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Teacher's Perspectives Regarding Kindergarten Students' Behaviors and Social Skills Post-Pandemic

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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Latalia M. Robbins

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

Teachers' Perspectives Regarding Kindergarten Students' Behaviors and Social Skills

Post-Pandemic

by

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MA, Grand Canyon University, 2013

BS, Northern Arizona University, 2009

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

December 2024

Abstract

Kindergarten teachers and support professionals in the social-emotional community within a local school district experienced changes in student behaviors and social skills since returning to in-person schooling following the pandemic. After COVID-19, teachers found themselves engaging students who presented a lack of social skill development, contributing to the behaviors within the classroom microsystem. This study used Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to support research efforts to examine how learning environments and interactions contributed to students' preparation for Kindergarten. The research explored 12 Kindergarten teachers' and support professionals' perspectives concerning Kindergarten student behaviors and social skills. The research design was an exploratory qualitative study with teacher interviews. The interviews were transcribed and then coded using the content analysis coding method, and upon completion, themes that reflected key areas of contribution to the study emerged. These themes were (1) realizations about the pandemic, (2) social skills and behaviors, (3) families, (4) environment matters, (5) technology matters, and (6) early childhood programs. The study noted concern for teachers in the classroom and presented ideas on ways to provide support that can benefit Kindergarten students. The implications for positive change were identified and achieved as the study highlighted the areas of social development that need to be addressed to improve developmental outcomes that impacted all areas of student growth.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my husband, Alex, and our three precious children, Al, Conner, and Camille, who have been supportive throughout the entire process. My dreams became an easy reality with your help. My mom, the Middlebrook girls, and the Robbins Family provided me with the vision, courage, and work ethic to perform qualified work. I will forever be grateful to Mrs. Rochelle Robbins for leading me to the education profession. To the futures of Dylan Jeremiah Chappell and Dorian Alexander Robbins-Mair in hopes that this study provides you with tools to maximize development and learning that will promote unimaginable growth. To Mrs. Katrina Woodruff, Mrs. Rachel Phillips, and Ms. Courtney Akinosho who required me to be my very best in a profession that searches for the most magnificent gems in our youngest learners. Lastly, to God, who showed me that with his assistance, I could knock down walls, be successful, and claim what is possible. I am nothing without your favor, grace, and mercy.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In March of 2020, COVID-19 became a common phrase in communities worldwide. The virus created a pandemic that caused the traditional way of living to change to increase the safety of everyone (LaPolla, 2021). O’Keeffe and McNally (2021) stated that the impact was not limited to industries such as food and the economy, for it also affected a significant part of children’s growth: their education. At the pandemic’s beginning, the current school year was curtailed by several months, and education relocated to a virtual environment.

In the fall of 2020, amidst a thriving pandemic that threatened to eliminate the possibility of normalcy, local school districts and childcare facilities in Georgia had to choose whether to conduct school face-to-face or continue with virtual learning instruction. Some school districts selected a virtual method that they would utilize for months. A few school districts in Georgia had state-funded early childhood programs in elementary schools, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, they offered early childhood programs virtually. Several families opted not to send their children to school, thus creating an issue for future Kindergartners and teachers (Sherlock, 2021) in the following school year.

Several principles guide Bright from the Start (2022), a state government agency that oversees state-funded early childhood programs in Georgia, including face-to-face learning experiences and access to social skill development opportunities led by qualified teachers. During the pandemic school year, technology-based activities replaced social skill development for those students who participated in virtual learning (Local School

District, 2021). One result was that teachers had no idea of the social development level of students entering Kindergarten who did not attend an early childhood education program during the 2020-2021 school year (O’Keeffe & McNally, 2021). However, what teachers experienced and observed regarding the behaviors of Kindergartners when all students returned to school in the 2021-2022 school year differed in comparison to previous school years (Camović, 2022; Duran, 2021; Egan et al., 2021; Lane et al., 2021; Linnavalli & Kalland, 2021; Loades et al., 2020; Orben et al., 2020; Paulaskaite et al., 2021; Sama et al., 2020; Spinelli et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2020).

Background

The historical meaning behind this study falls into several areas that impacted a student’s ability to be prepared for Kindergarten post-pandemic: COVID-19 pandemic, social skill development, and virtual learning. In 2020, 91% of all school-age students returned home from their learning institutions and began a limited educational journey that included learning virtually or not at all (O’Keeffe & McNally, 2021). The pandemic replaced forms of learning such as play with social distancing (O’Keeffe & McNally, 2021), thereby delaying some early learning experiences for students preparing for Kindergarten (Duran, 2021).

Students preparing for Kindergarten felt the greatest of these impacts because their social development before entering the grade lacked “close interaction with adults and their peers” (Camović, 2022, p. 157) during the pandemic. Young students involved in early learning programs assist in forecasting social and academic achievements in kindergarteners (Dore et al., 2021). Due to COVID-19, students entering Kindergarten

began school with an unknown set of skills and an unfamiliar state of readiness that has yet to be determined because of environmental changes that included social distancing and avoiding human contact, which impedes healthy social skill development (Duran, 2021).

Problem Statement

The problem explored in this study was the perceptions of Kindergarten teachers, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals within a local school district who struggled to address challenging behaviors and poor social skills displayed by their students since returning to in-person schooling following the pandemic. Since the return to complete in-person learning, elementary schools have seen an increase in behavioral issues among their Kindergarten students who either attended a prekindergarten program virtually or did not attend it (Local School District, 2021). Prekindergarten programs saw a decline in enrollment and the condensing of learning domains that included personal and social development (Bright from the Start, 2022). This domain assists in the identification of certain behaviors in younger children early and helps to develop social skills (Bright from the Start, 2022).

In addition, the coordinator of Early Childhood for a local school district (2021) stated that teachers struggled with behaviors and a lack of social skills among students more than in previous school years. Students who did not attend prekindergarten programs or attended programs with a reduced schedule missed opportunities to develop the necessary skills to succeed in Kindergarten. The Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (GKIDS) Readiness Check provided a glance at Kindergarten social

skill preparedness using data generated from the Foundations of School Success assessment (Georgia Department of Education [GADOE], 2023). Administered within the first 6 weeks of students entering Kindergarten, GKIDS measures the student's ability to do the following:

- Engages in independent activities and continues tasks over some time.
- Independently follows rules and routines.
- Plays cooperatively with a few peers for a sustained period.
- Uses senses to observe, classify, and learn about objects and environment.
- Makes statements and appropriately answers questions about how objects/materials can be used to solve problems.
- Effectively uses words, sentences, and actions to communicate needs, ideas, opinions, and preferences.
- Performs delicate motor tasks that require small-muscle strength and control.

(GADOE, 2023, para. 4)

The study showed that, between 2019 and 2022, 62% to 74% of the Kindergarten students assessed had a developing or lower performance level (GKIDS, 2023). An average of 32% of the Kindergarteners demonstrated the necessary social skills for their grade level during that period (GKIDS, 2023). This supports a need to address the gap in practice to ensure students receive the social skills needed for Kindergarten during a pandemic.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined the perceptions of Kindergarten teachers, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals within a local school district who struggled to address challenging behaviors and poor social skills displayed by their students since returning to in-person schooling following the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted learning for all age groups across the world. The impact on students attending early learning programs included missed social opportunities, such as interaction with teachers knowledgeable of the developmental milestones' students need to succeed in Kindergarten. This disruption to learning created unclear expectations regarding the level of social development a student had experienced before entering Kindergarten. One of the significant roles of early learning teachers is to ensure that kindergarteners are equipped with the social skills needed to be successful. Disruptions to instruction, such as the example created by the pandemic, highlight the need for preparation for future crises that affect traditional education. Thus, it is imperative to gather and examine information regarding the impact of the pandemic. Because the pandemic had a significantly adverse effect on young children (Camović, 2022; Egan et al., 2021; Linnavalli & Kalland, 2021), the perspectives of early learning teachers on the behaviors and social skills of Kindergartners proved beneficial.

Research Question

The following research question guided the study: What are the perspectives of Kindergarten teachers, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals within a

local school district regarding the challenging behaviors and poor social skills students have displayed since returning to in-person schooling following the pandemic?

Conceptual Framework Overview

The conceptual framework that supported this study included the contributions of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) regarding understanding human development rooted in the ecological systems theory and how it impacts the ability of teachers to maintain quality relationships with children. This concept placed weight on the role of social-emotional learning in early childhood and emphasized the importance of interactions in promoting healthy development. Bronfenbrenner believed that to achieve objectives in social skill development, continuous and regular interactions between humans, objects, and their environment must be maintained over a period to maximize learning (Hayes et al., 2017). The logical connections between the framework presented in this study are grounded in the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the development of the first two stages: microsystem and mesosystem stages.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) research helped to show how quality relationships are developed through social interactions with people and environments such as the classroom. The research helped to support how repetitive hands-on practices in the classroom help prekindergartners meet developmental milestones and prepare them for Kindergarten. Most of all, the theory was a reminder that child development is created through interactions in relationships facilitated by teachers, peers, and parents (Hayes et al., 2017). Human development is based on "quality, focusing more on the relationships that happen in early year settings than on environmental factors since programs

characterized by stimulating and supportive teacher-child interactions are most effective for children” (Hayes et al., 2017, p. 30). With the ecological systems theory as the base of this study, the research attempted to show how continuous human interaction with teachers can facilitate healthy social skill development and minimize concerns with Kindergarten behaviors when achieved in person.

Nature of the Study

The study centered on an exploratory qualitative design to explore the perceptions of kindergarten teachers, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals within a local school district regarding social skills and behavior in kindergarteners’ post-pandemic. According to Yadav (2022), this method allowed for intimate opportunities with teachers to understand their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and their perceptions of developing kindergarteners’ social skills and post-pandemic behaviors. I used interviews to examine teachers’ experiences and observations of students’ social skills and behavior. This assisted in possible future outcomes that may gauge teachers’ understanding of the social skill development standards that address early learners.

Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory, which concerns research on human development and the emphasis placed on children, served as a framework for this exploration. The first two levels, microsystem, and mesosystem, focus on the interaction among children and caregivers, including teachers. The limitations and stress in those interactions created by the pandemic led to questions concerning the social skill preparedness of Kindergarten students.

After transcribing interviews, I decoded data from interviews using a thematic method. I looked for commonalities that clarified and answered the research question and showed diverse ways to teach and maintain social skill development during a pandemic. The investigative focus of this research was to examine the range of human interaction between the teacher and the students and how it prepared students for Kindergarten. In addition, the study explored the social skill opportunities students received during the pandemic and the conclusions teachers developed regarding future learning experiences. Lastly, the research examined teacher expectations of students' social skill development and behavior.

Scope and Delimitations

This research study included 12 participants in an exploratory qualitative study to address teachers' perceptions regarding kindergarteners' social skills and behavior post-pandemic. After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, parents could send their prekindergarten students to school virtually or not be taught by their local school district. Prekindergarten programs in the district only offered virtual learning for seven out of 10 months of school during the 2021-2022 school year.

The program adapted to a shorter school schedule and limited instruction in academics and technology. Due to the pandemic, teaching practices and standards changed while the curriculum remained the same. Because of these adjustments, there was little participation in prekindergarten. Enrollment increased in the 2022 school year, and students who learned virtually or did not participate in an early learning program entered Kindergarten.

Delimitations/Limitations

The information and data collected for this research study were limited to 12 teachers, including kindergarten teachers, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals within a local school district. The teachers were current kindergarten teachers in the southeastern portion of the United States, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals; each monitored cases that included managing student behaviors and social development. The teachers had experience teaching Kindergarten for 3 or more years, as well as experience teaching kindergartners during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results came directly from the perspectives of teachers who taught and managed Kindergartners before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Assumptions

Several assumptions were made in this research. First, I assumed that all teachers in this study knew the social skills children need to succeed in Kindergarten. Second, I assumed teachers were familiar with adapting to various teaching platforms based on their training. Additionally, I assumed that teachers received and continued to receive support from the administration and local school districts to prepare for Kindergarten post-pandemic. Lastly, I assumed teachers had experience teaching Kindergarten and could answer the questions within this research.

Significance

This study highlighted the perspectives of Kindergarten teachers, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals within a local school district on how the pandemic impacted Kindergarten students' behavior and social skills. Research has

shown that success in children is contingent on a social foundation by the age of six (Sapra, 2019). We are developing personal and social skills that allow for building teacher-student relationships, conflict resolution skills, and the foundation for social-emotional skills (Bright from the Start, 2022).

This study led to positive change by showing the importance of understanding social skills and certain behavior traits in kindergarteners. Griffore and Phenice (2016) contended that human interaction is crucial to social development, providing the foundation for learning experiences. These experiences promoted growth in all areas of learning, including personal and social development (Lippard et al., 2018). This research supported practical application in the specialization of the field. The study's positive change was to understand better how events such as the pandemic impacted behavior and social skills and how to offset any adverse effects by being knowledgeable and prepared for future disruptions, thus ensuring that students entering Kindergarten receive the opportunity to accumulate skills needed to thrive. Study findings have the potential to increase the understanding of how events such as the pandemic impacted behavior and social skills, which can provide the knowledge of how to approach and prepare for future disruptions.

Definitions

The following definitions are provided to assist the reader:

Behavior: an observable and measurable action, activity, or process, often initiated in response to internal or external stimuli (American Psychological Association, 2023a).

COVID-19: an infectious disease from 2019 that caused a pandemic due to its ability to spread through “droplets and virus particles released into the air when an infected person breathes” (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2022, para. 2), thus causing problems for the respiratory system.

Ecological systems theory: developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979; addresses the relationships between students, parents, and teachers in various social contexts that promote development (Cipriano et al., 2018).

Human interaction: between the biological and psychological person and their environment (Rudasill et al., 2018).

Kindergarten: a learning environment developed by Friedrich Froebel for children five to six years of age that provides developmentally appropriate learning opportunities to build the children’s social and academic skills and prepare them for the transition into first grade and school in general (Murray, 2018)

Mesosystem: refers to the students’ various habitats that connect school and home.

Microsystem: refers to the levels or stages of environments in which a person develops and learns that are impacted by factors such as teachers, parents, and guardians (Cipriano et al., 2018)

Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS): supports staff in developing and improving opportunities for students through curriculum development and providing resources and training to assist students who may require and/ or emotional support (DeKalb County Public Schools, 2024).

Pandemic: “an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a vast area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people” (Kelly, 2011, p. 540).

Prekindergarten: a learning environment for children three to four years of age that addresses academic achievements between advantaged and disadvantaged students and provides access to quality early childhood education and social development (DeAngelis et al., 2018).

Proximal interpersonal processes: interactions the developing person engages in daily with significant others within the most central microsystem (Cao et al., 2020). This includes daily interactions that the child experiences with various key socializers in the family and childcare setting, teacher instruction, and play with peers.

Social-Emotional Professional: assist in the implementation of evidence-based strategies to support a coordinated and effective school climate, classroom management, social-emotional learning, retroactive practices, and behavioral interventions process (DeKalb County Public Schools, 2024).

Social skills: according to the American Psychological Association (2023), social skills refer to the following:

A set of learned abilities that enable an individual to interact competently and appropriately in each social context. Western cultures most commonly identified social skills include assertiveness, coping, communication and friendship-making skills, interpersonal problem-solving, and the ability to regulate one’s cognitions, feelings, and behavior. (para. 1)

Summary

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to examine the perspectives of Kindergarten teachers, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals within a local school district regarding the challenging behaviors and poor social skills students displayed since returning to in-person schooling following the pandemic (Camović, 2022; Egan et al., 2021; Linnavalli & Kalland, 2021). COVID-19 disrupted a pivotal time in learning amongst prekindergartners preparing for Kindergarten. Teachers of young students use their skills and training to help them explore all areas of academics, with a strong influence on social skills. During the pandemic, the de-emphasis on social skill learning increased negative behaviors.

Using an exploratory qualitative study, I examined the perspectives of Kindergarten teachers, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals within a local school district to gauge the impact of COVID-19 on kindergarteners' social skills and behavior. I conducted interviews to understand and gain helpful insight into the learning environment during the pandemic. This study had the potential to create positive social change by understanding how to ensure students entering Kindergarten received the opportunity to develop their social skills during a disruption such as the pandemic. Chapter 2 explores literature that supports the continuation of social skill development during a pandemic to prepare kindergarteners for success.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Upon returning to the classroom after the pandemic, Kindergarten teachers, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals within a local school district faced increased issues with behaviors and struggling social skills in Kindergartners (Camović, 2022; Egan et al., 2021; Linnavalli & Kalland, 2021). March 2020 brought with it a pandemic that disrupted traditional learning. Ninety-one percent of all school-age children saw traditional in-person learning methods revised to meet students' current environmental needs, whether it be learning virtually or not at all. These changes not only impacted grades K-5 but drastically changed the learning environment of students preparing for Kindergarten.

This exploratory qualitative study highlighted teachers' perceptions of how the pandemic influenced kindergarteners' behaviors and social skills post-pandemic. Changes to learning disrupted essential methods of acquisition that are the basis of social skills development, such as play. By understanding what teachers experienced in the Kindergarten classroom with students whose early learning program was decomposed, stakeholders can adequately gauge the difficulties and the most shocking areas. This study attempted to address many themes that arose through research discovery, such as the repercussions of the pandemic that changed everyday practices for early learners. In addition, the study explored the challenges students faced as they prepared for Kindergarten, such as virtual learning, access to early learning programs, poor social development learning, and teacher perceptions of skills needed for Kindergarten.

Literature Search Strategy

The strategy for literature collection was based on the need to locate supportive research and articles that complemented the progression of an exploratory qualitative study regarding Kindergarten teachers, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals within a local school district's perception of behaviors and social skills of Kindergartners' post-pandemic. Through this research study, several databases were used in Walden's Library. Education Source was the central database that allowed for extensive search using many combinations of terms associated with the study theme. It housed a diverse collection of current peer-reviewed articles that contributed to and supported the current research study regarding social skill development, behavior, Kindergarten, and the pandemic. ERIC is another database that allowed for further research on the behaviors and social skills of Kindergartners' post-pandemic, which were up-to-date and current. Other databases that were used included UNICEF, ProQuest Central, and ProQuest. Key terms that were used are as follows: *social skill development, social skills, social and emotional, social, personal and social, Urie Bronfenbrenner, ecological systems theory, microsystems, mesosystem, play, early learning, early childhood, early childhood education, academic achievement, Kindergarten readiness, preschool, Kindergarten, perceptions, pandemic, COVID-19, coronavirus, social distancing, quarantine, human development, early learning strategies, early learning methods, anxiety, teachers, behavior, parents, virtual learning, online learning, distance learning, qualitative, qualitative research, transferability, dependability, credibility, confirmability, content analysis, and coding.*

The process of locating and searching for peer-reviewed articles was manageable. With the assistance of the professionals at the Walden Library, I explored combinations of word searches and used other databases that allowed for further research. Library professionals extended the study in a direction that opened more possibilities and avenues to look deeper at terms associated with the skills kindergarteners need. I found many articles based on current research to support this study.

Conceptual Framework: Ecological Systems Theory

The conceptual framework that guided the study was Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and his contribution to human development. Bronfenbrenner focused on human development and highlighted the need for human interaction between various levels that impacted child development. Ugwanyi et al. (2021) explained that connections made by relationships and interactions children made with parents and teachers in multiple settings promoted development and growth. Mabhoiyi and Seroto (2019) stated that these relationships depend on one another to maximize learning. Nasiopoulou (2019) further highlighted the importance of the individual, emphasizing that successful development is contingent on a stable environment with opportunities to interact. le Roux (2021) contended that the home or school environment cannot triumph individually; they must coexist.

Bronfenbrenner's research developed the ecological systems theory to show the association between human development and the environment (Hayes et al., 2017). The environment allowed humans to grow and develop socially through interactions with key individuals and their surroundings. Within the system is a foundation created by the

family that houses the first interactions with parents. Building on these familiar relationships are the bonds created in the school setting with teachers. le Roux (2021) described the relationship between home and school as “reciprocal” (p. 3), supporting the idea that one benefits from the other. Mabhoyi and Seroto (2019) surmised, “Their development is the result of complex interactions between the individual and various systematic factors that influence each other” (p. S2), and these connections influence all other relationships.

In human development, “the individual adapts, functions, and develops through dynamic interactions between their characteristics and the surrounding environment” (Nasiopoulou, 2019, p. 329). At home, students develop the qualities that create the social skills needed to thrive in the most basic of environments, which includes school. The environment is essential to the individual, for it “promotes cordial relationships between the children and the members of the immediate environment” (Ugwuany et al., 2021, p. 21).

Five levels helped to explain stages of development comprised of the ecological systems theory: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Kallander et al. (2021) addressed these levels by considering the crisis children experienced because of the pandemic and using ecological systems theory to highlight the importance of ensuring these levels of development and interaction continued to enhance growth. These levels, dependent on each other, can “influence children’s thinking, perceptions, and behavior” (Kallander et al., 2021, p. 3). This exploratory qualitative study emphasized the first two levels of the ecological systems

theory, microsystem and mesosystem, which, during the pandemic, were targeted primarily due to school closures, the dissolution of early learning programs, and the transition to distance learning. The microsystem embodies the initial interactions between a child and their immediate caregivers, whereas the mesosystem explores the connections within the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem and mesosystem, a vital part of a student's development before entering Kindergarten, continued to show how a healthy establishment can benefit all (Hayes et al., 2017).

Microsystems

In their examination of a virtual Kindergarten-readiness summer learning program, Dore et al. (2021) stated, "Parents and caregivers are children's first and most influential teachers" (p. 905). A child's microsystem guides their existence. Nasiopoulou (2019) explained that a microsystem comprises factors with which the child has immediate contact, including parents, teachers, siblings, neighbors, and the community. le Roux (2021) highlighted the family-created foundation for human construction as the most impactful. The family provides an example of how a child interacts with their environment (Mabhoyi & Seroto, 2019).

In contrast to the family, the teacher is the one from whom the children gain instruction and guidance regarding social and academic skills. Teachers engaged in training to understand and know how a child thinks and develops (Nasiopoulou, 2019) and provide a familial community in which children learn. Teachers are significant in child development and maintain an equally pivotal presence in a child's microsystem. Timmons et al. (2021) put it, "The role of the teacher in this process cannot be overstated,

as they depend on their nuanced understanding of the many ways in which children learn and develop and how children's grasp of concepts is revealed" (p. 888).

A benefit of teachers being a part of the microsystem is providing strategies such as play to assist in skill development in many areas. O'Keeffe and McNally (2021) described play as life's way of combatting stress. Shonkoff (2020) emphasized that play facilitated by teachers provided significant support during COVID-19. Teachers used play to guide the development of social skills that assist in developing and managing certain behaviors. This in-person benefit allows for authentic interactions and an environment to practice.

Mesosystems

Mabhoyi and Seroto (2019) described the connections between the microsystem and mesosystems in researching the relationship between student's home and school environments. Parents and caregivers facilitate the connections in the home environment (microsystem). The teacher creates and monitors connections in the school environment (microsystem). The mesosystem shows the connections between the relationships within the environment, whereas microsystems examine them independently. Within the mesosystem, home and school environments work together to maximize learning experiences for the child. Mabhoyi and Seroto (2019) considered students' circumstances an integral part of development; therefore, meaningful connections are necessary. COVID-19 redefined the mesosystem in children's lives.

Understanding that the world impacts children (Mabhoyi & Seroto, 2019), teachers had to develop an understanding of the home environment and the changing

needs of the classroom by connecting families in ways not typically considered. Distance learning required more than the teacher could ensure. Camović (2022) explained, “During the crisis, all children’s microsystems became remote islands, and cooperation between parents and teachers was needed to bridge the existing gap to support children’s development adequately” (p. 158). The changes rendered by distance learning created no guarantee that the connections between home and school were sustainable with minimal management. COVID-19 revealed the importance of connections in the mesosystem that potentially impact kindergarten students.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables

This section presented concepts and variables related to the research. To grasp the need to explore and understand kindergarten teachers, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals within a local school district’s perspective regarding kindergarteners’ post-pandemic, an examination of factors that directly impacted every outcome was required. Kindergarten is the beginning of formal K-12 school. Shirakawa and Saracho (2021) described it as the period in schooling where children receive opportunities to evaluate their skills coupled with instruction facilitated by a trained educator. To be prepared for this level of learning, Bronfenbrenner understood that students needed exposure to social skills developed through human interaction within microsystems and mesosystems to ensure positive outcomes (Cipriano et al., 2018). Teachers assisted in managing these interactions by creating an environment conducive to social skill development, which includes a safe and secure setting that allows students to thrive (Cipriano et al., 2018). Teachers and parents are part of a microsystem that

houses such developments and ensures the contents of the mesosystem are communicated (Nasiopoulou, 2019).

The pandemic caused by COVID-19, a virus that attacked the human respiratory system and facilitated a death toll that exceeded one million people worldwide, disrupted the mesosystem that was needed for students entering Kindergarten; it halted the traditional learning environment for preschoolers entering Kindergarten and created school closures that impacted relationships built on human interaction (Hagihara et al., 2022). The pandemic isolated students into a distance learning setting and erected a computer screen between the teacher, the world, and the student (McKenzie, 2021). McKenzie (2021) described the effects of COVID-19 as life-altering, for it introduced social distancing—a concept directly in opposition to the ecology theorized by Bronfenbrenner as healthy and necessary for successful human development (le Roux, 2021). Furthermore, the pandemic highlighted a need to focus on mental health (Sama, 2020) and maneuvered technology from supportive to primary learning mode (Timmons et al., 2021).

The Impact of COVID-19

COVID-19, also known as coronavirus, created a pandemic that swept across the planet and claimed many lives (McKenzie, 2021). O’Keeffe and McNally (2021) described COVID-19 as an “acute respiratory syndrome” (p. 79) that did not discriminate when it came to gender or age. The World Health Organization (WHO) proclaimed it to be infectious, and with such a declaration came mandates that included school closures and social distancing measures, such as vaccinations and wearing a mask in public

settings (Timmons et al., 2021), to combat the progression of the virus. Despite these steps, COVID-19 impacted “193 countries and 1,598,017, 253 learners worldwide” (O’Keeffe & McNally, 2021, p. 80) and shocked governments.

Pascal and Bertram (2021) highlighted the effects of COVID-19 on low-income families and children living in poverty, which placed them at a disadvantage. However, COVID-19 challenged all communities economically and educationally (Paulauskaite et al., 2021). Timmons et al. (2021) reminded researchers that learning in the early stages involves experiences that include play and inquiry and promote social, emotional, and cognitive development. The pandemic limited interaction within the students’ mesosystems and redefined the role of teachers to a less in-person version that needed more time and opportunity to help facilitate development (Timmons et al., 2021). Changes in how early learners acquire skills occurred as COVID-19 health mandates confined students to their homes (Hagihara et al., 2022). In addition, COVID-19 cut programs specifically aimed at preparing students for Kindergarten. Dore et al. (2021) revealed that COVID-19 halted the execution of summer learning programs designed to impact the developmental skills of future kindergarteners. Furthermore, COVID-19 made it difficult for teachers to facilitate the development of young students’ social skills.

Social Skills

Egan et al. (2021) defined socio-emotional development as follows: “It refers to how children develop the ability to initiate and maintain trusting relationships with adults and peers, understand and express emotions appropriately, become independent, explore and engage with the environment, and make responsible decisions” (p. 926). Teachers are

an essential part of student learning, and they are responsible for “ co-facilitating and extending learning” (Timmons et al., 2021; p. 888). The areas of development teachers help to grow in their students are “belonging...well-being... engagement...and expression” (Timmons et al., 2021, p. 888). Egan et al. (2021) stated that early education teachers assist students in their “socio-emotional development [which] is concerned with how children think, feel, and act” (p. 926). Teachers and caregivers play a vital role in cultivating opportunities associated with social proficiency (Egan et al., 2021). School closures caused by COVID-19 disrupted microsystems and mesosystems of children globally (Egan et al., 2021). The pandemic created a barrier between the students and the world (Mabhoyi & Seroto, 2019), negatively impacting the social development of students preparing to enter Kindergarten.

Traditionally, developing social skills allows for construction in several areas: “self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making” (Egan et al., 2021, p. 926). Focusing on these skills allows students to make positive connections through the management of teachers (Egan et al., 2021). Safe and nurturing opportunities coached by teachers in an environment destined to address student needs help social development (Egan et al., 2021). Furthermore, using strategies such as play and human interaction, teachers create opportunities to guide students successfully through this learning area. In-person, authentic experiences that prepare students for future engagements maximize students’ development of successful social skills, which, in turn, lead to “a positive attitude toward school...and...increased academic performance” (Egan et al., 2021, p. 926). COVID-19

agitated the learning process with the abrupt switch to distance learning (McKenzie, 2021). With the restraint placed on skill development, COVID-19 created uncertainties regarding the skill set of students entering Kindergarten.

Behaviors

Egan et al. (2021) stated that the benefits of teacher-managed social skill development yield results in “self-confidence, empathy, concentration, persistence, attentiveness, effective communication, and problem-solving” (p. 926). The lack of proper social skill development due to COVID-19 created troubling behaviors. In their research on the impact of COVID-19 on young children’s socio-emotional development, Egan et al. (2021) explained that, through learning experiences, children discover how to manage their emotions with the assistance of human interaction, which helps to minimize issues with behaviors. Research shows COVID-19 impacted students in numerous ways (Loades et al., 2020; Orben et al., 2020; Spinelli et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2020). In response to a survey that solicited the opinions of preschool teachers regarding education pre- and post-Covid-19, Duran (2021) identified adverse effects that resulted in children’s “anxiety and fear” (p. 253), which caused a great deal of concern among the teachers. Linnavalli and Kalland (2021) attributed increases in “emotional problems, conduct problems, and hyperactivity” (p. 3) in children three to six years of age to the pandemic. The research conducted by Sama et al. (2020) revealed an “increase in anger and irritation” (p. 128) as well as “depression and anxiety” (p. 128) among children after COVID-19.

The lockdown brought on by the pandemic also caused “stress” (Sama et al., 2020, p. 134) to children globally and created an increase in disruptive behaviors (Lane et al., 2021). School closures and social distancing increased the likelihood of issues with behaviors (Paulaskaite et al., 2021) due to their impact on relationships, and a vital part of a child’s microsystem was compromised. When factoring in other contributions to issues that led to difficulties regarding the behaviors of Kindergartners, it is essential to consider those that impacted human interaction. Social distancing and wearing a mask kept students, their families, and teachers safe, but it also minimized the effects of human interaction (O’Keeffe & McNally, 2021). Behaviors are a concern due to the impact of COVID-19 on educational norms for early learners and the limited human interaction between the student and the teacher.

Social Distancing

Maragakis (2023) of Johns Hopkins described social distancing as “staying home and away from others as much as possible to help prevent the spread of COVID-19” (para. 1). Social distancing became an action that placed a divide between humans because of COVID-19. Mabhoyi and Seroto (2019) described how microsystems and mesosystems are made of connections between the most critical pieces of a child’s life. With the directions given regarding quarantine mandates because of COVID-19, “isolation at home, social distance, wearing masks outside, using disinfectant after contact, washing hands frequently, and avoiding contact” (Duran, 2021, p. 249) became the nature of human existence and survival and impacted the ecology of children. Social

distancing pushed teachers and children into a new province of learning (O’Keeffe & McNally, 2021), making developing social skills difficult.

Social distancing eliminated programs that assisted students with preparing for Kindergarten. Dore et al. (2021) presented a study regarding how summer learning programs ended due to COVID-19 mandates. These programs prepared future Kindergartners for their next learning experience. Changes did not end there.

Governments worldwide issued instructions to close schools and transition to distance learning (Lane et al., 2021) to comply with the guidance set by social distance requirements (Lafave et al., 2021). Social distancing increased feelings of uncertainty in students impacted by COVID-19.

Kindergarten

Kindergarten is the first level of learning when a child reaches elementary school. Friedrich Froebel was the creator of Kindergarten, and after years of researching child development and behavior, he finalized the concepts to clarify human development. Froebel emphasized the importance of play without structure and identified three guiding principles: “social imitation, learning through expression, and systematized play” (Muelle, 2005, p. 88). Shirakawa and Saracho (2021) explained that Kindergarten is a group of children observed in a flexible setting. Froebel’s Kindergarten unites the parts of the microsystem that are imperative to developing a Kindergartner, including the “connection between nature and humans” (Shirakawa & Saracho, 2021, p. 1168). The reference to nature was further expanded to include relationships (Shirakawa & Saracho, 2021) that can be fostered in a learning setting.

Murray (2018) highlighted the importance of ensuring that Kindergartners have a place to relate and learn. Teachers created a place for these ideals to flourish. Dolan (2022) elaborated, “Young children’s development is contingent on learning from nurturing, responsive, and stimulating interactions with teachers and peers” (p. 36). This is especially important when children cannot attend early childhood programs. These are the expectations for development when it comes to students entering Kindergarten. Teachers create “conditions for high-quality classroom experiences” (Nasiopoulou, 2019), such as play.

Play

Ostroff (2020) described the play as vital to early learners’ learning process. Play is the preferred delivery method of the many strategies used to teach, develop social skills, and minimize behavioral concerns. Play is a tool used to relate lessons to a student’s abilities. Pascal and Bertram (2021) reported, “Froebel argued that play helps children to relate their inner worlds of feelings, ideas and lived experiences with the wider world and to see a connection between them” (p. 24). Children need to relate and understand the world, and play facilitates learning. Dore et al. (2021) believed that early learning programs centered on teacher-child relationships create durable skills that build positive connections. Play helps to manage these opportunities.

David Elkind (2001), a famous author and child psychologist, stated, “Play is nature’s way of dealing with stress” (p. 218). Teachers use play to teach students how to manage their feelings, gain academic knowledge, and express their concerns (O’Keeffe & McNally, 2021). It is a significant vessel for teaching and preparing students for

Kindergarten. When COVID-19 occurred, it was not easy to continue in the same manner because of school closures. Egan et al. (2021) stated, “Play-based learning is particularly relevant for young children, providing them with relevant and meaningful learning opportunities” (p. 926). Play as a strategy took time to execute due to restrictions COVID-19 placed on learning, such as distance learning.

Distance Learning

With the arrival of COVID-19 came changes in the way teachers instructed their students. Lane et al.’s (2021) research demonstrated how governments across the world moved swiftly to implement distance learning to maintain a connection between students and educational institutions while allowing physical distancing, which Maragakis (2023) defined as “the practice of staying at least 6 feet away from others to avoid catching a disease such as COVID-19” (para. 3). Distance learning challenged families, children, and their teachers. Bookser et al. (2021) explained how distance learning was especially difficult for low-income families and various races. State online learning requirements diminished teachers’ time (Bright from the Start, 2022). With these changes came minimized adjustments to what teachers could teach, including social skills.

Ostroff (2020) contended, “Learning is inherently social” (p. 20) and “young children learn by playing, observing, and actively engaging communities of kids” (pp. 20-21). The need for physical distancing changed the delivery of instructions to support those opportunities. The government’s mandated physical distancing led to the implementation of distance learning. Lafave et al. (2021) explained that physical distancing intended to slow the spread of COVID-19, which caused communities and

schools everywhere to close. A further measure taken because of COVID-19 was reducing the number of students who could attend early learning programs. Lafave et al. (2021) reported that this decrease in face-to-face students resulted in distance learning for students. For those who were allowed to attend school, Lafave et al.'s (2021) qualitative study of early learning teachers revealed that the decreased student population, physical distancing, and COVID-19 protocols created “a disconnect with their ability to teach and develop social connectedness within their classroom community” (p. 941). In addition, COVID-19 sanitation guidelines meant that students missed opportunities to engage in the usual physical literacy activities—indoor play, toys—and enrichment experiences such as field trips that were part of the typical curriculum (Lafave et al., 2021).

Summary and Conclusions

COVID-10 caused many issues to arise in the spring of 2020. Schools closed and switched to distance learning. Governments and stakeholders rushed to create a way for children to continue learning safely. They considered all mandates that included social distancing, physical distancing, masks, and reductions in class sizes. Due to limitations set on screen time, some states reduced the opportunity to teach social skills (Bright from the Start, 2022). With these changes came modifications in the delivery of learning skills, such as playing. The impact on social skills created concerns regarding the behaviors of Kindergartners and their state of learning preparedness post-pandemic (Camović, 2022; Egan et al., 2021; Linnavalli & Kalland, 2021).

By researching teachers' perspectives to gather details on the changes they witnessed in students' social skills and behaviors, I aimed to uncover the effects of

COVID-19 on Kindergartners. This study has the potential to inform governmental agencies and stakeholders of ways to ensure educational institutions meet the whole child's needs, including social development, to minimize concerns with Kindergartners' behavior when switching to distance learning for any possible future disruptions. The gap this study sought to address was to identify the means to support teachers addressing kindergarteners who lack the social skills for learning and display questionable behaviors. The next chapter describes the research design and methodology used to collect the information needed for positive social change.

Chapter 3: Research Method

This research study examined the perspectives of Kindergarten teachers, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals within a local school district regarding the poor social skills and challenging behavior of kindergarteners' post-pandemic. To prepare for disruptions in the future, it was essential to explore how COVID-19 impacted students as they prepared for Kindergarten and what teachers encountered once school returned to traditional delivery of instruction, departing from distance learning. To accomplish this, I utilized an exploratory qualitative study design to interview teachers to gain their perspectives on their students' social skills and behaviors post-pandemic. This chapter presents an in-depth description of this research design, including its rationale, methodology, recruitment, participant selection criteria, data collection procedures and instrumentation, data analysis techniques, measures to promote trustworthiness, the role of the researcher, and ethical considerations.

Research Design and Rationale

This exploratory qualitative research study examined kindergarten teachers, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals within a local school district's perspective regarding the poor social skills and challenging behaviors of kindergarteners' post-pandemic. Following the guidance of Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, I pursued the selected research question: What are Kindergarten teachers', MTSS professionals', and social-emotional professionals' perspectives regarding the challenging behaviors and poor social skills students are displaying since returning to in-person schooling following the pandemic? I developed the research

question based on analyzed, peer-reviewed articles that identified the gap in practice. The question sought to capture the perspectives of teachers who taught kindergarten before, during, and after the pandemic.

Jeffries al. (2019) explained, “Building a holistic picture using the descriptions study participants provide to understand complex social, economic, or organizational phenomenon is the common element that resonates in all qualitative research” (p. S32). A qualitative research study also allows the researcher to address social concerns. The COVID-19 pandemic created social issues within learning communities through social and distance learning (McKenzie, 2021). Kindergarten teachers could see the impact of changes made by the pandemic and how it affected kindergarteners’ social skills and behaviors. In addition, this method allowed for the proper implementation of Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological system theory as a framework to determine the impact of the pandemic on the microsystems and mesosystems of students in Kindergarten (le Roux, 2021).

Qualitative research offers several methods, or traditions, to gain “a realistic interpretation of the world from the participants’ perspectives” (Jeffries et al., 2019, p. S32). These include case study, grounded study, phenomenology, ethnography, and exploratory. Abood and Alalwany (2021) identified case study factors as relationships between events and past research. The grounded study is rooted in research, data, and the relationships that connect them (Abood & Alalwany, 2021). In the phenomenology study, the work is based on an event or a phenomenon that identifies a division in practice. Ethnography involves “close field observation” (Abood & Alawany, 2021, p. 1966) of a

phenomenon to “reveal a common cultural understanding” (p. 1966). The exploratory qualitative method embodies a tradition that allowed a sincere and in-depth investigation into teachers’ perspectives that supported the gap in practice. An exploratory qualitative research study was most appropriate for this research study.

Jeffries et al. (2019) stated that a qualitative study considers factors that explain relationships within a study. The qualitative analysis includes “uncovering important factors when applied to populations for which little previous research exists” (Jeffries et al., 2019, p. S32). Jeffries et al. (2019) described how qualitative studies allow for the focus of a particular event and context with limits. The exploratory method assists with identifying groups impacted by a phenomenon for which there is limited research. The phenomenon in this research study was the COVID-19 impact on kindergarteners’ social skills and behaviors post-pandemic.

Methodology

The research employed an exploratory qualitative research study that utilized interviews. This method was chosen for the personal manner it provided through data collection. With this method, I could capture real experiences from teachers who taught before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Their experiences expounded on what qualified them as Kindergarten teachers to ensure they fit the goals and objectives of the study. Using this method helped increase knowledge in this field and identify gaps that must be addressed.

Using the exploratory qualitative research study, I examined the experiences of 12 individuals: teachers who taught Kindergarten, a kindergarten teacher who became a

multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) specialist, and social-emotional professionals within local Georgia school districts. The selection was based on teachers who had taught before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals who collected information regarding behaviors after the pandemic. These criteria were essential to the study to provide a supportive context for the gap it addressed.

Recruitment and Participant Selection

Following approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I contacted Kindergarten teachers in Georgia using public school websites. The criteria for selection relied on the following:

- Must have taught kindergarten before, during, and after the pandemic
- Additional experience as a MTSS specialist
- Additional experience as a social-emotional professional

Upon identification, I emailed a recruitment letter to all Kindergarten teachers, the specified MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals in the selected local Georgia school district. The letter included participant criteria, the purpose of the research, and a survey. Upon the return of the surveys, simple random sampling determined the participant pool for interviews based on the numbers stated in the proposal and participants' meeting of designated criteria.

Thomas (2020) proffered that simple random sampling is appropriate when all participants have a commensurate chance of participating. Using simple random sampling, I selected 12 teachers, who were all kindergarten teachers who met the

specified criteria, with one of the participants currently serving as an MTSS specialist and two teachers who served as social-emotional professionals in addition to their role as a kindergarten teacher. To capture all sides of the pandemic's impact on Kindergarten students, this study sought to interview teachers with 3 or more years of experience teaching Kindergarten, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals. Once teachers, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals were selected, I used a Google form to obtain their informed consent and interest regarding participation in the research study. For the sake of the study, all participants would be referred to as "teachers."

Data Collection Procedures and Instrumentation

The exploratory qualitative method allowed for using specific tools to capture data that helped promote social change. In this study, interviews afforded an in-depth and personal examination of the perspectives of teachers with experience or knowledge that contributed to the study. Jeffries et al. (2019) explained that using interviews can direct the research and provide meaningful context. I conducted interviews using the Zoom platform, which could record and transcribe interviews to facilitate the identification of categories, codes, and themes.

Data collection was conducted in two phases. The first round was to establish rapport with all participants, inform them of the study, and gather background information about the participants. I also used this opportunity to explain the reasoning for the study without prejudice. This was done using a survey. The second round included the interview, which lasted approximately 60 minutes per participant. I presented the

research and interview questions to each participant in the second round of interviews.

The interview questions used to facilitate the research study were the following:

What are the perspectives of Kindergarten teachers, MTSS specialists, and social-emotional professionals within a local school district regarding the challenging behaviors and poor social skills students have displayed since returning to in-person schooling following the pandemic?

The intent of the interview questions was to expound on participants' qualifications and support the research question. Upon completing the interviews, participants completed an exit interview survey on the process and received a letter of gratitude for their participation. If there was a need to follow up, the exit interview survey included procedures. It included the possibility of future follow-up interviews that would not exceed 1 hour.

Data Analysis

Data for this exploratory qualitative research were generated from a survey and individual interviews with Kindergarten teachers, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals within a local school district who provided perspectives on kindergartners' social skills and behavior post-pandemic. I transcribed all interviews upon completion (Saldaña, 2015). I used content analysis coding to code the text from the interviews. This method allowed for identifying similarities that produced patterns within the interviews (Saldaña, 2015). Using this method, I identified codes, categories, and themes and linked them to the proposed data (Waalkes et al., 2021). Within the themes, I was able to gather the information that supported the gap in the research and gain a better

understanding of the impact the pandemic had on kindergartners' social skills and behavior through the perspectives of the teachers.

Trustworthiness

Manoukian (2021) described trustworthiness as embodying the factors of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Confirming trustworthiness within a research study means conducting the research fairly and producing something closely aligned with the participants' experiences (Xerri, 2018). To verify that the research was trustworthy, I ensured that my intentions regarding the research were communicated to the participants and remained aligned with the study's objectives as stated in the consent form. In addition, to maintain authentic results, I assured participants that they were welcome to notify me regarding any issues or concerns that arose in collecting information through interviews.

Credibility

It is essential to establish credibility when conducting research. Credibility, an integral part of an exploratory qualitative study, requires authentication of the research design and method used to perform the analysis (Manoukian, 2021). Thus, the research question guided this exploratory qualitative research study with interviews. I followed the guidelines per IRB directions and the directions for performing interviews. Data collection aligned with the content analysis method of coding, which led to identifying themes that address the research question. Credibility within the study did not waiver and remained connected with all the parts of the research method.

Transferability

Transferability, as related to exploratory qualitative study, refers to “the extent to which findings from a qualitative study are useful in understanding how people experience the target phenomenon in other settings or under other conditions” (Achterberg & Arendt, 2008, p. 74). I established transferability in this exploratory qualitative study with interviews by ensuring that the outcome and results can be transferred or addressed in another setting. This included an audit trail that assisted with meeting this objective. Transferability ensures that the data collected in one study is not limited to that setting.

Dependability

According to Achterberg and Arendt (2008), dependability refers to the degree to which the researcher accurately interprets the data. Yunanto et al. (2021) stated that dependability validates the research through the study’s findings. The research and interview questions were formed based on findings from research articles that addressed various themes within this study and were in direct relation to the perspectives and experiences of the participants. Follow-up questions and member checking helped promote dependability.

Confirmability

Xerri (2018) described confirmability as the length to which the results can be authenticated. The exploratory qualitative study with interviews was conducted with the intent that it could be repeated, if necessary, with the same participants but with a different researcher. This study was corroborated using the research design and tools to

determine the outcome. In the interview process, I used the identified research questions, transcribed the questions using content analysis coding to confirm the results, and linked the connections between educators' perspectives and literary articles. Confirmability was in place to ensure validity within the research and confirm the process so that the results could be tested.

Role of the Researcher

In the researcher role, I facilitated data collection through a non-biased approach using an interview protocol. From an observer-facilitator approach, I interviewed teachers who taught Kindergarten at the elementary level, an MTSS specialist, and a social-emotional professional within a local school district. Understanding that I am affiliated with the district, I ensured the participants were randomly selected from a different part of the school or cluster where I am employed. Several factors limited connections with participants. The first was the target grade level of the study. This study focused on Kindergarten teachers, and I am an experienced prekindergarten teacher. Secondly, conducting individual interviews online limited any personal influence I may have. I intended to audio and visually record the interview sessions to limit the possibility of bias. In addition, I included daily journaling that allowed for reflection and minimized any bias in the research. Ethical concerns were minimal with the research study. The study did not take place in my work environment.

Ethical Procedures

I ethically conducted this exploratory qualitative research study per Walden University's IRB criteria. The guidelines set by IRB ensured the protection of the

participant's rights. Participants received a Google form that solicited their qualifications and consent to participate. I was the only individual to conduct the study, thus eliminating any possibility of tampering with the outcome of the results. I was the sole individual to collect the literature for the analysis and administer the interviews. Each participant received the same research and interview questions using the interview protocol. Results were not shared with other participants. To respect the confidentiality process of the research, I maintained all digital recordings, emails, and Google forms on a password-protected flash drive. Upon coding the information and completing the dissertation, I will destroy the transcriptions after five years, when the data will remain secure. This process aligned with the requirements set by Walden University to protect the study participants.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I described the research design. Using the exploratory qualitative research design with interviews as the study method was appropriate to gather the perspectives of Kindergarten teachers regarding the social skills and behaviors of kindergarteners' post-pandemic. I examined the role of the researcher, which was to collect the literature for the study, conduct interviews with participants, and align the process with the guidelines set by the IRB. I explained the recruitment process, which involved obtaining IRB and local district approval before contacting participants with information regarding the study's purpose and criteria. In addition, I delineated the data collection process and data analysis techniques, which involved coding to generate themes. I discussed measures I took to promote credibility, transferability, dependability,

and confirmability to establish trustworthiness in the research. I maintained an ethical stance to develop credibility and protect the participants.

Chapter 4: Results

The research study examined the perspectives of Kindergarten teachers, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals within a local school district regarding kindergarteners' social skills and behaviors post-pandemic. COVID-19 was a pandemic that upended the daily routines and procedures for millions of Kindergartners across the globe and catapulted their school learning environment into their residential spaces to be overseen by families not certified to teach. Bronfenbrenner (1979) theorized that children can thrive and develop through nurturing relationships in a supportive environment. This is founded on the principles of the ecological systems theory. The following research question was investigated through this understanding: What are Kindergarten teachers, MTSS professionals, and social-emotional professionals' perspectives regarding the challenging behaviors and poor social skills students display since returning to in-person schooling following the pandemic?

The research sought to examine a gap in practice by identifying the efforts to support the questionable level of social skills and behaviors exhibited by Kindergartners' post-pandemic. The exploratory qualitative method was used to review educators' perspectives and uncover what was observed in kindergarteners' post-pandemic. Educators' perspectives were delved into using the exploratory qualitative method to build an understanding of the social experiences and outcomes of those in the Kindergarten learning community. In Chapter 4, I explored in depth the process that helped to develop the outcome of this research study further, which includes outlining the

setting for which the study was conducted, the collection and analysis of the data, and the results.

Setting

Once Walden University's IRB approved the collection of data, I communicated with local Kindergarten programs within several of the state of Georgia's largest school districts. Using public school websites, I compiled a list of email addresses comprised of Kindergarten teachers, an MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals in a local school district. In all, 55 invitations were emailed. Each invitation included the consent to participate in the research study and a survey outlining the required qualifications, years of experience in the Kindergarten field, and whether the educator was willing to participate and why.

A thorough survey was conducted to identify teachers who met the research checklist. 12 eligible candidates emerged and accepted the invitation to contribute to the research study and consented to be a part of social change. Interviews were conducted after the subsiding of the COVID-19 pandemic, which created no limitations in the proceeding. Upon completion of the interviews, participants were granted access to their own transcriptions and audio recordings upon request to further contribute to the study.

Demographics

Thomas (2020) contended that simple random sampling was appropriate when all participants had an equal chance of participation. I deployed simple random sampling to identify and narrow the research selection. All participants were teachers with experience teaching kindergarteners before, during, and after the pandemic and one with experience

as an MTSS specialist. Teachers came from public and private schools with various classroom sizes within two counties. These diverse kindergarten programs included high-achieving students and dual language students. Students also experienced various socioeconomic statuses, ranging from low-income to prosperous households.

Table 1 depicts pertinent information for the 12 teachers selected for the research study. Their experience teaching Kindergartners ranged between 3 and 45 years. All 12 teachers had taught Kindergarten, with 10 currently doing so at the time of the study. One of the teachers had 3 years of MTSS experience; two educators had a background in social skill development and 6 years of teaching in early childhood programs such as prekindergarten. All the teachers taught during the pandemic, nine doing so virtually and eventually transitioning to hybrid for a year. Three teachers taught entirely outdoors for an entire school year. All participants received formal training and earned certification to teach in public schools in Georgia.

Table 1

Participants' Demographics

Number	Years of Experience	School Type	Classroom Type
P1	22	Public	Virtual/Hybrid
P2	3	Public	Virtual/Hybrid
P3	6	Public	Virtual/Hybrid
P4	7	Public	Virtual/Hybrid
P5	15	Public	Virtual/Hybrid
P6	7	Public	Virtual/Hybrid
P7	9	Public	Virtual/Hybrid
P8	6	Public	Virtual/Hybrid
P9	4	Private	Outdoor
P10	5	Private	Outdoor
P11	45	Private	Outdoor
P12	3	Private	Outdoor

Data Collection, Analysis, and Results

Data collection and analysis were conducted and completed using two types of software: Zoom Technologies and Microsoft Word. Interviews were conducted using Zoom Technologies, which automatically produced saved audio recordings secured within the Zoom site. I was the only person with access using a secure user ID and password. The requirements for participating in this research were that the teachers had taught Kindergarten before, during, and after the pandemic. An MTSS specialist and social professionals were required to have 3 years of experience. All teachers hold a current certification to teach in the state of Georgia. By examining the survey, I concluded that the participants met the requirements to be a part of the research, as demonstrated in Table 1. After interviews with qualified participants were completed, the audio recordings were saved and transcribed. From there, themes and prevailing words were exposed and coded. Categories were created based on commonalities within what was discovered.

Data Collection

Upon Walden University's approval to conduct research (see Appendix A), I sent 55 invitations, including a survey outlining the qualifications necessary to participate in the study and a consent form. Of those invitations, 13 returned met the requirement and consented to share their perspectives, although only 12 participated. The next step in the process was to email each participant a calendar that showed interview timeslots. Each educator was instructed to choose a 60-minute time slot between February 15, 2024, and March 1, 2024. The interviews were conducted during the individual time slot using

Zoom Technology, and upon scheduling, each meeting provided a secured link and access. I conducted each interview. The interviews did not occur during the participant's employee hours to avoid conflicting with their work obligations. Each interview was recorded using Zoom Technology, saved in a secure environment using a password-protected device, and uploaded to Microsoft Word transcription. Each transcription included time stamps and identified the participant and me as "speaker 1" and "speaker 2." The transcriptions and audio recordings can only be accessed and viewed by me. Once the data was collected, the recordings and transcriptions were moved to a separate device to be stored and secured for 5 years, after which I would delete them.

Interview Sessions

I conducted the interviews from February 15, 2024, to March 1, 2024. Each participant had a prescheduled timeslot that was set for 60 minutes. Before each interview began, I greeted each participant and set the tone for a comfortable conversation regarding their perspectives. I inquired about their day and spoke casually about teaching in general in preparation for the interview. I explained before I began recording what participant number they were and that once I began recording, I would refer to them by their participant number and not their name. After I started recording, I verbally confirmed that each participant received and consented to contribute to the research study. Each replied verbally, "Yes" or "I consent." In some interviews, participants expressed their eagerness to have a conversation of this magnitude.

As we proceeded with the interview, I gave each participant an outlook on the session. I stated that the interview was based on the 14 questions they received before the

interview. In addition, I relayed to the participants that our conversation would be regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and that the topic may trigger positive and negative experiences; should this be the case, they should verbally request that I stop recording so that they might take a break or end the interview. Each participant shared their experiences and addressed each question. In some interviews, sub-questions arose, and the participants answered those as well.

Once the interviews were completed, I stopped the recording and thanked each one for their contribution. I then shared with each of them the process of securing the audio recording, the importance of keeping the conversations secure and confidential, and how the audio recordings and transcriptions would be stored and deleted after 5 years. Following each interview, I transcribed the audio recordings, summarized my notes, and examined each transcription for the next steps.

Data Analysis

This section addresses the process from coding to themes that emerged through the analysis of the interviews. All interview data produced audio recordings I constructed and transcribed using Microsoft Word. Interviews consisted of 12 consenting individual participants. After each interview, I summarized my notes and deployed the content analysis coding method, which detects similarities that create a pattern and produce themes. I uncovered information supporting the theory using Saldaña's (2015) content analysis coding method. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory with an intentional focus on the microsystem and mesosystem, I developed a chart highlighting codes, categories, and themes supporting the hypothesis.

As I continued examining the transcripts and the journal I maintained while conducting the interviews, I began to list emerging themes. Each theme was linked to an interview question. Each interview question and response were highlighted using a different color. I used coding identified in Table 2 through Table 7 to link responses to interview questions as central themes emerged. While reading the transcripts, I made a list of reoccurring words and coded them according to which participant responded. Once the transcripts were coded, I reviewed the data and identified commonalities, how often a keyword was used, and which participant provided a perspective regarding the research question. In all, codes were identified and were sorted into six themes that addressed Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. All information was derived from the perspectives of the 12 participants.

Results

In this section, I will share the critical findings discovered in the research. All the results come from responses to the interview questions and audio recordings from the participants in this study regarding the social skills and behaviors of kindergarteners' post-pandemic. After analyzing the transcriptions, the following themes were identified to address the research question and purpose of the study: (1) realizations about the pandemic, (2) social skills and behaviors, (3) families, (4) environment matters, (5) technology matters, and (6) early childhood programs. In the following sections, I will share tables that present the themes generated from the coding of patterns in interview responses, critical findings for each theme, and the interview questions responses aligned to each theme, providing supportive data for the research question.

Theme 1: Realizations About the Pandemic

Table 2

Theme 1 Categories, Code, and Quotes by Participants

Theme	Category	Codes	Quotes by Participants
Realizations About the Pandemic	Accountability	Virtual teaching	P12 “No one took time to socialize with them.”
	Responsibility	Disconnect	P12 “Virtual was hard.”
	Unprepared	No support	P2 “We do not know what, how to deal with it, and people were freaking out about how to deal with teaching their kids so they couldn’t go to school and they were already stressed out, so they just didn’t manage a lot of the, and put them on computers. They just ignored the behavior prior to the pandemic.”
	No professional learning or training	Difficulty teaching	
	Learning Expectations	Hard to keep students focused	
	Maintaining Safety	Children learning differently	
	The Unknown	Unknown	
	Early Learning Deficits	No social emotional development	P2 “I had a parent tell me she does not know what to do with her son whose exhibiting behaviors at home.”
	Mental Health	Scared	
	Distance	No hugs	P4 “Parents struggling with their ‘new normal’ and didn’t know how to interact with their child beyond a conversation.” P2 “Then you had appearance because of their own personal issues. One of the challenges is that because they had to work or they had their own issues, the children did not get everything they needed because the parent just was not visual.”

Teachers shared that the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted disparities that impacted the development of social skills and caused issues with behaviors in kindergarteners. One teacher mentioned that concerns with social skills stemmed from the home environment students were a part of during and post-pandemic. P2 stated, “There’s a lack of skills at home, and they’ve been ignored or been accepted because they just are, and a lot of that was because of the pandemic.”

Teachers shared that the pandemic unlocked issues that may not have known about social skills and students’ behavior. One of those issues was that parents needed help regarding how they could support their child’s social skills at home. P4 explained, “I had a parent tell me she does not know what to do with her son exhibiting behaviors at home.” He was doubtful that social skills could be addressed because parents were not as equipped with knowledge and expectations as the teachers were. P4 stated, “Parents struggling with their ‘new normal’ and didn’t know how to interact with their child beyond a conversation.”

Teachers also showed the difference between what they could provide in their traditional environment and what students experienced during the pandemic. Through teaching virtually and then returning to school, teachers realized that Kindergartners were missing the long-term effects rendered by the guidance of a traditional classroom. P2 stated, “I have structure. I have rules and regulations they follow.” P2 also shared the following regarding their perspective about parents: Then you had the appearance because of their issues. One of the challenges is that because they had to work on their problems, the children did not get everything they needed because the parents were not

visual. Teachers agreed that these factors contribute to the success of social skill development.

An additional concern from the pandemic that impacted kindergarteners was the attachment to technology that formed because of the dependency it created. P4 shared information regarding a digital attention span created in some of his Kindergarten students' post-pandemic. P4 said, "So when it was time to step back into the school building, you had a very different time trying to keep children focused because for a long time the computer was their attention."

Other realizations about the pandemic regarding preparedness were echoed by several of the teachers. All teachers shared the feeling of being thrown into the unknown and how that would translate into learning socially on the level of the parent, student, and teachers. P2 stated,

We did not know what or how to deal with it, and people were freaking out about how to deal with teaching their kids so that they could not go to school and they were already stressed out, so they just managed a lot of them, put them on computers and just ignored behaviors.

Teachers agreed that the period of no interaction in traditional education greatly impacted kindergartners' social skills and behavior.

Theme 2: Social Skills and Behaviors

Table 3

Theme 2 Categories, Code, and Quotes by Participants

Theme	Category	Codes	Quotes by Participants
Social Skills and Behaviors	Emotions	Anger	P11 “They didn’t have skills to self-regulate.”
	Social Standards	Self-regulation	P10 “They lack other things that are important when it comes to social skills. They have trouble even now expressing and emotions. I have a little kid. He comes in at least three times out of a week crying.”
	Challenging Behaviors	Struggles with communicating	
	Self-Control	No empathy	
	Advocation	Autism/ADHD	P12 “There were definitely some challenging behaviors. They lacked so much; they lack that empathy. Kindergarten did not receive what they needed during the pandemic socially and it greatly impacted their social skills and behaviors.”
	Communication	Unable to follow rules	
	Social/Emotional Training	Not sharing	
	Self-help concerns		
Problems		P7 “Not having self-regulation prevents students from getting their feelings out.”	
			P6 “Subconsciously, they had a lot of stuff on the inside that we missed really and did not know how to help them deal with. So, I felt like they had little self-control. They acted out a lot, but here again I think it stemmed from just the fear of the unknown that they experienced.

Teachers emphasized that they observed a change in Kindergartners' social skills and behaviors post-pandemic and that they struggled with social development. P4 began this discussion with complex assumptions about what led to social skills and behavior concerns. Teachers highlighted the abrupt change in the learning environment. P4 asserted, "Being forced into environments without a moment to adjust and then forced back into another" can impact social skills and behaviors.

P12 shared that what was seen post-pandemic was because of the change: "There were some challenging behaviors. They lacked so much. They lacked empathy." Kindergartners did not receive what they needed socially during the pandemic, impacting their social skills, behaviors, and ability to perform. P12 added, "A lot of kids did not get what they needed and deserved during the pandemic time. So now you have kids coming back who should know how to read, and they are angry and showing out."

P4 stated that some of the issues that came with the students returning were because of what occurred at home during the pandemic. They said that students were "...just difficult emotionally because they had been sitting at home with mom and dad for this time. They cried and put-up fits or a temper tantrum left and right socially." Some of the impacts on social skills and behaviors were caused by the absence of physical interaction provided by teachers. P12 elaborated, "A lot of times those kids need that one on one. They need that physical. They need that in-person education, and virtual was not that; it worked for some, but it failed for many." P10 spoke of the struggle Kindergartners had before the pandemic and how the onset of change to a virtual one created new complication regarding expectations. P10 stated that kindergarteners "can't communicate

but are expected to type on a computer. “Teachers also shared their concerns regarding Kindergartners’ ability to regulate their emotions. P10 shared,

They need to include other things that are important when it comes to social skills. They have trouble even now sharing their feelings and emotions. I have a little kid. He comes in at least three times out of the week in the morning crying. He cannot express his emotions.

Students have trouble labeling their feelings and learning how to deal with things. P7 mentioned, “Not having self-regulation prevents students from getting their feelings out,” and P11 added that Kindergartners “. . . didn’t have skills to self-regulate.” When discussing how they addressed these concerns, P7 stated that Kindergartners needed “a lot of support, redirection, and coddling.”

Teachers shared concerns about self-help issues, and that students needed to be managed a bit more than what they had seen in the past. P7 mentioned that “some of the concerns was like independency, because I felt like a lot of the parents were helping them a lot with different things.” P4 asserted, “They didn’t know how to always communicate or verbalize” after the pandemic. P4 attributed to the assumption that “parents didn’t interact with their kids” and that the pandemic took away those fun moments in learning. P4 said “Being able to play helps grow social skills.” With the pandemic’s limitations, Kindergartners missed essential social vehicles that lead to positive development.

In addition to the issues that created concerns about social skills, P4 and P9 brought up that the pandemic gave way to problems with social disabilities. P9 stated, “We saw an increase in diagnoses with ADD, ADHD, and autism.” P4 added that cases

of bipolar disorder were also noted after the pandemic. P11 shared their experience with violence after the pandemic with one of the students, explaining that, upon the return to school after the pandemic, “I had a child stabbed me with scissors. I still have a scare. They were more violent with each other, with me, and with other adults. Lots of kicking, biting, hitting, and biting.”

Theme 3: Families

Table 4

Theme 3 Categories, Code, and Quotes by Participants

Theme	Category	Codes	Quotes by Participants
Family	Expectations	Uninformed	P4 “Parents didn’t interact with their kids.”
	Not prepared	Differences	
	Family support	Home	P4 “Just difficult emotionally because they had been sitting at home with mom and dad for all this time. They cried and they put out fits and just a temper tantrum left and right.”
	Family understanding of educational goals	Cultural background	
	Unaware of standards	Unable to support student learning	
	Uninformed of changing environment	Denial	P7 “Some of the concerns was like independency, because I felt like a lot of the parents were helping them a lot of different things. Also dealing with conflicts and struggling with socializing and just being able to communicate and express themselves.”
	Lack of information		P11 “I had one student and his parents like worked the whole time during the pandemic” P9 “Parents these days put their children in front of the TV and technology which is a good thing. No one will say technology is horrible, but I think we rely on it so much that they forget that their kids are a kid.”

Kindergarten teachers spoke of the involvement of parents before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Teachers spoke of how participation from parents before the pandemic was intricately linked to events created by the school but not necessary to support social skills development. P12's response endorsed this statement: "When you talk about parent support at my previous place of employment, it was there, but it was more so with events." During the pandemic, parents' support differed due to the environmental change. While teaching virtually, public school teachers conveyed that those students either had a parent next to them during a lesson, which allowed students to remain attentive during learning, or they did not. P12 stated,

With the parent support and possibly sitting next to them (during virtual learning) or being able to redirect them when we needed it the most, it would have been great. Often, it was nonexistent, to be honest. You know the parents would put their child on the computer, and then you would not see them.

Teachers also stated that the lack of participation was due to parents needing to be more available to support students virtually. This type of support provides the grounds for building relationships, which is essential to social growth in Kindergarten. P10 said, "We as adults know how important relationships are and getting along." One of the teachers who taught in person outdoors during the pandemic stated that they had more support because they were learning in an outdoor environment. These parents could see a first look at how learning is conducted.

Teachers expressed that there were valid concerns during the pandemic that led to parental lack of support in the development of social skills in Kindergarten. P11 stated, "I

had one student, and his parents, like, worked the whole time during the pandemic.”

Teachers also suggested that some parents did not understand how to support development. P9 said, “Parents these days put their children in front of TV and technology, which is good. No one will say technology is horrible, but we rely on it so much that we forget that our kid is a kid.”

Teachers summarized that post-pandemic parents were still unaware of social expectations for Kindergartners. They should be equal contributors to social development and teachers provided this perspective through the support shown before and during the pandemic. P6 conveyed that “parents should be held accountable for social development, and [it] should not be the sole responsibility of the teacher.”

Theme 4: Environment Matters

Table 5

Theme 4 Categories, Code, and Quotes by Participants

Theme	Category	Codes	Quotes by Participants
The Environment	Virtual learning	Learning online	P12 “Virtual was really hard.”
	Shortened schedule	No play	P11 “Taught completely outside. In 2020, when the lockdown first happened, we went completely outside so we had classes outside with ten kids and everyone wore a mask.”
	Absence of play	Distance	
	Parent understanding of learning environment	Adding more technology	P10 “I made a desk for all of the students to work from outdoors.”
	Incorporating technology	Physical disconnect Social skills absence	
	Strategic environmental learning	Learning outdoors	P5 “Students were isolated with a desk, space, had plenty of time outside, no hugs and no touching.”
	Parent supported learning		P4 “After the pandemic, students were robbed of aa environment that fosters natural development.”
			P12 “It was hybrid, and you did have some students that were virtual and had some students that did come to the building.”
			P7 “It definitely increase my use of technology for the learning experience because I was very able to be very creative with the way I created my lessons.”

When beginning the discussion regarding the learning environment, teachers were eager to share the unpredictability of a learning environment. Virtual, in-person, and hybrid environments represented the 12 teachers in this research study. When sharing how the environment impacted social skills and behaviors, P12 shared that “Virtual was really hard. We had sixty kids on one screen.” When returning to the classroom, the hybrid model was deployed. P12 said, “It was hybrid, and you did have some students that were virtual and had some students that did come into the building.”

Three teachers shared that they taught outdoors and contributed to the change in students’ ability to do more. P11 said, “In 2020, when the lockdown first happened, we went completely outside, so we had classes outside, classes of 10 kids, and everyone was masked.” Other teachers described it as a “pod system to keep each class separated.” When discussing how the environment impacted the social skills and behaviors of Kindergartners, P5 simply shared the divide that was hard to break when they returned to the class. P5 said, “There were no hugs and no touching.” Teachers all agreed that the environment educators teach fosters social skills through interactions. The virtual and outdoor environments eliminated the physical ingredients needed to develop socially. P4 stated that the environment “fosters a natural development of social skills that occurs with peers and teachers.” For Kindergartners returning to the classroom post-pandemic, this factor was essential in developing social skills and limiting behaviors.

Theme 5: Technology Matters

Table 6

Theme 5 Categories, Code, and Quotes by Participants

Theme	Category	Codes	Quotes by Participants	
Technology	Distance earning	Teaching delivery	P10 “Can’t communicate but expected to work on computers.”	
		PowerPoint teaching		
	Incorporation of technology	Teachers share information	P12 “Teaching virtually was hard.”	
		Learning by laptop		
	New student responsibility	Students learn from the promethean board	Flexibility	P10 “ I will do it when you show me how to do it.”
			Post pandemic	P7 “Received training on how to use the platform. The platform that we used was MS Teams and we received some training on it.”
		Each child has a Chromebook to take home and to learn from throughout the day		
		Students untrained to use the laptops	P4 “Students developed a digital attention span that impacted the way they learn.”	
		Sole method of teaching		
		Used to assist and embellish	P7 “After we returned, we remained online for a while which meant the student had to learn using their laptops.”	
Difficult for ESOL learners				
More digital activities				

Teachers believed it was necessary to mention how technology impacted the development of social skills. During the pandemic, nine teachers communicated using Zoom Technologies and Microsoft Word. Teachers expressed that doing so “was hard,” and P7 stated, “We received training on how to use the platform, but no other training.” Some teachers, such as P10, pushed back on the effort to teach virtually by saying, “I will do it when you show me how to do it.” The idea was posed that if teachers were unsure of how to use technology or uncertain of how to support the whole child, then how were they going to tend to students’ needs socially? The impact of technology is shown through class setups and the distance it contributed during the pandemic and returning to the classroom using the hybrid model. Technology was the communication tool during the pandemic. P2 shared how “we focused on the academic during a short learning window using Teams,” and P3 stated, “We had no time to work on social skills in a virtual environment.” P7 said, “Software such as ClassDojo allowed us to communicate with students and parents, but there were no social expectations.” Technology was there to continue learning the basics and left the social skills untouched.

Theme 6: Early Childhood Programs.

Table 7

Theme 6 Categories, Code, and Quotes by Participants

Theme	Category	Codes	Quotes by Participants
Early Childhood Programs	Prekindergarten	Play	<p>P1 “Oh, I definitely think that it’s important because pre-k gets the opportunity to have those social skills before coming to Kindergarten because a lot of times week before pre-k students didn’t have the opportunity. Many of them did not go to nursery so they were not around other children.”</p> <p>P1 “They didn’t have the opportunity to share with others, collaborate with others and so you were teaching those things in Kindergarten, but the pre-k program has helped out a lot because now they come to Kindergarten ready, at least the ones that attend.”</p> <p>P2 “The children that were in pre-k here at the building are different from some of the children that were not.”</p> <p>P5 “If they go to pre-k, they start to learn those social skills and they start to learn how to be in control of themselves. Now there is such an emphasis in Kindergarten in Kindergarten...and if you do not have your social emotional developed then Kindergarten can be a challenging year for a lot of kids.”</p>
	Early Learning Programs	Learning thru experience	
		Hands on learning	
	Social-Emotional Learning	Most students did not attend early learning programs due to the pandemic due to closures	
		Play	
	Emotional regulation	Creativity	
	Language development	Language	
		Behaviors	
	Guided learning and development	Unable to handle emotions	
		Trouble verbalizing concerns	
		Growth	
		Guided play	
		Making choices	
		Physical interaction	
Following directions			
Labeling feelings			
Working with others			
Social standards last stop			
Feeling safe			

Teachers shared that one significant way to promote the social skills kindergarteners need and to curve concerns with behaviors was to ensure that they attended early childhood programs. Each teacher stated that early learning programs are essential to the social development of Kindergartners. Due to the pandemic, most programs were closed or operating virtually. Teachers understood the necessity of social skill development before Kindergarten, so teachers expressed the importance of the experiences. P5 shared, “Social skills are tested for at the beginning of the school year using an assessment toll called GKIDS to determine where they are socially and that is all.” Knowing this, teachers expressed the need to develop social skills before coming to Kindergarten.

P12 shared, “I firmly believe that it is necessary and a great resource before children reach Kindergarten. That basic skills that kids do not know entering Kindergarten or something as simple as holding a crayon or a pencil.” P3 added, “There are so many studies that show how beneficial prekindergarten is for language acquisition and social skills and so many things they need.” P7 mentioned that in Kindergarten there is not time to teach the skills provided in early learning programs and followed the statement up by saying, “I don’t have time to teach you how to hold a pencil based on how fast-paced Kindergarten is.” Out of all the contributions, two teachers summed up the impact of early learning programs on Kindergarten. P2 shared, “The children that were in prekindergarten here at the building are different from some of the children that were not in prekindergarten at all. They are very poised, as if they understand the rituals and routines.” P4 added that early learning programs “provide a natural development in

learning.” These factors were absent from the Kindergarten classroom post-pandemic and were missed during the pandemic.

Discrepant Data

Discrepant data is possible when the data collected aligns differently from the research. All data collected for this research study aligned and supported the research question. All participants shared their experiences without concerns, regardless of their teaching environment. Teachers came from diverse backgrounds and years of experience. They all had instructed diverse students over the past three years or more. No discrepant data were discovered in the research, and all data collected support the research.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was accomplished in this research study by remaining aligned with the study’s intention, which was to address the perspectives of 12 teachers on the social skills and behaviors of Kindergartners’ post-pandemic. Each step of the process demonstrated the expectations made in previous chapters. The data collected came from interviews scheduled with qualified teachers, using safe technology, and maintained in a secure environment. The study addressed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The study aligned with the research’s purpose, and I checked to ensure that integrity was maintained throughout the process.

Credibility

I established credibility in this exploratory qualitative study by staying true to the research design method and research question. The study produced 12 interviews with teachers qualified to discuss kindergarteners’ social skills and behaviors. Credibility was

maintained by carefully analyzing the interview transcriptions and examining the journal kept during the process. I followed the guidelines set by IRB and analyzed the data using the coding content analysis method. By using this method, transcriptions were coded, and themes emerged. This method helped to identify themes used to present the data collected from this study. Credibility was maintained, and all parts remained aligned.

Transferability

Transferability was maintained in this exploratory qualitative study by using interviews to contribute to the outcome and transfer them to a secure setting. Interviews were conducted using Zoom Technologies with 12 teachers. Audio recordings were downloaded and transcribed using Microsoft Word. I can undertake the interviews, and the outcome can be presented in another setting.

Dependability

I achieved dependability in the research by using interview questions aligned with the literature-based articles in the study. Follow-up questions that arose while conducting the interviews remained connected to the original interview questions. The themes from the data produced by the interviews remained connected to the original interview questions that supported the research question. The process of dependability validated the research through the collection of data.

Confirmability

Confirmability of the research ensures that it can be conducted by a different researcher at any time. This study can be replicated using the same 12 teachers with a different researcher. The same research design and tools will produce the same outcome.

The interview process includes the research question supported by the interview questions, downloading and transcribing audio recordings, and the discovery of themes using content analysis coding to validate the results and connect them to the purpose of the research study. The validity of the process was ensured, and the data can be evaluated.

Summary of Key Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study, which included interviews, was to examine teachers' perspectives regarding the social skills and challenging behaviors of kindergarteners' post-pandemic. In Chapter 4, the interviews of 12 teachers were conducted using research-based interview questions derived from the research question. I transcribed the audio recordings and summarized the journal after completing the interviews. Content analysis coding was used to uncover themes from the perspective of each educator. Themes were further supported using quotes from the transcriptions of the audio recording. Themes and recordings were synthesized to support the research question, purpose, and problem within the research. I collected and analyzed all the information and placed it in a secure environment to be destroyed after five years. Key findings from the study centered on what was discovered about kindergarteners' social skills and behaviors after the pandemic. Findings revealed numerous factors that occurred before and during the pandemic, resulting in kindergarteners lacking social skills and exhibiting challenging behaviors.

In Chapter 5, I conclude the research by presenting the interpretation of the findings, documenting the study's limitations, providing recommendations for future

research, and discussing the implications of the current research study. I present data regarding how the study addresses the gap in positive social change. The research will also revisit the themes uncovered in the data analysis that demonstrate support for the research question for this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of the exploratory qualitative study with interviews was to examine teachers' perspectives regarding kindergarteners' social skills and behaviors post-pandemic. The nature of this study was to explore teachers' understanding of Kindergarten social skills before, during, and after the pandemic. The study was created to uncover how Kindergartners' social skills fared amid the social restrictions classrooms faced during the span of the COVID-19 pandemic period, as well as to present the impacts COVID-19 had on the social skills kindergarteners need to succeed in a classroom environment and address possible behavioral concerns. The objective was to investigate the experiences of teachers who taught kindergarteners during the pandemic and compare experiences that may lead to implications regarding social skill development. This exploration led to the research question used to guide the study towards positive social change: What are Kindergarten teachers, MTSS specialist, and social-emotional professionals' perspectives regarding the challenging behaviors and poor social skills students are displaying since returning to in-person schooling following the pandemic?

This research study is based on the conceptual framework of Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which addresses how children grow through the interactions of families and teachers within their environment. From there, a literature review included a collection of peer-reviewed articles that supported the importance of these interactions in an environment that may yield positive social skills. The data collection consisted of sending invitations to potential participants, surveys to

determine their qualifications, and consent forms to 55 teachers in two school districts in Georgia. From those invitations, 12 were identified as participants in this study. I created a schedule to manage 60-minute interviews after work hours and during a time available for participants. I conducted each interview using Zoom Technologies. I produced audio recordings and transcribed them using the Microsoft Word transcription process. I kept all information from the transcriptions and journals used during the interview in a secure space for 5 years.

The data collection included content analysis coding to identify themes and common phrases that would address the research question. During that process, I found similarities that would lead to the summary of six themes demonstrating a response to the research question. The following themes came from the data collected in response to the poor social skills and challenging behavior of Kindergartners' post-pandemic: (1) realizations about the pandemic, (2) social skills and behaviors, (3) families, (4) environment matters, (5) technology matters, and (6) early childhood programs. Participants in this study expressed the importance of interaction in developing social skills during such a difficult time in everyone's life. Teachers attributed deficits in the loss of social skills to the lack of natural interactions within an environment that allows for natural development. Through the interviews, I captured how COVID-19 affected teachers and students and created fear of the unknown. Examining teachers' perspectives provided an opportunity to discuss the importance of social skill development opportunities in Kindergarten on both a local and state level. The study's objective was to enact social change to improve the social skills and behaviors of students in kindergarten.

Interpretation of the Findings

This section of the research includes critical findings about the articles that comprise the literature review and conceptual framework. Urie Bronfenbrenner's work on ecological systems theory served as the foundation of the research. The findings within the research expand the study and support the educators' perspectives regarding what they experienced and observed in Kindergartners' post-pandemic. The research provided the following themes: (1) realizations about the pandemic, (2) social skills and behaviors, (3) families, (4) environment matters, (5) technology matters, and (6) early childhood programs. These themes allowed me to address the research question and discover what recommendations need to be made about Kindergartners' social skills and behavioral objectives that can have rippling effects on future grades. In the next section, I establish how the literature supports the data collected from the research that produced the themes.

Realizations About the Pandemic

Through data collection from transcribed interviews came several realizations that the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to developing poor social skills and challenging behaviors in kindergarteners. Teachers discussed the limitations and barriers placed on the students and families. The first of these limitations was the impact on schools, teachers, and students. Teachers shared how the decision to close schools and implement social distancing came unexpectedly. Timmons et al. (2021) stated that diminished the possibility of social institutions and, in its place, provided measures to disrupt how students and their caregivers socialize. Social distancing was a concern they believe

attributed to the poor development of critical skills needed to navigate Kindergarten successfully. With the addition of distance learning, social distancing, and mask-wearing (Timmons et al., 2021), a key measure in making connections and relationships was frayed.

With the change in learning environments during COVID-19, students had to learn in residential spaces. Maragakis (2023) suggested that the change in environment was to minimize the spread of the pandemic. O’Keeffe and McNally (2021) mentioned how providing this type of change created a relationship with distance that catapulted social skill development into the unknown. Restrictions continued with school closures (Lane et al., 2021), making it even more challenging to address human development. Through the shared experiences of the teachers came the realization of how necessary human interaction is within a nurturing environment. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory explores the connection between human development and the environment and outlines what students need to thrive socially. Ugwanyi et al. (2021) suggested that the connections needed for social growth require human interactions and relationships, and these actions are dependent on one another. Requiring students, teachers, and families to change the environment and social distance disrupted the fabric of the ecological systems theory’s microsystem and mesosystem.

Teachers were asked to describe their classroom environments. They did not hesitate to iterate the closeness of the furniture, the access of materials to be shared, and the accessibility of the teacher for development. COVID-19 caused a disruption, and with it came the loss of the student and the teacher’s ability to interact in a familiar setting.

Teachers build from the “reciprocal” nature of the relationships created at home to promote kindergarteners’ social growth (le Roux, 2021). Teachers realized that interactions between themselves and Kindergartners were impacted because they lacked the opportunity to engage in a process that allowed for interactions in a supportive environment (Nasiopoulou, 2019). Distance learning could not provide meaningful social development.

Teachers discussed the change that allowed students to continue learning in vital academic areas. They shared their experiences with virtual learning, which quickly became the alternative to teaching. Teachers shared how the use of technology changed due to the pandemic. What was once a supplemental resource inside the classroom soon became the bridge between teachers, families, and students. Teachers asserted that technology allowed them to remain connected for a short time. Lane et al. (2021) expressed the government’s push to maintain connections using virtual learning (distance learning) for these necessary bonds to continue. Yet, teachers reiterated the uncertainty the divide it created.

Social Skills and Behaviors

Teachers shared what they knew about the social skills of kindergarteners. They discussed expectations and observations of social skills needed for proper development. Such skills include self-control and communication. Egan et al. (2021) supported this need by emphasizing specific skills, such as the ability to manage oneself and become more socially aware, as part of the skill arsenal developed by teachers. Teachers stated that facilitating the development of social skills was challenging to accomplish while

learning virtually and when returning to school to the standard practice of learning using the hybrid model. Egan et al. (2021) supported their observations by suggesting that these skills must have an environment to build trusting bonds and employ emotions learned from proper examples provided by adults and their peers through physical interactions.

Timmons et al. (2021) asserted that teachers are vital to this type of social development through the responsibility of their training on child development. This type of development is complex to convey with social distance in practice virtually or using the hybrid model. These measures impacted the teachers' ability to grow social skills in Kindergartners. Creating opportunities where they could gauge expressions was complex, which is also necessary for growth (Timmons et al., 2021). Egan et al. (2021) provided support regarding how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the microsystems and mesosystems in which students learn the social skills to support positive behaviors. Mabhoiyi and Seroto (2019) contended that the harsh line created by the pandemic impacted the efforts of teachers and parents to prepare kindergarteners socially.

Teachers expressed that the ability to play is essential in developing social skills and minimizing concerns with behaviors. For some time, social distancing and virtual learning prevented students preparing for kindergarten from using their primary vehicle to forge social skills. Egan et al. (2021) identified play as a strategy children use to facilitate human interaction within an environment nurtured by teachers and caregivers. These human interactions provide practice necessary for the future development of the skills needed in Kindergarten. This foundation created in person facilitates all learning and addresses the whole child. Ostroff (2020) further asserted that play is essential, and

Pascal and Bertram (2021) added that play is the ingredient in relaying feelings, communicating, and diminishing negative behaviors in Kindergartners.

When addressing the behaviors students displayed post-pandemic, teachers shared concerns that students were unable to communicate or advocate for their own needs, and some engaged in emotional outbursts that escalated to violence when they returned to school post-pandemic. Play had been subtracted from the learning equation because of virtual learning, social distancing, and the hybrid model. Upon returning to traditional schooling practices, it was challenging to return to normal without embarking on a gradual process. Pascal and Bertram (2021) explained that play helps students relate to the world, and Ostroff (2020) found that play allows students to work through behavioral concerns.

Concerns with behaviors arise when there is an issue with social development. Egan et al. (2021) maintained that proper development of social skills includes problem-solving and effective communication. Egan et al. (2021) also asserted that due to COVID-19, teachers experienced issues with behaviors because of the missed opportunities the pandemic created. Teachers provided these examples when they discussed the violence they witnessed, the lack of sharing and communication among Kindergartners, and their inability to manage themselves due to a period left at home with caregivers who were not fluent or trained in social development. Teachers stood with Duran (2021) when it was mentioned that they saw signs of “anxiety and fear” in their students, which are harmful to social skills. Linnavalli and Kalland (2021) agreed that these behavioral signs created social problems and behavioral issues for kindergarteners.

Families

Remaining connected to families was necessary for developing social skills and minimizing behaviors in Kindergartners. According to some teachers, maintaining these bonds was easier before the pandemic because parents were naturally drawn to attending school events and collaborating with the teacher for student achievement. This was different for all teachers. Some felt that these efforts were small and the responsibility of educating rested on the teacher's shoulders. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory places the responsibility of human development on the teacher and the caregiver. The microsystem and mesosystem can only work when all participants are present. During the pandemic, teachers mentioned that parents would place their children in front of a computer and walk away. The stability within the microsystem at home disrupted the microsystem in the classroom and other environments. Mabhoiy and Seroto (2019) stated that the microsystems must develop appropriately for the mesosystem to be at its best, for it is where the home and school meet. Therefore, teachers need to examine these connections between themselves and the families, for it was evident that a disruption created rippling effects in social skills and behaviors in Kindergartners' post-pandemic.

Upon the return to school, a certain level of distance remained as some parents relinquished their responsibility to the teacher. Paulauskaite et al. (2021) provided insight into this idea by stating that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted families financially and educationally. For those families classified as low-income, it was much more difficult, thus placing them at a disadvantage. Teachers stated that parents did not know what to do during uncertainty. Timmons et al. (2021) suggested that the roles of the teacher and

caregiver were reinvented to support students, with the bulk of the responsibility being placed on the teacher.

Environment Matters

Within the conversation regarding the learning environment, teachers spoke of classroom setup, accessibility to learning materials, interactions with peers, and the closeness teachers provide. All teachers shared that the environment matters in developing social skills and guiding positive behaviors. They suggested that a virtual environment and one that maintains social distance cannot accomplish this. Bronfenbrenner shared that connections and a supportive environment help the students evolve. Teachers shared two experiences during the pandemic; some taught virtually, while a few taught in open and outdoor classrooms, yet both provided a level of distance. Mabhoyi and Seroto (2019) suggested that the environment is the capsule for learning environments and should be managed well by teachers and caregivers. The pandemic impacted the environment significantly. Camovic (2022) described the learning environment as “remote islands” (p. 158), implying that access was difficult for teachers to reach using what they knew. More than ever, connections with parents were necessary, and the repercussions of these frayed connections spilled out into the classrooms post-pandemic, displayed in the social skills and behaviors kindergarteners exhibited.

Technology Matters

Teachers shared that before the pandemic, technology was used as a supportive tool and, in some ways, supplemented learning in small doses. They would use technology to extend learning and provide additional practice for students in their home

spaces. Technology was used for virtual learning during the pandemic and shortly after, and all connections were made through a computer. Teachers asserted that technology kept families, students, and teachers connected and safe during and after the pandemic. Although it was difficult for some families (Bookser et al., 2021), it allowed teachers to communicate with their students and maintain some learning objectives. Murray (2018) shared that technology gave students and teachers an environment in which to exist together and learn. Dolan (2022) asserted that although the virtual environment did not offer the benefits of an in-person environment, it did not change the teacher's ability to be nurturing and full of meaningful interactions.

However, technology did offer social development a secondary position for some. Bright from the Start, an agency that governs social development amongst its youngest learners, planned against long hours online to ensure that cognitive learning would not be impacted. They did so by minimizing the time spent online and suggesting that the focus is on language, literacy, and math. Through distance learning, teachers and families could remain connected, and all skills were not lost, but as one teacher stated, it created a digital attention span to contend with post-pandemic.

Early Childhood Programs

Teachers responded similarly regarding early childhood programs' importance on kindergarteners' social skills and behaviors. They all agreed that they are 100% necessary for the social development of Kindergartners. Several mentioned that social skill development in Georgia is cultivated in early learning programs, such as prekindergarten, but not in Kindergarten. Timmons et al. (2021) shared how the government shut down

early learning programs and implemented social distancing, which contradicts its purpose. With the shutdown came six-foot mandates and mask-wearing (Timmons et al., 2021), which minimized physical touch and facial expressions. Dore et al. (2021) shared that the pandemic directly impacted the early learning program, which is responsible for preparing school-age students for Kindergarten. Without these programs, the removal of play came for a short period of time, which Dore et al. (2021) asserted helps manage learning and creates social opportunities. Shutting down early learning opportunities opened the door to social and behavioral concerns by increasing the likelihood of problems with “conduct problems and hyperactivity” (Linnavalli & Kalland, 2021, p. 3). It impaired caregivers’ and teachers’ ability to teach necessary skills for kindergarteners to be successful and resulted in a tarnished foundation to work with for those returning to school after the pandemic (Egan et al., 2021).

Limitations of the Study

This research study was conducted with 12 participants who taught Kindergarten before, during, and after the pandemic. These teachers, who came from public and private school settings, had experience teaching diverse kindergarteners in various settings. They all had differing styles of teaching and managing students. The teachers also had minimal differing experiences regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, and they were all willing to share their stories and perceptions to emphasize the needs of Kindergartners’ post-pandemic. The only limitation discovered in the research study was where the pool of applicants was retrieved. The participants represent two school districts in north Georgia’s public and private sectors. There were no other limitations in the study.

Recommendations

The qualitative research study explored Kindergarten teachers' perceptions of poor social skills and challenging behaviors post-pandemic. These teachers represented public and private settings, MTSS coordinators, and social and emotional professionals. All teachers had experience teaching Kindergartners before, during, and after the pandemic. Nine teachers taught in a virtual setting and transitioned to hybrid upon returning to school. Three teachers taught in an outdoor classroom upon the onset of COVID-19 and eventually transitioned to the hybrid model.

Teachers shared numerous experiences regarding teaching online, maintaining connections with families, technology's impact, social skills' importance in returning Kindergarten students, and the impact of early education programs. A recommendation that I would give for future teachers to extend this study would be to include a way to continue the cultivation of social skills when the primary learning environment becomes unavailable. Several teachers mentioned that social skills development was not a priority during the pandemic and that local school districts were more concerned about academic achievement. The data for this study revealed that continuous management of social skill development is a factor in Kindergarten success. Extending the survey would include discovering how to emphasize social skill development on both a teacher and parent level.

Another recommendation that I would suggest is to review internet accessibility in struggling communities. Upon the onset of the pandemic, students transitioned into their home environments and continued learning through virtual methods. According to a

local school district, attendance was low due to the responsibility of managing the expectations for learning virtually and having accessibility. Should another pandemic arise, stakeholders should consider what will determine virtual learning success and who has access to the internet.

The last recommendation would be to examine the social skills and behaviors of students who have completed third grade upon returning to school after the pandemic. In the local school district, third grade marks the beginning of standardized testing for grade promotion. Using the data from this study, researchers can extend the analysis to identify the social skills needed for achievement in third grade and how the pandemic impacted them through the lens of teachers and parents.

Implications

The study aimed to address the gap in identifying the means to support teachers' ability to address Kindergartners' social skills and concerning behaviors post-pandemic. A gap was created when the unknown of an impossible environment with substantial implications was created for kindergarteners to learn and develop without emphasizing social skill development. As a result of this study, the research desires to see a change in state standards for early childhood grades. Social and emotional standards must be a part of state requirements and should be taught to Kindergartners. In some states, early learning programs are not mandated. It is not fair to hold students responsible for skills not taught or to leave the development to caregivers unaware of crucial development objectives in students preparing for the grade.

An additional implication of the research is the importance of mandatory attendance in early learning programs and kindergarten. In examining the criteria to be prepared for future learning, it has been discovered that social skills are only developed in early learning programs. The responsibility of knowing these skills is implicated in Kindergarten but is needed to progress academically. Policyholders and stakeholders would need to make changes to our educational fabric. Doing so would create more prepared students who are socially capable of addressing what the future holds.

Conclusion

The study aimed to examine teachers' perceptions of kindergarteners' poor social skills and challenging behaviors post-pandemic. The study comprised 12 teachers' experiences teaching kindergarteners before, during, and after the pandemic. I conducted the interviews, and the privacy of the individuals was maintained. The data collected was kept in a secure space and interpreted by me. From the collection of data, several themes arose: (1) realizations about the pandemic, (2) social skills and behaviors, (3) families, (4) environment matters, (5) technology matters, and (6) early childhood programs. Conclusively, the study supports the suggestion that kindergarteners' social skills and behaviors were impacted by the limitations the pandemic imposed. Social skills are just as imperative to the development of Kindergartners preparing for school as academics and should not be secondary. Teachers being ready to educate everywhere at any time is also significant, and with that notion comes the need for teachers to have what they need to address all areas of learning effectively. Educational stakeholders should do their best to ensure teachers have what they need should the situation arise again. This study

demonstrated the importance of caregivers and teachers in student social preparedness.

All parties are responsible for student outcomes; this research shows the significance.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval

Dear Latalia Robbins,

This email is to confirm that, based on your responses to Form A, your study appears to fall within the parameters of the IRB pre-approved Interview Manual, conditional upon the approval of the research partner. This approval will need to be documented in the partner's signed site agreement (Appendix A in the manual), which will need to be submitted to the Walden IRB when obtained. The researcher may not commence the study until the Walden IRB confirms receipt of that signed site agreement.

Your approval # is 07-11-23-0611445. You will need to reference this number in your final doctoral study and in any future funding or publication submissions. You are required to use the consent form provided in the Interview Manual. A copy of this consent form tailored to include your IRB approval number is attached, and no edits may be made to this approved text.

Your IRB approval expires on July 10, 2024. One month before this expiration date, you will be sent a Continuing Review Form, which must be submitted if you wish to collect data beyond the approval expiration date.

Your IRB approval is contingent upon your adherence to the exact procedures described in the Interview Manual and the final version of the IRB form that has been submitted as of this date. This includes maintaining your current status with the university. Your IRB approval is only valid while you are an actively enrolled student at Walden University. If you need to take a leave of absence or are otherwise unable to remain actively enrolled, your IRB approval is suspended. Absolutely NO participant recruitment or data collection may occur while a student is not actively enrolled.

If you need to make any changes to your project procedures, you must obtain IRB approval by submitting the IRB Request for Change in Procedures Form. You will receive confirmation with a status update of the request within 10 business days of submitting the change request form and are not permitted to implement changes prior to receiving approval. Please note that Walden University does not accept responsibility or liability for doctoral scholarship activities conducted without the IRB's approval, and the University will not accept or grant credit for student work that fails to comply with the policies and procedures related to ethical standards in research and scholarship.

When you submitted your IRB application, you made a commitment to communicate both discrete adverse events and general problems to the IRB within 1 week of their occurrence/realization. Failure to do so may result in invalidation of data, loss of academic credit, and/or loss of legal protections otherwise available to the doctoral student.

Both the Adverse Event Reporting form and Request for Change in Procedures form can be obtained at the Documents & FAQs section of the Walden web site: <http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/researchcenter/orec>

Doctoral students are expected to keep detailed records of their project activities (i.e., participant log sheets, completed consent forms, etc.) for the same period of time they retain the original data. If, in the future, you require copies of the originally submitted IRB materials, you may request them from Institutional Review Board.

Both students and faculty are invited to provide feedback on this IRB experience at the link below:

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=qHBJzkJMUx43pZegKlmdiQ_3d_3d

Sincerely,
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Research Ethics, Compliance, and Partnerships
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Appendix B: Interview Protocol and Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study examining the perspectives of kindergarten teachers regarding the challenging behaviors and poor social skills students have been displaying since returning to in-person schooling following the pandemic. This form is part of the “informed consent” process to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study seeks thirty volunteers who are:

- Kindergarten teachers
- MTSS coordinators
- Social-emotional professionals
- Taught prior to the pandemic for more than 2 years.

Latalia Robbins of Walden University is leading this study. Dr. Karyn Hawkins-Scott, Department at Walden University, is the faculty advisor.

Study Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to examine the perspectives of Kindergarten teachers, MTSS coordinators, and social-emotional professionals in a local school district regarding the challenging behaviors and poor social skills students have displayed since returning to in-person schooling following the pandemic.

Procedures:

This study will involve you completing the following steps:

- Take part in a confidential, audio-recorded interview of no more than 60 minutes. This will be conducted on Zoom.

- A 20-minute conversation to inform you of the research data collected to inform the study.
- A 10-minute debriefing to address concerns and inform the participant of the next steps.

Here are some sample questions:

- i. Before the pandemic, what examples of challenging behaviors did kindergarteners exhibit during the school day?
- ii. What tools and training did you receive before the pandemic to assist in supporting Kindergartner's social skills and behavioral concerns during the pandemic?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

The research will only be conducted using volunteers. No one will be penalized for not participating in the study, and no volunteers will be mistreated because of their participation.

If you decide to join the study now, you can change your mind later. You may stop at any time. The researcher will follow up with all volunteers to let them know whether they have been selected for the study.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this study may result in minimal risk, which may lead to some discomfort. Emotional and mental risk may include feelings that arise due to conversations regarding the pandemic, such as anxiety and sadness.

Participating in this research study will allow you to understand how the pandemic impacted you and the Kindergartners' social skills. Through interviews, participants may

find ways to support their students' social skills and behaviors in the classroom.

Additional benefits would include acknowledgment of participation in this study, which aims to promote social change in today's post-pandemic classroom.

Privacy:

The researcher is required to protect your privacy. Your identity will be kept confidential within the limits of the law. The researcher is only allowed to share your identity or contact information as needed with Walden University supervisors (who are also required to protect your privacy) or with authorities if court-ordered (very rare). The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. If the researcher were to share this dataset with another researcher in the future, the dataset would contain no identifiers so this would not involve another round of obtaining informed consent. Data will be kept secure by having a 64-bit password-protected drive. All names and personal information will be masked so as not to be able to identify the participants. Data will be kept for at least 5 years, as the university requires.

Contacts and Questions:

The leading researcher conducting this study is Latalia Robbins, a graduate student at Walden University. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Latalia Robbins at [REDACTED] or by phone at [REDACTED]. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant or any negative parts of the study, you can call Walden University's Research Participant Advocate at 612-312-1210. Walden

University's approval number for this study is IRB, which will enter the approval number here. It expires on IRB, and the expiration date will be entered.

*You might wish to retain this consent form for your records. You may ask the researcher or Walden University for a copy using the contact info above.

Obtaining Your Consent

If you understand the study and wish to volunteer, please indicate your consent by replying to this email with "I consent."

Researcher's Signature _____

Appendix C: The Research Question and the Qualitative Interview Questions

One Research Question Aligned with Qualitative Interview Questions

Research Question 1: What are Kindergarten teachers, MTSS coordinators, and social-emotional professionals' perspectives regarding students' challenging behaviors and poor social skills since returning to in-person schooling following the pandemic?

Qualitative Interview Questions

1. What are your expectations of social skills in kindergarten?
2. What are your expectations of students' behaviors in Kindergarten?
3. What do you know of the school experience of Kindergartners prior to the pandemic?
4. Before the pandemic, what examples of challenging behaviors did kindergarteners exhibit during the school day?
5. Before the pandemic, what tools and training did you receive to support Kindergartner's social skills and behavioral concerns?
6. Before the pandemic, what type of parental support did you receive for students with challenging behaviors and concerns with social skill development?
7. During the pandemic, what tools and training did you receive to support Kindergartner's social skills and behavioral concerns?
8. After the pandemic, what tools and training did you receive before the pandemic to assist in supporting Kindergartner's social skills and behavioral concerns?
9. Prior to the pandemic, what challenging behaviors did you experience?

10. After the pandemic, how has the pandemic impacted behaviors and social skill development in Kindergartners?
11. After the pandemic, what type of parental support did you receive for students with challenging behaviors and concerns with social skill development?
12. How important is it for the state of Georgia to include social skill development in Common Core, and why?
13. Were there any cultural differences that impacted Kindergarten social skills and behaviors because of the pandemic?
14. How did the pandemic impact the way you teach post-pandemic compared to before?

Appendix D: Survey for Kindergarten Teachers

The following survey is to be completed by Kindergarten teachers.

1. How long have you taught in the DeKalb County Public School system?
2. How long have you been a Kindergarten teacher?
3. Did you teach prior to the pandemic?
4. Did you teach during the pandemic?
5. Did you teach after the pandemic?
6. Please state your highest academic qualification:
 - Associate
 - Bachelor
 - Masters
 - Doctorate
7. What concentration does your degree cover?
8. Are you currently teaching Kindergarten?
9. What is your current title:
 - Kindergarten teacher
 - MTSS professional
 - SE coordinator
10. What did you observe of students' social skills before the pandemic?
11. What did you observe in student's social skills during the pandemic?
12. What did you observe in student's social skills after the pandemic?
13. What is the likelihood that your students had prior learning experiences before entering Kindergarten?
14. How did you facilitate social skill development during the pandemic in your class?
15. What are your thoughts regarding Kindergartners' behaviors and social skills after the pandemic?
16. What were your social-emotional expectations prior to the pandemic?
17. Has your expectations changed since returning to in-person learning? If yes, why?
18. What social-emotional training have you received during and after the pandemic?
19. In your own words, describe the social-emotional standards for Kindergarten in your local school district.

Appendix E: Survey for MTSS Coordinators

The following survey is to be completed by MTSS coordinators.

1. How long have you taught in the DeKalb County Public School system?
2. Did you act as a MTSS coordinator prior to the pandemic?
3. Did you act as an MTSS coordinator during the pandemic?
4. Did you act as an MTSS coordinator after the pandemic?
5. Please state your highest academic qualification:
 - Associate
 - Bachelor
 - Masters
 - Doctorate
6. What concentration does your degree cover?
7. Are you currently an MTSS coordinator
8. What did you observe of students' social skills before the pandemic?
9. What did you observe in student's social skills during the pandemic?
10. What did you observe in student's social skills after the pandemic?
11. What is the likelihood that students had prior learning experiences before entering Kindergarten?
12. How did you facilitate social skill development during the pandemic in your class?
13. What are your thoughts regarding Kindergartners' behaviors and social skills after the pandemic?
14. What were your social-emotional expectations of Kindergartners prior to the pandemic?
15. Have your expectations changed since returning to in-person learning? If yes, why?
16. What social-emotional training have you received during and after the pandemic?
17. In your own words, describe the social and emotional standards for kindergarten in your local school district.

Appendix F: Survey for Social-Emotional Professionals

The following survey is to be completed by social-emotional professionals.

1. How long have you taught in the DeKalb County Public School system?
2. How long have you been a social-emotional coordinator?
3. What were your responsibilities prior to the pandemic?
4. What were your responsibilities during the pandemic?
5. What were your responsibilities after the pandemic?
6. Please state your highest academic qualification:
 - Associate
 - Bachelor
 - Masters
 - Doctorate
7. What concentration does your degree cover?
8. Are you currently teaching Kindergarten?
9. What did you observe of students' social skills before the pandemic?
10. What did you observe in student's social skills during the pandemic?
11. What did you observe in student's social skills after the pandemic?
12. What is the likelihood that your students had prior learning experiences before entering Kindergarten?
13. How did you facilitate social skill development during the pandemic in your class?
14. What are your thoughts regarding Kindergartners' behaviors and social skills after the pandemic?
15. What were your social-emotional expectations prior to the pandemic?
16. Have your expectations changed since returning to in-person learning? If yes, why?
17. What social-emotional training have you received during and after the pandemic?
18. In your own words, describe the social-emotional standards for Kindergarten in your local school district.