of the school year:

…What we, what we did was, we would check – we had – we were very lucky at the

beginning of the year for the last two, three years, we got to have like a back to school g-

meet and greet so we would have parents come in with a kindergartener, we'd have 45-

minute slots, we'd visit with the parents, give them forms, and then we would sit down with a kindergartener to be. And we would check them on letters and numbers... And then we also would take a Star Test, which was difficult for some at the beginning 'cuz some had never had any computerized – we would take that test with them. And there was a practice test so that the kids could, you know, so they got a little bit of, of information before they would do it. And then we also did that Star Testing in the winter, and in the spring. Except this year we didn't get to do that, but anyways so, it was interesting to see their growth. And then we would also do individual testing. I – you know, like, okey, I would see that so, and so, knew only 10 of the letters. So that I would, you know, I would want to do activities that would promote further assessment for them or further success for them so we would just s – do a quick checks, how many letters they know, can they say their alphabet, do they know how many sounds, any of those kind of things…

Jennifer provided a brief description of the challenges that accompany the assessment of language and literacy skills:

…And then we've adopted some new curriculum, and we have yet to have the time to sort of sit down and talk about the assessments that go along with the curriculum, but there's always just this battle between the assessing and delivering instruction because, especially in kindergarten, where you ha – where it has to be one on one because kids can't really write anything on a piece of paper for you. It takes away a lot of your teaching time the more that you're assessing. So we – we're, it's hard to find really valuable assessments that would drive our instruction, which is what we really want to do…It's just, we kind of had this stuff thrown on us and no time for professional development.

Teaching methods. Participants described their unique teaching methods for language and literacy skills. Most teachers reported using multiple modalities to engage their students while teaching language and literacy skills. For example, Mary noted that she adapted a teaching program to make it more engaging for her students:

...It was audio, but I did – what we did was – we did make some SMART – SMART Board lessons where we would put the "alpha friends" songs on our SMART board, and then the kids could visually – visually see them and then we could mark – circle all the letters or all the, you know, "B's" in – in Benny bear and they could see visually see the words that we were – as we were singing them. So, there was a little visual in it, but it was more auditory where we were more just with the singing.

Jennifer reported that literacy is targeted in both large and small group settings, with different activities included in each:

...Yes. Yeah, but phon – we do intertwine some phonics into the guided reading but the phonemic awareness is like a whole group sort of thing that can be intertwined into like different games that you might pa – that I might play with the kids around letters or rhyming and beginning sounds and different things like that.

Patricia noted that literacy and language development at the kindergarten level is contingent on successful models performed by the teacher:

I think, you know, a lot of it comes from modeling. That – that's a really big piece of kindergarten and language and literacy development. You know, there's a lot of strong work that's done during our read-aloud in particular with language. But even in literacy

skills, and then, yeah [participant laughs]. I can't – I can't think of anything in like, you

know, super specific but.

Prioritization of teaching. Throughout the interviews, participants provided insight into

how teaching language and literacy is prioritized. Teachers reported that prioritization considered

district and school guidelines in addition to influences of past teaching experience. Jennifer noted

that kindergarteners need to learn many things about the school setting before they can move

onto other skills:

> *…They need to learn everything in kindergarten. [Participant laughs] That is really hard.*
>
> *They don't know – there's a lot of things they don't know, you know. They might not*
>
> *know how to answer some questions and so you have to teach them that or you have to*
>
> *teach them the vocabulary they need to survive in school, like what it means – like when*
>
> *she says this, that's what that means. It's, you know, like the school, all of the vocabulary*
>
> *surrounding school, you don't have to teach that really in first grade, but you do in*
>
> *kindergarten. So, that's usually like the first thing and then just how to listen, you know,*
>
> *listen and follow your directions, and then, you know, just builds on the building blocks*
>
> *of literacy like the letters and the sounds and all of the phonics and phonemic awareness*
>
> *skills that you can do orally. They have to be done first before you can even really begin*
>
> *to have the kids look at a book by themselves.*

Patricia explained that teaching the alphabet is taught in her classroom in cycles by

learning a letter a day:

> *…So we, a couple of years ago, changed to doing a letter a day. And we teach it in*
>
> *cycles. So, our first cycle is a letter a day and we use students' names to help us decide*

the order so we don't necessarily go in alphabetical order in that first cycle…And then,

so we use students' names to help us in the beginning, And then the next cycle is

alphabetical. So, once you've gone through the first cycle, you get through all 26, then

you assess kids, then we start the second cycle, which is alphabetical. Then we assess

kids, then our next cycle, is by, I believe it's, it's out of order again, but it's by, like the

sounds, so like, we would teach "B." this you know your mouth says, essentially the

sound when it says this, the letter "B" and so then we teach it in that way. I don't – I'm

sure there's a term for that, but I'm not remembering it. And then there's a fourth cycle,

however, I don't usually teach the fourth cycle to my entire group. By that time, there's

like, just such a small group of kids that need that work that we usually just do that work

in a small group setting so.

Mary noted that ongoing assessment regarding literacy skills helps guide teachers on when to move on to the next skills:

…And – and during the first month, month and a half anyway, and then what we would

do is, later on, I would have them trade those names with a neighbor and then we'd put

those puzzle pieces together for their neighbor and then they would name those letters

and so it was all part of that literacy to help them learn. Once we knew where they were

at the beginning of the year screening, then we knew what we needed to do to get them to

the next level and that would be helping them with.

Chapter 5

Discussion

In this chapter, the findings of the current study will be discussed. First, the categories, themes, and final assertion will be summarized. Next, the findings of the current study will be discussed in relation to current research. Finally, recommendations for future research will be made, and implications for the field of speech-language pathology will be discussed.

Summary of Categories, Themes, and Assertion

Analysis of the transcripts of interviews conducted with kindergarten teachers revealed 17 codes, three categories, three themes, and one final assertion, all of which helped to answer the research questions *What expectations do kindergarten teachers have regarding the language and literacy milestones that children are anticipated to meet at the beginning of the school year, How do kindergarten teachers perceive that their students are performing on the milestones upon entrance to kindergarten,* and *How have kindergarten teachers' expectations for kindergarteners' language and literacy skills changed over the last 10 years*?

The first category, *Students of 2019-2020 school year,* comprised the first theme, *Students of the 2019-2020 school year were challenging overall, and there was a wide range in their language and literacy skills.* All participants noted that the kindergarten class of 2019-2020 was a challenging group of children. The participants reported that there was a great variety in the entry-level literacy and language skills that the children possessed, with many students performing under the expected level. A few of the participants questioned whether children's early use of video games and other independent activities could limit the interactions with other children and adults, resulting in lower language and literacy performance overall. One participant

shared additional challenges stemming from a single child in the classroom that exhibited challenging, and occasionally dangerous, behaviors.

The second category, Teachers' expectations, comprised the second theme, *The language and literacy skill expectations at the beginning of the school year have increased over time and are being met inconsistently.* Participants reported that expectations for entry-level skills in language and literacy have increased over time, most notably after switching from part-day to whole-day kindergarten, which occurred approximately five years ago. Participants expressed that, because there seemed to be such a variety of skills levels in the 2019-2020 kindergarten class, entry-level milestones were being met inconsistently by their students.

The final category was *Assessment and Teaching*, which comprised the theme, *Assessment of language and literacy is ongoing throughout the school year and teaching methods often involve multiple modalities.* Analysis of the interview transcriptions revealed that participants completed language and literacy assessments throughout the school year. Participants reported that training for assessment and teaching was often provided by the district through in-service training or distance conferences such as Webinars. Additionally, participants noted that teaching language and literacy was often performed by using multiple modalities (e.g., visual, auditory).

The final assertion was created by combining the information from the categories and themes revealed by the analysis of the interview transcriptions. Participants reported that the class of 2019-2020 kindergarten students was challenging, with a wide range of literacy and language skills; additionally, the kindergarten teachers noted that expectations have increased over time and are being met inconsistently; finally, the assessment of literacy and language extends throughout the school year, with training for assessment and teaching often being

provided by the school districts. Therefore, the final assertion of the current research was, *Kindergarten teachers' expectations for language and literacy skills upon entrance to kindergarten have increased over the last 10 years, and teachers perceive that their students, particularly students of the 2019-2020 school year, have a wide range in skills and abilities when it comes to language and literacy, causing milestones to be met inconsistently.*

Summary of Findings in Relation to Current Literature

Theme 1: Students of the 2019-2020 school year were challenging overall, and there was a wide range in their language and literacy skills. The first theme will be related to the existing literature in the following sections.

Category 1: Students of the 2019-2020 school year. The first theme consisted of codes that were grouped into the first category. Category 1 will be compared to existing literature according to each code.

Overall impression of class. In 2019, Costantino-Lane interviewed long-term teachers in California to investigate trends in kindergarten over time. The results of this study showed that nine out of 10 participants reported that interactions cause oral language development to occur, and these interactions don't seem to be happening as much at home or in the schools. The result of this is that the oral language skills of children are substantially lower at the start of kindergarten now than they have been previously. Participants in the current research reported that the 2019-2020 class of students was particularly challenging, with Jennifer stating, "They were very challenging. It – that's a great word to describe them." It is possible that the difficulty the kindergarten teachers experienced with the 2019-2020 class of kindergarten students had to

do with their oral language development which, as Costantino-Lane's research showed, was perceived to be lower in recent years than it was previously.

  Variety of entry-level skills. Onnis, Truzzi, and Ma (2018) conducted a systematic review of previous literature to examine gene and environmental influence on language development and language disorders. The researchers found that there are several genes that are associated with language production and language disorders. Additionally, social communication (e.g., child-caregiver interaction) is paramount to language development, which also appears to be influenced by genes. Thus, there is an amplitude of possibilities for the gene and environmental combinations that a child can have, resulting in a great variety of language and literacy skills. The participants of the current study noted that the 2019-2020 class of kindergarten students had a variety of skills upon entrance to kindergarten. When asked about the skills seen in her classroom, Patricia stated, "Pretty diverse. In regard to academics, some really low kiddos – some that came to kindergarten not even knowing what their name looked like. And then some that were performing at like a first-grade level when they entered kindergarten." Thus, the variety of skills seen could be attributed to the genetic and environmental influences that each child has acting on them.

  Family/home life. In 2005, Nelson conducted research using data from a longitudinal study to evaluate the home and preschool environments for children in the 1998-1999 kindergarten class. In this research, the effect of preschool attendance and home learning activities on reading and mathematics achievement was investigated. Results showed that children who engaged in learning activities at home with their parents scored higher on measures of mathematics and reading performance. Additionally, children who attended preschool scored higher on assessments than children who did not attend preschool. This research demonstrated

that the home learning environment can have an impact on children's performance in

kindergarten. This is a trend that was noted by the participants in the current study. One of the

participants, Mary noted, "So I had some parents that, you know, definitely were participants,

and they wanted to be part of their child's learning. And I had some that definitely probably

didn't feel like school was the most important thing in their child's life, so." This statement

coupled with the research provided by Nelson serves to demonstrate how the variety of entry-

level skills noted in the previous code developed.

     Distance learning. Bao, Qu, Zhang, and Hogan (2020) investigated the potential impact

of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic on literacy outcomes in kindergarten students

by using literacy achievement over the summer months as a model. Their research indicated that

school closures during the pandemic impacted 1.5 billion students, with the prediction that the

rate of reading ability gain decreased by 66% due to lack of in-person instruction. In contrast,

while the participants in the current research did not comment directly about the effect of

distance learning on the literacy achievement of their students, the participants noted some

positive outcomes that occurred due to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In

particular, Mary noted that one of the children that had lower language skills at the beginning of

the school year began to experience gains through distance learning. Jennifer noted that the

students in her classroom continued to meet academic goals throughout distance learning.

Additionally, Jennifer reported that while distance learning resulted in less ability for the

children to experience social interactions, it seemed to be beneficial for students with higher

levels of anxiety. Overall, Mary summarized, "So, I'm going to say, I feel like [the students]

persevered even when we did our distance learning of things they still – they still were – they

love school, they loved everything that we did, so I can honestly say I feel good about those things."

     Students receiving services. In research conducted by Gosse, Hoffman, and Invernizzi (2012), the researchers investigated the number of children receiving overlapping speech-language and reading services in kindergarten and first grade. The results of the study showed that approximately 6% of children received speech-language services and approximately 11% of kindergarteners received reading services. Additionally, approximately a quarter of children receiving speech therapy were also receiving reading services. The kindergarten teachers in the current research reported similar rates of children in their own classrooms that were receiving speech therapy services. Additionally, one of the participants reported that several of the students in her classroom were receiving literacy intervention. Though the participant did not state specifically that some of her students were receiving services from both areas, based on the literature, it is likely that this is the case.

     Challenging behaviors. Wills, Mason, Gregori, and Veatch (2019) investigated the effects of paraprofessionals' self-monitoring the use of praise while working with students with emotional and behavioral disorders. The results of the research showed that self-monitoring increased total praise and improved student engagement while decreasing disruptive behavior. The research indicated that more professional development training needs to be provided to paraprofessionals to assist in controlling emotional and behavioral disorders. In the current research, Mary noted that she had one student in her classroom that demonstrated challenging behaviors throughout the school year. In relation to the current literature, having a trained paraprofessional present in the room may have been beneficial for decreasing disruptive behaviors in her classroom.

Theme 2: The language and literacy skill expectations at the beginning of the school year have increased over time and are being met inconsistently. The following sections will discuss the second theme in relation to existing literature.

Category 2: Teachers' expectations. The second theme identified from the interview analysis consisted of codes that were grouped into category 2. The second category will be compared to existing literature according to each code.

Skills over time. In 1997, Espinosa et al. conducted a study in rural Missouri to compare kindergarten teachers' perceptions of school readiness to the results of the Carnegie study that was performed in 1990. The results of the study showed that 55% of kindergarten teachers felt that children were less ready for entrance into kindergarten than they had been 5 years previously. The teachers were most likely to rate students as lacking skills in problem-solving, attention, turn-taking and sharing, and math and literacy concepts. Two of the three participants in the current study shared similar sentiments, with long-term kindergarten teacher Mary stating,

> *...So, I think the language skills almost were better when I first started teaching than they*
>
> *have been, you know, and I don't want to say that with everyone but I think – I think*
>
> *we're losing something when we let our kids just spend so much time on – on those kind*
>
> *of games and things because I just think that the reading that they – that they're missing*
>
> *out on the conversation – family conversation at the supper table, any of those things, I*
>
> *think going to the library for storytime and those things I think you lose out on when –*
>
> *when kids are playing so much with technology.*

This participant noted technology as a potential factor resulting in decreased language skills. Similarly, in research conducted by Costantino-Lane (2019), nine of the 10 participants felt that

the social interactions that facilitate oral language development were occurring less frequently, likely due to increased technology use. In the current research, Patricia reported that she hasn't noted a change in entry-level skills over time; however, she also noted that she has only been teaching for the past five years. The other two participants, Mary and Jennifer, had experience working in the schools for over five years.

Definitions. Research conducted by Shaughnessy and Sanger (2005) explored kindergarten teachers' perceptions of language and literacy development. The results of the survey revealed that kindergarten teachers had a good overall understanding of language and literacy and how each develops. In the current research, the participants were asked to provide a definition for both language and literacy. The participants each provided a unique definition for both terms; however, literacy seemed to be more challenging to describe than language. Kindergarten teachers seemed to have a good understanding that literacy is intricately connected to language; however, unlike the research conducted by Shaughnessy and Sanger, it did not appear that the kindergarten teachers had a good understanding of how the two were connected.

Expectations over time. In 2016, Bassok et al. investigated kindergarten teachers' beliefs about school readiness by comparing data from kindergarten classes of 1998 and 2010 included in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K). The results of the study showed that there was a notable increase in the belief that parents should teach their children the alphabet and that children should start formal reading instruction before kindergarten in 2010 as compared to 1998. This indicates that the expectations for entry-level language and literacy skills have increased over time. Similarly, two of the participants in the current study reported a notable increase in expectations during their career as an educator. The third participant, Patricia, has been a kindergarten teacher for five years and reported no change since she started teaching, but

believes a change in expectations occurred prior to her time as an educator: "I mean, typically, a lot of kindergarten – I mean kindergarten kind of seems to be like the 'new first grade' these days." The change that Patricia noted seemed to occur after the state of Minnesota implemented full-day kindergarten statewide, which happened five years ago.

End-of-year skills. Zvoch et al. (2008) investigated whether a lengthened school day in kindergarten would make a difference in literacy achievement at the end of the school year. The results of the study showed that there were greater rates of growth in literacy for children who attended full-day kindergarten when comparing economically disadvantaged students who attended full-day kindergarten to economically advantaged students who attended half-day kindergarten. Students in the full-day classrooms had a greater amount of time devoted to classroom instruction, resulting in greater literacy gains and reading abilities at the end of the school year. Literacy achievement was noted by one of the participants in the current research as an area that is evaluated at the end of the year; however, in contrast, the other two participants did not note any specific end-of-year skills that were expected to be present.

Entry-level expectations. Costantino-Lane (2020) researched teachers' perceptions of reading instruction in kindergarten through the use of a survey. Results of the study showed that nearly 50% of teachers believed that the most important contributor to school readiness was effective communication. A majority of teachers perceived that many students lacked oral competence at the beginning of the school year, with children not yet speaking in full sentences by the end of the school year. Oral language skills were something that all of the participants in the current research reported as being an expectation at the beginning of the school year. In particular, Jennifer noted that students should be able to speak in complete or mostly complete sentences at the beginning of the school year. Additionally, Mary noted that at the beginning of

the school year, she expects that the students can have a conversation with her in order to get to know each other better, which requires basic oral language skills.

Theme 3: Assessment of language and literacy is ongoing throughout the school year and teaching methods often involve multiple modalities. The third theme will be discussed with comparisons to the existing literature in the following sections.

Category 3: Assessment and teaching. The final theme identified through data analysis was made up of codes grouped into the third category. Category 3 will be compared to existing literature according to each code.

Support staff. Jones, Ratcliff, Sheehan, and Hunt (2012) conducted research regarding the roles and collaboration of teachers and paraprofessionals. In this research study, there was one paraprofessional present in each kindergarten classroom, and both the teachers and the paraprofessionals were surveyed regarding their roles and then observed directly by the researchers. The findings revealed that paraprofessionals and teachers often had some disagreement about the roles that paraprofessionals perform, with kindergarten teachers listing fewer roles than did the paraprofessionals. Classroom observations revealed that paraprofessionals consistently performed the duties of managing student behaviors and providing direct, sometimes whole group, instruction. The participants of the current study reported having paraprofessionals present in the classroom at least occasionally. While the participants of the current study did not explicitly report on the roles that the paraprofessionals in their classrooms performed, Mary stated that she had some students that required additional help during specific academic activities, indicating that the paraprofessional may have been providing direct instruction to individual or small group of students during those times.

Perception of SLP and SLP roles. In 2005, Shaughnessy and Sanger investigated kindergarten teachers' perceptions of speech-language pathologists as part of their research. The results of their survey showed that kindergarten teachers valued the collaboration with and work of speech-language pathologists; however, the kindergarten teachers seemed unsure about the roles that speech-language pathologists play in literacy intervention. The current research revealed similar patterns. When asked to describe the roles of speech-language pathologists in literacy intervention and how they've changed over time, Jennifer stated, "I don't know how to answer that one."

Format of training. McCutchen and Berninger (1999) researched kindergarten teachers' knowledge of literacy before and after attending in-service training. The results of the research showed that teachers were able to use the knowledge that they gained through in-service training in their classrooms by combining it with what they previously knew. Additionally, some teachers were better at this than others. In the current research, the kindergarten teachers reported that much of the training that they receive for assessment and teaching of literacy and language comes from in-service trainings Thus, these trainings are likely beneficial for the teachers, as the result is learning more and new information regarding literacy and language; however, some teachers will be better at implementation in their own classrooms than others. This is likely related to the short period of time that these trainings occur across. One of the participants, Jennifer, in the current research reported that she is attending college currently for a certificate in literacy. Because the training that she received occurred over a longer period, her skills in the assessment and teaching of literacy will likely be very good.

Assessment methods. In 2004, Cress investigated the incorporation of state standards into the kindergarten classroom. The research revealed that assessment should consider a child's age,

development, and experiences, as an assessment based on these factors will be more accurate than formal procedures. Additionally, the research revealed that conversation and observation of language skills is an important method of assessment at this age. Beswick et al. (2005) found that teacher ratings of children's skills were consistently lower than performance on formal tests in their research. As a result, the researchers called for the use of both formal and informal assessments. Similarly, the participants of the current study reported using both formal and informal assessments to evaluate the language and literacy skills of their students throughout the school year. In particular, the participants noted formal assessments that were used for literacy and informal methods that were used for language evaluation: "There's no formal assessment really that's done for language. It's more informal and we sort of just listen to what they're able to do" (Jennifer).

Teaching methods. Pyle et al. (2018) conducted research regarding the relationship between play and literacy in the classroom. The researchers found that teachers who believed that play was important to literacy development had more literacy materials in the play areas and had more success with the children using them. The participants in the current research reported using multiple modalities while teaching in order to engage the kindergarten students in academics. One of the participants, Mary, noted that incorporating play into the school day is highly important in her classroom:

> *...But I think the most important thing for me was also not losing that playtime with kids, letting them share and get along, and all those kinds of things – playing together. I didn't want them to – I don't' want to lose – I didn't want to lose that. I always started my day with that, so that could look forward to that and I always ended my day with that so that students got to have some good feelings when they came and when they left.*

While Mary did not note using any specific literacy materials included in classroom play, it would be easy to incorporate these for a teacher who values the presence of play in their classroom.

     Prioritization of teaching. In 2017 Briggs et al. researched teacher acceptance and implementation of new standards by examining the experience of 15 teachers. The results of the study revealed that teacher buy-in was influenced by the factors of professional identity and reform context. The participants of the current research often described their curriculum priorities as being determined by the school district in which they were employed. Two of the three kindergarten teachers used the word "we" when discussing teaching priorities, indicating that the priorities of the individual classrooms reflected the larger school, or even school district, priorities. While the teachers never directly commented on where the curriculum priorities come from, collective identity terms, such as "we," serve to indicate that the teachers' priorities were dictated by the school or school district.

Limitations

     This study included a limited number of participants and the conclusions drawn from the interviews should be viewed as a summary of the experiences of these participants only. The current research aimed to explore kindergarten teachers' experiences with the assessment and teaching of language and literacy; however, data collection occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data may reflect teachers' experiences with the assessment and teaching of language and literacy during the pandemic, as opposed to their experiences during a typical school year.

Implications

The data from the current research indicates that expectations for language and literacy have increased over time but that students are meeting the milestones inconsistently due to a variety of experiences prior to enrollment in kindergarten. The variety of entry-level skills present in the kindergarten students indicates that it may be challenging for kindergarten teachers to accurately assess students and teach language and literacy skills in a group setting due to the variety of skill levels. Additionally, the current research indicates that the availability of standardized early intervention programs (i.e., preschool) may assist in leveling the entry-level skills so that students enter with skills at a more similar level. This could be a potential solution to kindergarten students entering at drastically different skill levels, resulting in milestones being met more consistently.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research in this area should include more participants from various school districts, or even states, to investigate kindergarten teachers' experiences with the evaluation and teaching of language and literacy on a larger scale. Additionally, future research could include questions regarding kindergarten teachers' perspectives on the kindergarten curriculum, beliefs regarding their identity, and the amount of support they feel they receive in their role as an educator.

Summary

The current research consisted of one-on-one semi-structured interviews with three kindergarten teachers employed by the same large school district in a rural city in the Midwest. Analysis of the results revealed that kindergarten teachers' expectations for language and literacy

skills have increased over time and that students are meeting milestones inconsistently due to a wide range of entry-level skills. An implication of the current research is that the availability of standardized early intervention programs (i.e., preschool) may help to level the entry-level skills in language and literacy that kindergarten students possess at the beginning of the school year. Thus, kindergarten teachers would potentially be able to teach language and literacy skills at the same baseline level in the group setting and milestones may be met more consistently. Future research in the area should focus on including a larger number of participants to determine whether the results of the current study accurately represent kindergarten teachers' experiences.

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Appendix A

STATE OF MINNESOTA
Executive Department

Governor Tim Walz

Emergency Executive Order 20-19

Authorizing and Directing the Commissioner of Education to Implement a Distance Learning Period and Continue to Provide a Safe Learning Environment for Minnesota's Students

I, Tim Walz, Governor of the State of Minnesota, by the authority vested in me by the Constitution and applicable statutes, issue the following Executive Order:

The COVID-19 pandemic presents an unprecedented challenge to our State. Minnesota has taken proactive steps to ensure that we are ahead of the curve on COVID-19 prevention and response. On March 13, 2020, I issued Executive Order 20-01 and declared a peacetime emergency because this pandemic, an act of nature, threatens the lives of Minnesotans, and local resources are inadequate to address the threat. In Executive Order 20-01, I directed all state agencies to submit proposed orders and rules to protect and preserve public health and safety.

In Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 12.02, subdivision 1, the Minnesota Legislature recognized the "existing and increasing possibility of the occurrence of natural and other disasters of major size and destructiveness" and conferred upon the Governor the emergency and disaster powers provided in Chapter 12 to "ensure the preparations of this state will be adequate to deal with disasters" to "generally protect the public peace, health, and safety" and to "preserve the lives and property of the people of the state."

Pursuant to Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 12.21, subdivision 1, the Governor has general authority to control the state's emergency management as well as carry out the provisions of Minnesota's Emergency Management Act. Pursuant to subdivision 3 of the same section, the Governor may "make, amend, and rescind the necessary orders and rules to carry out the provisions" of Minnesota Statutes 2019, Chapter 12. Furthermore, under Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 12.21, subdivision 3, the Governor is permitted to authorize the Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Education ("MDE") "to alter school schedules, curtail school activities, or order schools closed." When approved by the Executive Council and filed in the Office of the Secretary of State, such orders and rules have the force and effect of law

during the pendency of a peacetime emergency. Any inconsistent rules or ordinances of any agency or political subdivision of the state are suspended during the pendency of the emergency.

On March 15, 2020, I issued Executive Order 20-02, which directed schools to close to students and engage in a planning period from March 18, 2020 until March 27, 2020 ("Closure Period"). During this Closure Period, school and district staff were directed to report to work to construct continuity of education plans that would be delivered via distance learning or social distancing models compliant with Minnesota Department of Health guidance ("MDH Guidance"). In order to continue providing education for Minnesotan children while preserving the health, safety, and lives of Minnesotans, I am directing all public schools to implement distance learning plans, continue providing student meals, and provide onsite care to school-aged children of certain workers in Critical Sectors exempted under Executive Order 20-20 ("Eligible Children").

We continue to recognize that schools are community hubs for children and families. School closures put burdens on children and families and disproportionately impact different communities. I greatly value the efforts of school staff to make sure that our students receive meals on a daily basis and to provide other services such as physical and mental health care supports virtually where possible. These services must continue.

On March 20, 2020, the U.S. Secretary of Education announced that students impacted by school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic can bypass standardized statewide assessments for the 2019-20 school year. The U.S. Department of Education has made a waiver process available to any state that is unable to assess its students due to the ongoing national emergency, providing relief from federally mandated assessment requirements for this school year.

Student performance, as measured by statewide assessments, is required to be reported and used in federal and state accountability and reporting systems. Consistent with the current federal waiver opportunity and to protect students' health and safety, Minnesota is cancelling its statewide assessments for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year. Minnesota has therefore submitted a request for a waiver of federal assessment requirements. Due to the national emergency, Minnesota's federal waiver request also includes a waiver from the federal reporting requirements and the requirement that this assessment data be used in the accountability systems. Action must also be taken to provide relief from state accountability and reporting requirements.

Minnesotans rely on the care and services provided to children and families of Critical Sector workers as we navigate the COVID-19 pandemic and take care of one another. Educators, school employees providing care, and child care providers are themselves Critical Sector workers. Child care services will continue to be necessary for the essential functions of health care services, law enforcement, emergency response services, and other Critical Sectors.

This peacetime emergency brings increased attention to the foundation child care providers provide for the health and the well-being of our state. The care that they provide children and families plays a critical role in our communities as we persevere through this pandemic. However, the health and the wellbeing of our children and their families is the top priority of the State and should a child care provider determine it cannot maintain public health guidance and safely meet the needs of children and staff, it should close. Educators and child care providers are the heroes we need to ensure that children are safe, allowing parents and guardians to provide critical care and emergency services to our communities.

For these reasons, I order as follows:

1. Nothing in this Executive Order should be construed to encourage or require Minnesotans in at-risk categories to act inconsistently with public health recommendations or the advice of their doctors. All Minnesotans should continue to regularly check and follow the advice on MDH's COVID-19 webpage: https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/

2. As planned, the closure period announced in Executive Order 20-02 will remain in place through March 27, 2020 ("Closure Period").

3. Pursuant to Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 12.21, subdivision 3(11), I authorize and direct the Commissioner of Education to implement a distance learning period beginning on March 30, 2020 through May 4, 2020 ("Distance Learning Period").

4. The purpose of the Distance Learning Period is to provide continuity of education during the COVID-19 pandemic while also preserving the health, safety, and lives of Minnesota's students, educators, and the broader public.

5. During the Distance Learning Period, public school buildings and facilities must be closed for typical in-school instruction.

6. During the Distance Learning Period, all public schools must provide continuous education based on the distance learning plans developed during the Closure Period directed by Executive Order 20-02.

7. I authorize the Commissioner of Education, in consultation with the Commissioner of Health, to extend the Distance Learning Period for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year calendar if it is deemed necessary for the health and safety of students and staff.

8. This order applies to all schools as set forth in Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 12.12, subdivision 3(11). I continue to encourage tribal and nonpublic schools to fulfill the spirit and directives of this Executive Order.

9. During the Distance Learning Period and per applicable labor agreements, school districts and schools must allow for remote work or telework to the extent possible. To the extent that it is necessary for teachers and staff to be physically present in school buildings, school districts and schools must provide conditions for staff in compliance with MDH Guidance on social distancing.

10. Consistent with applicable labor agreements, districts must utilize available staff who are able to work during the Distance Learning Period. Districts must also provide employee accommodations as required by law.

11. For purposes of Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 126C.05, for the period from March 30 through April 30, 2020, schools may count the number of days originally scheduled as instructional days. Additionally, students participating in distance learning may be reported in attendance and membership for their originally scheduled days and hours.

12. Staff will report to their respective school buildings on Friday, May 1, 2020, to plan and prepare for students' return to school buildings upon the end of the Distance Learning Period.

13. Upon approval by the Executive Council, for purposes of Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 126C.05, districts and schools may count May 1, 2020 and May 4, 2020 as instructional days, and enrolled students can be reported in attendance and membership.

14. Upon approval by the Executive Council, expenses for special education staff assigned to other work during the Closure Period and Distance Learning Period and expenses recorded in the food service fund may be charged to the same Uniform Financial Accounting and Reporting Standards codes to which the service is charged for an instructional day. The Commissioner of Education must notify school districts and charter schools of these formula changes as soon as practicable.

15. Subject to paragraph 1, schools and school districts, in cooperation with state agencies, are directed to support communities disproportionately impacted by the Closure Period and Distance Learning Period, including but not limited to, low- income families and families experiencing homelessness. During the Distance Learning Period, schools are expected to provide meals to their students. MDE will provide additional guidance to schools and school districts about this provision.

16. I direct state agencies to continue to work together to ensure continuity of mental health services to children and their families.

17. I direct MDE and MDH to continue to provide guidance throughout the Distance Learning Period to schools on best practices around distance learning and social distancing protocol.

18. During the Distance Learning Period, schools are directed to provide care, at a minimum, to district-enrolled students aged 12 and under who are Eligible Children. In providing this care, schools must practice hygiene and social distancing best practices. Schools are not required to provide this care during previously scheduled breaks reflected on a school-board approved calendar. I encourage schools and school districts to also provide extended care—before and after school hours—to Eligible Children. MDE will provide further guidance to schools, school districts, and the public about this provision.

19. Employers assigning employees to supervise and care for Eligible Children must ensure compliance with Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry regulations, and MDH Guidance regarding Schools and Child Care: Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19).

20. In the event that a school location is unable to provide adequate staffing for the care and supervision of Eligible Children due to high staff absenteeism due to illness or other reasons, they must review MDE guidance and contact MDE for further guidance on contracting with local child care providers.

21. Upon approval by the Executive Council, school districts and schools are authorized to transfer operating funds from certain programs that are not already assigned to or encumbered by staff salary and benefits, or otherwise encumbered by federal law, for the following purposes:
    a. To provide care to Eligible Children during the school day.
    b. To pay additional transportation costs incurred between March 30, 2020 and April 30, 2020 needed to implement this Executive Order in providing distance learning instruction.
    c. A fund transfer is allowed if the transfer does not increase state aid obligations to the district or result in additional property tax authority for the district. A transfer is limited to the operating funds of a district. A school board must approve a fund transfer by the fiscal year reporting deadline. A district or school must maintain accounting records for the purpose of this Executive Order that are sufficient to document both the specific funds transferred and use of those funds. Such accounting records are subject to auditor review. Any execution of this flexibility must not interfere with or jeopardize funding per federal requirements. Any transfer must not interfere with the equitable delivery of distance learning or social distancing models. The Commissioner of Education must provide guidance on the fund balance transfers that are allowable for the purposes outlined above.

22. Upon approval by the Executive Council, districts and schools may use fiscal year 2020 ("FY 2020") revenues from programs that are not already assigned to staff salary and benefits for the following purposes: to provide care to Eligible Children during the school day; and to pay additional transportation costs incurred between March 30, 2020 and April 30, 2020 needed to implement this Executive Order. The expanded revenue use in a program is allowed if it does not increase state aid obligations to the district and schools or result in additional property tax authority for the district other than what would be received under the statutory uses of the revenue

in FY 2020. A school board must approve the use of FY 2020 revenue from operating funds of a district by the fiscal year reporting deadline. A district must maintain accounting records for the purpose of this Executive Order which may be reviewed by auditors and that are sufficient to document the specific use of those funds. The Commissioner of Education must provide guidance on the state revenue programs that may be used for the purposes outlined in this Executive Order.

23. The Children's Cabinet will coordinate strategies to share information, including creating and posting online public health guidance specific to school and child care provider settings, managing questions from schools and child care providers through hotlines, and considering other needs.

24. Child care providers and school staff caring for Eligible Children should be placed on the state's priority list for COVID-19 testing. This priority list will not guarantee imminent testing as capacity in testing shifts due to nationwide testing capacity limitations.

25. No supplier or business should limit or restrict reasonable orders of cleaning, hygiene, and sanitation supplies by child care providers who are serving Eligible Children as defined in this Executive Order and as provided by further guidance.

26. Upon approval by the Executive Council, I authorize and direct the Commissioner of Education to close any available open statewide assessments, effective 5:00 pm on Friday, March 27, 2020.

27. If the federal waiver application referenced above is approved by the U.S. Department of Education, I authorize the Commissioner of Education to determine how to best satisfy general school district reporting requirements for the 2019-20 school year, including the reporting and identification requirements of the NorthStar and World's Best Workforce accountability systems. These decisions will include any future Minnesota legislative reports and the reporting requirements set forth in Minnesota Statutes 2019, sections 120B.11, 120B.30, 120B.31, 120B.35, 120B.36, 122A.414, 124D.59, 124D.98, 124D.861, 136F.302.

28. Schools and school districts unable to fully implement Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 120B.30, subdivision 1(e) due to school closures or the use of distance learning are exempt from this requirement for school year 2019-20. MDE will provide additional guidance to schools and school districts no later than the beginning of the 2020-21 school year.

29. Because there will be extremely limited assessment results, the Commissioner of Education should explore alternative federal reporting options, such as Ed*Facts*, for the 2019-20 school year.

Pursuant to Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 4.035, subdivision 2, and section 12.32, this Executive Order is effective upon approval by the Executive Council. It remains in effect until the peacetime emergency declared in Executive Order 20-01 is terminated or until it is rescinded by proper authority.

A determination that any provision of this Executive Order is invalid will not affect the enforceability of any other provision of this Executive Order. Rather, the invalid provision will be modified to the extent necessary so that it is enforceable.

Signed on March 25, 2020.

Tim Walz

Governor

Filed According to Law:

Steve Simon

Secretary of State

Approved by the Executive Council on March 25, 2020:

Alice Roberts-Davis

Secretary, Executive Council

Filed March 25, 2020 Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State, Steve Simon

Appendix B

STATE OF MINNESOTA
Executive Department

Governor Tim Walz

Emergency Executive Order 20-41

Authorizing and Directing the Commissioner of Education to Extend the Distance Learning Period and Continue to Provide a Safe Learning Environment for Minnesota's Students

I, Tim Walz, Governor of the State of Minnesota, by the authority vested in me by the Constitution and applicable statutes, issue the following Executive Order:

The COVID-19 pandemic presents an unprecedented challenge to our State. Minnesota has taken proactive steps to ensure that we are ahead of the curve on COVID-19 prevention and response. On March 13, 2020, I issued Executive Order 20-01 and declared a peacetime emergency because this pandemic, an act of nature, threatens the lives of Minnesotans, and local resources are inadequate to address the threat. On April 13, 2020, after notifying the Legislature, I issued Executive Order 20-35, extending the peacetime emergency declared in Executive Order 20-01.

In Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 12.02, the Minnesota Legislature recognized the "existing and increasing possibility of the occurrence of natural and other disasters of major size and destructiveness" and conferred upon the Governor the emergency and disaster powers provided in Chapter 12 to "ensure the preparations of this state will be adequate to deal with disasters," to "generally protect the public peace, health, and safety," and to "preserve the lives and property of the people of the state." Pursuant to Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 12.21, subdivision 1, the Governor has general authority to control the State's emergency management as well as carry out the provisions of Minnesota's Emergency Management Act. Pursuant to subdivision 3 of that same section, the Governor may "make, amend, and rescind the necessary orders and rules to carry out the provisions" of Minnesota Statutes 2019, Chapter 12. When approved by the Executive Council and filed in the Office of the Secretary of State, such orders and rules have the force and effect of law during the pendency of a peacetime emergency. Any inconsistent rules or ordinances of any agency or political subdivision of the State are suspended during the pendency of the emergency.

On March 15, 2020, I issued Executive Order 20-02, directing schools to close to students and to engage in a planning period ("Closure Period"). On March 25, 2020, I issued Executive Order 20-19, directing the Commissioner of Education ("Commissioner") to implement a distance learning period beginning on March 30, 2020 through May 4, 2020 ("Distance Learning

Period"). The Distance Learning Period allowed school staff to provide continuity of education while also preserving the health, safety, and lives of students, their families, school staff, and the public. All Minnesota public school facilities remain closed for typical in-school instruction but remain open to provide meals to children. Schools also provide onsite care to school-aged children of certain workers in critical sectors ("Eligible Children") exempted under Executive Order 20-20 and Executive Order 20-33, as supplemented by 20-38.

To preserve the health, safety, and lives of Minnesotans, it is necessary to extend the Distance Learning Period for all Minnesota school districts and charter schools for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school calendar year ("Extended Distance Learning Period"). Although distance learning is a critical component of our response to COVID-19, our Administration believes that we can make improvements to reduce disparities in students' experiences due to inequal access to internet.

Schools are community hubs for children and families. As such, school closures put burdens on children and families and disproportionately impact communities of color, as well as indigenous, immigrant, and low-income families and communities. We thank school staff for their dedication to students. I call on school districts and charter schools to continue to prioritize innovation and direct outreach to students.

In addition to distance learning, schools must continue to ensure students receive daily meals and provide other services virtually where possible, such as physical and mental health care supports.

Throughout the Distance Learning Period, the Minnesota Department of Education ("MDE") continually assessed the efficacy of the programming and services, issued additional guidance when necessary, and determined a need for additional supports for our most underserved students and families as well as students whose education may require limited on-site services. During the Extended Distance Learning Period, I request that all state agencies partner with MDE and the Children's Cabinet to innovate in serving children, schools, and communities to meet the needs of students. This is also a time for the public and private sectors to come together to prioritize the needs of students.

In collaboration with the Minnesota Department of Health ("MDH"), the Center for Disease Control and Prevention ("CDC"), and consistent with public health guidelines on masking, social distancing, personal hygiene, screening, and cleaning practices ("Public Health Guidelines"), MDE may determine that it is possible to safely reopen school facilities for additional specific instructional programming.

School districts and charter schools need authorization to transfer operating funds from programs that are not already assigned to or encumbered by staff salary and benefits, or otherwise encumbered by federal law, to help cover additional costs incurred for nutrition services, community education programs, and technology supports for our students.

Care of Eligible Children continues to be necessary for our state's COVID-19 response. Child care providers remain open. As such, care for such Eligible Children must continue. All programs serving children should follow Public Health Guidelines.

For these reasons, I order as follows:

1. Nothing in this Executive Order should be construed to encourage or require Minnesotans in at-risk categories to act inconsistently with public health recommendations of the advice of their doctors. All Minnesotans should continue to regularly check and follow the advice on MDH's COVID-19 webpage: https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/

2. To preserve the health and safety of students, their families, school staff, and the public and to provide continuity of education during the COVID-19 pandemic, and pursuant to Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 12.21, subdivision 3(11) and paragraph seven of Executive Order 20-19, I authorize and direct the Commissioner to extend the Distance Learning Period established in Executive Order 20-19 through the end of the 2019-2020 school calendar year. For all school districts and charter schools that operate on an approved flexible learning year calendar, the Distance Learning Period is extended until June 30, 2020. For the purposes of this Executive Order, the extended distance learning periods set forth in this paragraph are referred to as the "Extended Distance Learning Period."

3. Executive Order 20-19 remains in full effect during the Extended Distance Learning Period except as explicitly modified by this Executive Order.

4. School districts and charter schools must use May 1, 2020 and May 4, 2020 to plan for the Extended Distance Learning Period, which will begin on May 5, 2020. To the extent possible, school districts and charter schools must provide accommodations for staff to work remotely. If staff must report to their respective buildings during this Extended Distance Learning Period, planning activities must be performed in accordance with Public Health Guidelines. This provision supersedes paragraph 12 of Executive Order 20-19.

5. School districts and charter schools must electronically post their respective distance learning plans and communicate them to students and their families by May 5, 2020. The distance learning plans must address, but not be limited to, communication pathways with student families, community input on student and family needs, and other outreach opportunities. This is in addition to core instruction, supports for all student groups, nutrition, school-age care, technology needs, and effectively delivering educational models to students in a distance setting.

6. This order applies to all schools as set forth in Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 12.21, subdivision 3(11). I continue to encourage tribal and nonpublic schools to fulfill the spirit and directives of this Executive Order.

7. During the Extended Distance Learning Period, all public schools must provide continuous education based on the distance learning plans developed during the Closure Period directed by Executive Order 20-02, and as modified by school districts and charter schools during relevant planning periods.

8. I authorize the Commissioner, in consultation with the Commissioner of Health, to expand in-school provisions of additional activities and programming the Commissioner deems necessary and that can be operationalized in compliance with Public Health Guidelines where those services cannot be provided through a distance learning model and those services are needed to access that student's distance learning instruction,

provide supports or services schools can safely offer, and create opportunities for meaningful connections between students and teachers.

9. MDE, in consultation with MDH, must establish a protocol in accordance with Public Health Guidelines to allow for home visits by school staff to build and preserve relationships with students and their families. Nothing in this protocol should be interpreted as a requirement or should be used to replace services provided by counties or social services.

10. Subject to paragraph 1, school districts and charter schools, in cooperation with state agencies, are directed to support communities disproportionately impacted by the Distance Learning Period and Extended Distance Learning Period, including but not limited to, historically marginalized families and families experiencing homelessness. During these periods, schools are expected to provide meals and instructional resources needed for distance learning to their students. MDE will continue to provide additional guidance to school districts and charter schools about this provision

11. During the Extended Distance Learning Period and per applicable labor agreements, school districts and schools must allow for remote work or telework to the extent possible. To the extent that it is necessary for teachers and staff to be physically present in school buildings, school districts and schools must provide conditions for staff in compliance with Public Health Guidelines.

12. Consistent with applicable labor agreements, school districts and charter schools must utilize available staff who are able to work during the Extended Distance Learning Period. School districts and charter schools must also provide employee accommodations as required by law.

13. Upon approval by the Executive Council and notwithstanding Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 169.443, subdivision 2, school buses may deploy arm and flashing red signal systems when delivering meals and distance learning materials to students.

14. School districts and charter schools must make all reasonable efforts to provide daily reports to MDE on the provision of care to Eligible Children, meal delivery and nutrition services, and access to internet and devices

15. Upon approval by the Executive Council, the requirement for school districts and charter schools to administer and for current senior high school students to complete the civics test questions pursuant to Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 120B.02, subdivision 3 is waived for the 2019-2020 school year.

16. Upon approval by the Executive Council, school districts and charter schools are authorized to transfer operating funds from certain programs that are not already assigned to or encumbered by staff salary and benefits, or otherwise encumbered by federal law, for the following purposes:
    a. To provide care to Eligible Children during the school day.
    b. To pay additional transportation costs incurred between March 30, 2020 and the end of the 2019-2020 school year, as defined in paragraphs 2 and 3, needed to implement this Executive Order in providing distance learning instruction and meal delivery.
    c. To pay for additional costs related to technology needed to provide distance learning instruction.
    d. To pay the portion of staff salary and benefits of employees paid through the community service fund normally funded by fees that were refunded, waived, or

              otherwise not paid during the Closure, Distance Learning, and Extended Distance Learning periods.

    e. To pay the portion of food service fund staff salary and benefits normally funded by meal reimbursement revenue during the Closure, Distance Learning, and Extended Distance Learning periods.

    f. A fund transfer is allowed if the transfer does not increase state aid obligations to the school district or charter school or result in additional property tax authority for the school district. A transfer is limited to the operating funds of a school district or charter school. A school board must approve a fund transfer by the fiscal year reporting deadline. A school district or charter school must maintain accounting records for the purpose of this Executive Order that are sufficient to document both the specific funds transferred and use of those funds. Such accounting records are subject to auditor review. Any execution of this flexibility must not interfere with or jeopardize funding per federal requirements. Any transfer must not interfere with the delivery of distance learning or social distancing models for all students and school staff. The Commissioner must provide guidance on the fund balance transfers that are allowable for the purposes outlined above.

17. Upon approval by the Executive Council, school districts and charter schools may use fiscal year 2020 ("FY 2020") revenues from programs that are not already assigned to staff salary and benefits for the purposes in paragraph 16 needed to implement this Executive Order. The expanded revenue use in a program is allowed if it does not increase state aid obligations to the school districts or charter schools or result in additional property tax authority for the school district other than what would be received under the statutory uses of the revenue in FY 2020. A school board must approve the use of FY 2020 revenue from operating funds of a district by the fiscal year reporting deadline. A school district or charter school must maintain accounting records for the purpose of this Executive Order that may be reviewed by auditors and that are sufficient to document both the specific funds transferred and use of those funds. The Commissioner must provide guidance on the state revenue programs that may be used for the purposes outlined in this Executive Order.

18. Upon approval by the Executive Council, under Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 134.355, subdivision 8, the purposes of regional library telecommunications aid is expanded to include the improvement of internet access and access to technology with items that are not e-rated, including, but not limited to, digital or online resources.

19. The Commissioner, in consultation with the Commissioner of Health, may allow school districts and charter schools to open for summer school and extended school year programming. These programs must comply with Public Health Guidelines, paragraphs 1 and 11 and MDE guidance created pursuant to paragraph 20 of this Executive Order.

20. I direct the Commissioner to create guidance for distance learning during the summer period, and, if possible per MDH recommendations, for summer learning that employs a hybrid model of distance learning and in-school learning.

21. Upon recommendation from the Commissioner of Health, school districts and charter schools may begin their 2020-2021 school year based on their respectively approved school calendars. I direct the Commissioner, in consultation with the Commissioner of Health, to develop an educational model that balances in-school and distance learning

methods in the case that a typical, in-building school year is not possible based on the health and safety of students, their families, school staff, and the public due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

22. Upon approval by the Executive Council, notwithstanding any law to the contrary, fiscal year 2020 expenditures for employees and contracted services that would have been eligible for state special education aid under Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 125A.76, and for special education tuition billing under Minnesota Statutes 2019, sections 125A.11 and 127A.47, in the absence of school closures or learning plan modifications due to COVID-19 must be included as eligible expenditures for the calculation of state special education aid and special education tuition billing.

23. Upon approval by the Executive Council, notwithstanding any law to the contrary:

    a. For school meals served beginning on or after March 16, 2020, the Commissioner may adjust the fiscal year 2020 appropriations remaining under Minnesota Laws 2019, First Special Session Chapter 11, article 7, section 1, subdivisions 2, 3, and 4 as specified in paragraph b.

    b. On June 30, 2020, the Commissioner must subtract the amount actually paid to participants for the 2019-2020 school year under Minnesota Laws 2019, First Special Session Chapter 11, article 7, section 1, subdivisions 2, 3, and 4 through March 13, 2020 from the total appropriations for each program. The Commissioner must then allocate the remaining funds under each appropriation to participants in the summer food service program on a per- meal basis for meals served on or after March 16, 2020 and before July 1, 2020.

Pursuant to Minnesota Statutes 2019, section 4.035, subdivision 2, and section 12.32, this Executive Order is effective upon approval by the Executive Council. It remains in effect until the peacetime emergency declared in Executive Order 20-01 is terminated or until it is rescinded by proper authority.

A determination that any provision of this Executive Order is invalid will not affect the enforceability of any other provision of this Executive Order. Rather, the invalid provision will be modified to the extent necessary so that it is enforceable.

Signed on April 23, 2020.

Tim Walz

Governor

Filed According to Law:

Steve Simon

Secretary of State

Approved by the Executive Council on April 24, 2020:

Alice Roberts-Davis

Secretary, Executive Council

Filed on April 24, 2020 Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State, Steve Simon

Appendix C

Table 1

Participant demographics

Participant	Highest degree earned	Total number of years teaching experience	Total number of years teaching kindergarten
Participant A (Mary)	Bachelor's	38	36
Participant B (Patricia)	Bachelor's	5	5
Participant C (Jennifer)	Master's	20	7

Table 2

Classroom demographics

Participant	Average number of students in classroom	Type(s) of additional aid in classroom	Number of additional aids in classroom
Participant A (Mary)	20	Paraprofessional	1-3
Participant B (Patricia)	22-24	Paraprofessional, special education teacher	1
Participant C (Jennifer)	24	Paraprofessional, parent volunteer	0-1

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

Intake questions:

1. How long have you been teaching?

2. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

3. As a kindergarten teacher, how many students are in the classroom?

4. Do you have additional staff in the classroom regularly? If yes, who?

5. Which grades have you taught?

6. Where have you all taught?

Interview questions:

Questions related to the specific students in this year's class –
1. How would you describe the students you have in this school year's kindergarten class?

2. Tell me about the home environments of the children in this year's kindergarten class?

3. Tell me about the entry-level language and literacy skills that your students had at the beginning of the school year?

4. Describe any changes you have noticed in these skills across the years that you have been teaching?

Questions related to language and literacy – these questions identify codes that may influence perceptions

5. How would you define language?

6. How would you define literacy?

7. Describe any specific training that you have received in teaching language and literacy?

8. Describe any specific training that you have received in evaluating language and literacy skills?

9. How are children evaluated in language and literacy at the beginning of the school year?

10. When a child is identified as performing below expectations at the beginning of the school year, how is that addressed?

11. Describe the language and literacy skills that you would expect a child to have already acquired by the time they start kindergarten?

12. How have expectations regarding language and literacy skills changed throughout your time as an educator?

13. Describe how you prioritize and teach the language and literacy skills throughout kindergarten?

Questions related to involvement of SLPs –

14. Describe your interactions with speech-language pathologists while working as a kindergarten teacher?

15. Tell me about some ways in which the roles of the SLP in addressing literacy specifically have changed over time?

Appendix E
<div align="center">

Research Participant Consent Letter

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You are invited to participate in a study about teacher's perceptions about the language and literacy skills of their students. I hope to learn about the various types of factors that influence the development of children's literacy. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a Kindergarten teacher with more than 5 years teaching experience.

If you decide to participate, I will interview you on topics including definitions of language and literacy, experience teaching and evaluating language and literacy, expectations of children regarding language and literacy skills, and how performance and expectations of children have changed over time. The interview will be recorded and transcribed by me after the interview. The interview will take no longer than 45-55 minutes. You are at no more than minimal risk by participating in this study. The most risk you can expect to have by participating in this study would be feelings of uncomfort when discussing your perceptions with me. Benefits include helping expand the body of knowledge the language and literacy skills of Kindergarten students

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will not be disclosed.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relationships with Minnesota State University Moorhead. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time.

Please feel free to ask questions regarding this study. You may contact the Primary Investigator of this study, Kris Vossler, in the SLHS Department at kris.vossler@mnstate.edu or 218-477-4200. Any questions about your rights may be directed to Dr. Lisa I. Karch, Chair of the MSUM Institutional Review Board, at 218-477-2699 or by email at: irb@mnstate.edu.

You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time after signing this form should you choose to discontinue participation in this study.

_____

Signature of Participant

_____

Signature of Investigator