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Preschool Teachers' Perspectives Regarding Children's Aggressive Behavior and In-School Suspension

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Abstract

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Martha Baker

MA, Excelsior University, 2017

BS, Excelsior University, 2014

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

Aggressive behavior can lead preschool students to be suspended in and out of school. The problem in this study was the high rate of in-school suspension (ISS) among preschool students in response to child aggressive behavior. Informed by Harvey's domain model of social reasoning and social information processing, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore perspectives of preschool teachers working in childcare centers in one city in Texas regarding children's aggressive behavior that may lead to ISS as a response to that behavior. Four research questions probed how preschool teachers describe the level of choice exercised by children, child acceptance of social conventions, child understanding of right and wrong, and teacher concerns for safety as part of the response to aggressive behavior. Data were collected through 11 semistructured interviews with lead teachers in general education preschool classrooms in independently funded childcare centers in one Texas city. Data were analyzed using in vivo coding resulting in five themes describing children's agency in choosing behavior, their application of social rules, their understanding of right and wrong, teacher concern for safety, and teacher actions in response to aggressive behavior. Teachers reported beliefs that aggressive children mimic behavior of peers or parents, follow rules but not school rules, and may be incapable of moral decision-making. Teachers felt responsible for children's safety but believed ISS does more harm than good. Recommendations include replication of the study in other regions and childcare types. Positive social change may result from these findings if teachers are supported in guiding aggressive children towards prosocial behavior, resulting in less out of class time for children.

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Dedication

I dedicate this degree to my deceased mother Bertha Lee (Weather) Andrews, my father-in-law Willie Ed Baker, my mother-in-law Lydia (Green) Baker, my sister Jimmie Mae (Andrews) Davis, my brother Steven Junior Andrews, and my brother Roy Lee Andrews. I also dedicate this degree to my father Jimmy Lee Andrews, my wonderful husband Edward Lonzo Baker, Sr., my beautiful daughter Brittany Edneisha Baker, my handsome son Edward Lonzo Baker, Jr., my beautiful daughter Briana Gabriella Baker, and all our family members. You were all there for me through the early mornings to the late nights, including weekends doing assignments. You all supported me when I had to fly to and from Albuquerque, New Mexico for residency. I hope I have inspired my family to achieve their dreams.

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I like to thank Jehovah-God for this educational journey. I would like to thank my Walden University faculty, Dr. White and Dr. Anderson, who guided me from the beginning to the end of my educational journey. My Walden experience has been an incredible journey through the entire process. Social change is not about observing others, it's about improving the communities and society. My Walden journey has strengthened me socially and academically and positively my understanding of preschool learning environments.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Children's suspensions and expulsions have been a concern for quite a while in the United States, where preschool expulsion rates are 3.2% higher than K-12 rates (O'Grady & Ostrosky, 2023). Behavior issues such as impulsive behavior, aggressive behavior, anxiety, social withdrawal, and tantrums have been a concern in preschool classrooms (Chen et al., 2021). Negative behaviors are triggered by a variety of factors such as a lack of social skills and trauma (Jennings et al., 2020). The preschoolers who exhibit these behaviors such as such as a lack of social skills and trauma seem to have a difficult time communicating their feelings to others (Jeon et al., 2019). This study needed to be completed because of the high rate of in school suspension (ISS) among preschool students in one city in Texas in response to children's aggressive behavior. Positive social change may result from this study because it informs childcare directors and school administrators regarding preschool teachers' perspectives of children's aggressive behaviors that may lead to in-school suspension as a response to that behavior. In this chapter, I describe the perspectives of preschool teachers working in the focus city regarding children's aggressive behavior that may lead to in-school suspension as a response to that behavior.

Background

Aggressive behaviors have caused students in preschool through second grade to be suspended both in and out of school. ISS is defined as an assignment of a student to a space in the school building alternative to the student's regular classroom, during which

typically there is no meaningful educational activity provided and there is no way provided for the student to recapture what they missed of regular classroom instruction, and a student may be so assigned repeatedly, continuously, or even permanently (Grosenick et al., 1984). This is distinct from out-of-school suspension (OSS), in which a student is sent home. In 2017 and 2018 62,557 ISS were ordered for preschool through second grade students in Texas. This is similar to the 64,773 ISS ordered for the same grade levels in the 2015-2016 school year (McKenzie, 2025). There were 36,475 OSS issued to Texas public school students in the 2015-16 school year. Children in pre-kindergarten accounted for more than 2,500 of these suspensions as well as foster care students and students with special needs (Feigen, 2025).

With these suspensions, young children were removed from school during a key developmental period, without getting the support they need to improve their behavior once they return (McKenzie, 2025). In schools with high suspensions and expulsions, exclusionary discipline practices may adversely affect academic achievement for all students (Clayback & Hemmeter, 2021). High suspension rates in Texas are related to low academic achievement at school, contrary to the claim that removing students will improve the learning environment (Texans Care for Children, 2019). A gap in practice is evident in the ongoing use of ISS with preschool students. This study was needed to explore preschool teachers' perspectives regarding ISS as a mechanism for managing children's behavior.

Problem Statement

The problem that was addressed through this study is the high rate of ISS among preschool students in response to children's aggressive behavior. In particular, 2017-2018, the most recent year for which data are available, 8,758 Texas schools used corporal punishment on 13,892 Texas students (Salhotra, 2023). It is about 43 per 100 students of the state's preschool ISS in 2015 through 2016 due to child behavior problems in the school district in the focus city (McKenzie, 2025). Further, in the city that was the focus of this study before HB 6, students in pre-kindergarten through second grade already had the option of being suspended out of school and in school in the case of violent behavior or other serious circumstances.

These suspensions remove these young children during a key developmental period without proper behavioral support (McKenzie, 2025). According to O'Grady and Ostrosky (2023), when students are suspended in school, they miss out on the instruction that they would normally receive in the classroom. In addition, in-school suspension can negatively affect students' social and emotional development (Martinsone et al., 2022) and their attitude toward school (Zeng et al., 2019). Although a 2017 Texas law restricts expulsion and OSS for students in preschool through second grade (Texans Care for Children, 2019), and the rate of OSS of preschool children has declined since the passage of that law in 2017, the rate of ISS of preschool students has remained virtually unchanged from the level of ISS in 2015-2016, despite a smaller overall preschool student population (Texans Care for Children, 2019). This suggested a gap in practice

regarding application of ISS as a behavior management tool with preschool students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore perspectives of preschool teachers working in childcare centers in one city in Texas regarding children's aggressive behavior that may lead to ISS as a response to that behavior. In preschool classrooms, educators use ISS to ensure student and teacher safety, to teach children skills needed for successfully interacting in society and in school, and to reduce misbehavior rates in the future (Giordano et al., 2022). Preschool students display challenging behaviors such as physical aggression, screaming, leaving a specified area without permission, not following directions, and spitting (An & Horn, 2022). According to one preschool teacher interviewed by An and Horn (2022), ISS is used by preschool teachers to manage such disruptions more than once a week. I used a basic qualitive design with interviews to explore preschool teachers' perspectives regarding ISS as a response to children's aggressive behavior. The phenomenon of interest was the high incidence of in-school suspension among preschool students in the focus city.

Research Questions

Four research questions (RQs) guided this study. These RQs reflect the study's purpose and its conceptual framework, which is described in the following section.

RQ 1: How do preschool teachers in the focus city describe the level of personal choice exercised by children who engage in aggressive behavior that may trigger ISS and their responses to those choices?

RQ 2: How do preschool teachers in the focus city describe the acceptance of social conventions in children who engage in aggressive behavior that may trigger ISS and their responses to that level of acceptance?

RQ 3: How do preschool teachers in the focus city describe the understanding of right and wrong in children who engage in aggressive behavior that may trigger ISS and their responses to that level of understanding?

RQ 4: How do preschool teachers in the focus city describe concern for safety as part of their response to children who engage in aggressive behavior that may trigger ISS and their response in light of safety concerns?

Conceptual Framework

The study was grounded in the domain model of social reasoning embedded in social information processing (SIP) as described by Harvey et al. (2001). Harvey et al. identified differences in young children's commitment of aggressive acts across four domains: personal, social-conventional, moral, and prudential. They posited that the moral domain includes children's perceptions of what is right and just across all contexts, in contrast to the social-conventional domain, which includes children's evaluation of a situation based on local expectations and the presence or absences of an authority figure. The personal domain was identified by Harvey et al. as referring to acts of personal choice, without a strong moral component, which were regarded by children as being most negotiable and arguable if their choices were disputed by an authority figure. The prudential domain involves situations where personal safety is in doubt. Harvey et al.

recognized a given situation might also be of mixed domain, so that the child must weigh the importance of competing domains. SIP of aggressive children is based in differences in personal, social-conventional, moral, and prudential perception. In the personal domain, individuals interpret issues or events based on how they impact themselves. In the domain of social conventions, individuals view situations as they are framed by social norms and expectations.

The SIP framework suggests that aggressive behavior involves reciprocal actions by the child and the teacher, and how each interprets a situation. Thus, it was important that I interview teachers regarding their perspectives of SIP factors in children that may lead to ISS as a response to children's aggressive behavior. The RQs for this study integrated attention to SIP domains as a mechanism by which I examined precise aspects of teacher perspectives regarding children's aggressive behavior.

Nature of the Study

In qualitative research, descriptions of lived experiences are used to convey understanding and meaning (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Using data to develop concepts for qualitative investigation, the researcher gains insight into a phenomenon and explores its depths (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This makes qualitative research the most suitable method for studying educational problems (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To collect data for the study, I used a basic qualitative design, focusing on preschool teachers' perspectives regarding children's aggressive behavior and ISS. I used this method to gain an understanding of the participants' perspectives by conducting interviews (Burkholder et al., 2020).

A quantitative approach was considered when designing the study. A quantitative research method using a survey would have allowed the study to be generalized to a large population; however, a survey design would have been ineffective in fulfilling the study's purpose of exploring teacher perspectives (Burkholder et al., 2020). The study involved variables that could not be controlled in a quantitative study, such as the experience and behaviors of the teacher, the physical environment the student is placed in, or the diversity of preschool children in the classroom. In addition, a different qualitative method, such as observations of teachers' classroom interactions, similarly would have been ineffective in exploring teachers' perspectives. Therefore, the basic qualitative study consisted of interviews.

I interviewed 11 lead teachers who worked with children ages 3 to 5 in childcare centers in Texas. I conducted interviews by telephone or Zoom, using open-ended interview questions based on the study's conceptual framework. Interview data were subjected to thematic analysis as described by Saldaña (2021). The phenomenon of interest in this study was the high incidence of in-school suspension among preschool students in the focus city.

Definitions

Aggressive behavior: Aggressive behavior can include all actions undertaken to damage or injure others regardless of whether the intent was fully achieved or not (Harvey et al., 2001).

Exclusionary discipline: Exclusionary discipline removes students from their

usual educational settings because of school discipline (An & Horn, 2022).

In-school suspension (ISS): ISS is the act of keeping students out of school while preventing them from interacting with their classmates (An & Horn, 2022).

Out-of-school suspensions (OSS): OSS means that school property is off limits to a student (An & Horn, 2022).

Social competence: Social competence measures how well one understands, manages, and expresses social and emotional aspects of life (Rakap et al., 2018).

Social information processing (SIP): SIP explains children's aggressive behaviors by understanding how cognitive processes are put into action (Harvey et al., 2001).

Assumptions

I assumed the participants responded accurately and truthfully to the interview questions. I assumed participants had experience with children who display aggressive behavior and had used or considered using ISS as a way of managing this behavior. Ravitch and Carl (2021) noted that assumptions about participants are necessary in studies that depend on participants' veracity and experience with the study phenomenon.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study encompassed perspectives of preschool teachers in the focus city regarding the use of ISS in managing children's behavior. This focus was chosen because the level of ISS with preschool students in the focus city is third highest in the state and has remained high in recent years. This study was delimited to include lead teachers in general education preschool classrooms working with children ages 3 to

5 years in independently funded childcare centers in the focus city. Lead teachers are responsible for what happens in a preschool classroom and so were expected to be better able than assistant teachers to provide perspectives on use of ISS to manage children's behavior. Children between the ages 3 to 5 are physically capable of acting aggressively toward peers but are expected to be able to self-regulate their behavior and so be responsible for aggressive acts. I focused on teachers who worked in independently funded childcare centers, because teachers in tax-funded centers may be required to follow specific rules regarding use of ISS. I focused on teachers in general education classrooms to avoid confounding variables presented in therapeutic settings or other classrooms exclusively serving children from a particular population. I excluded teachers with whom I had a personal or professional relationship. The scope and these delimitations may limit transferability of study results to elementary school settings and other settings not reflected in the participant selection criteria.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was that I conducted it following the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of health concerns arising from the pandemic, school personnel may have preferred to speak from a protected setting, so I conducted interviews remotely, using Zoom or the telephone. This may have affected the completeness of the information I gathered from participants, because I was not able see body language or facial expressions, and may not have been able to establish a warm, conversational connection with every participant. Also, because COVID-19 disrupted preschool practice and the

lives of children, children's behavior may have been affected, along with teachers' experiences with that behavior. According to Burkholder et al. (2020), preparations can be made prior to the interviews that could help avoid potential issues including selecting a carefully constructing interview question. Implementing these strategies may have helped improve the authenticity of the information collected during the individual interviews.

Significance

This study is significant because understanding teachers' perspectives of aggressive behaviors that persist in the preschool classroom may lead to improvements in teaching practice and administrative support that may reduce ISS in response to children's aggressive behaviors. Findings from this study have implications for preschool educators in their preparation for the classroom, which may improve the skills of children in the classroom regarding their aggressive behaviors. This study may be an important resource for preschool educators, preschool teachers, program administrators, and policy makers responsible for the high rate of ISS among preschool students in Texas in response to children's aggressive behavior. Positive social change may follow from this study if results are applied to improve teaching practice and administrative support based on understanding teachers' perspectives of aggressive behaviors in the preschool classroom. These improvements may lead to greater school success and reduce application of ISS for aggressive children.

Summary

In the United States, preschool teachers have seen a rise in externalizing behaviors like aggression, impulsiveness, and tantrums (Martin-Herz et al., 2022). Social skills, problem-solving, and relationships are more challenging for children who exhibit externalizing behaviors (Martinsone et al., 2022). Preschool children with externalizing behaviors may develop more extreme issues later in life without support in the early years (Jennings et al., 2020).

Preschool children who are suspended or expelled miss out on valuable educational opportunities and are more likely to fail academically and fall behind their peers (Chow et al., 2021). School suspension rates for 3- and 4-year-old children are 3 times greater than those for teenagers, and ISS at the start of this study were at a consistently high rate among preschool students in the focus city (Giordano et al., 2022). Because ISS was applied in response to children's aggressive behavior, this study explored perspectives of preschool teachers working in the focus city regarding children's aggressive behavior that may lead to ISS as a response to that behavior.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem that was addressed through this study is the high rate of ISS among preschool students in Texas in response to children's aggressive behavior. During the most recent report, from 2017-2018 school year, 62,557 ISS were ordered for preschool students through second grade students. This is similar to the 64,773 ISS ordered for the same grade levels in 2015-2016 school year (Texans Care for Children, 2019). In particular, in the focus city in 2017-2018, the most recent year for which data are available, 3,812 preschool children were punished with ISS (Texans Care for Children, 2019). About 44% of the state's preschool ISS in 2017 through 2018 due to child behavior problems in the school district that serves the focus city (Moffett, 2019). According to an article in the newspaper local to the focus city, the number of preschool children who experienced ISS in 2017-2018 was third highest in the state. The ISS did not decrease much between 2015 through 2018 school years in one state in the southwestern United States.

Literature Search Strategy

Articles were located using Walden University's Library databases that include EBSCOhost, Education Source, ERIC, ProQuest, Sage, and Taylor and Francis Online search engines. Also, the Google Scholar and Google search engine was used. I focused on peer-reviewed, academic articles published within the 5 years prior to this study, relating to preschool students' aggressive behaviors that may lead to in-school suspension. A variety of keywords were entered to locate relevant information relating to

preschool students' aggressive behaviors that may lead to in-school suspension including *aggressive behavior, anxiety, early childhood education, impulsive behavior, in school suspension, out of school suspension, social competence, social information processing, social relationship, social withdrawal*, and *tantrums*. The search term *in school suspension* was put in Walden University's Library databases that include EBSCOhost and yielded two articles. The search terms *aggressive behavior* and *impulsive behavior* were put in Google Scholar search engine to find additional articles. The search terms *social competence* and *out of school suspension* were put in Google Scholar search engine to relevant articles, including a report on ISS in the focus city of this study.

Conceptual Framework

The study was grounded in theory of the domain model of social reasoning that links to SIP described by Harvey et al. (2001). Harvey et al. identified differences in young children's commitment of aggressive acts across four domains: personal, social-conventional, moral, and prudential. A given situation might also be a mixed domain; reaction to mixed-domains events, such as may be the case often in incidents of children's aggressive behavior, require greater cognition than reaction to a single-domain event. The personal domain includes acts of personal choice without a strong moral component. These are regarded by children as being most negotiable and arguable if their choices are disputed by an authority figure. Further, the personal domain considers an individual's interpretation of an event or issue in terms of its impact on the self. When an individual gets angry easily, the personal domain is triggered based on the event or issue

that impacts the person. When an individual has a temper, the personal domain is triggered based on the issue or event that impacts the person such as an individual takes something that does not belong to oneself.

The social conventional domain describes how a person considers social expectations and conventions when deciding a course of action (Harvey et al., 2001). Even very young children are aware of social norms and can apply them to their behavior, and can understand punishment as an indicator of breaching these norms. In the preschool classroom, students notice violations of behavior expectations and expect punishment according to the seriousness of the problem behavior.

The moral domain in SIP theory includes a person's understanding of fairness and human rights in evaluating the appropriateness of behavior (Harvey et al., 2001). The moral domain includes children's perceptions of what is right and just across all contexts, in contrast to the social-conventional domain, which includes children's evaluation of a situation based on local expectations and the presence or absence of an authority figure. Situations in the moral domain differ from social conventional situations in that moral domain situations involve not complying with a specific rule that should not be violated, in contrast to social conventional violation of group preferences. In distinguishing between moral and social conventional situations, people evaluate the seriousness of an action and the extent to which the action is good or bad in the particular context or in the broader view of morality (Harvey et al., 2001). Regulation of aggressive acts is part of the moral domain because such behavior may harm others (Harvey et al., 2001).

The prudential domain involves situations where personal safety is in doubt. Harvey et al. (2001) stated situations that include potential physical risk may inspire aggressive or retaliatory action to reduce physical risk or may inspire withdrawal or appeasement as a way of preserving personal safety. In the prudential domain, young children determine how their actions might be harmful to themselves. This domain is different from other domains, in which actions are evaluated based on potential harm to others.

The connections between aggression and social cognition have been linked to SIP in how children attribute cause and effect, their recognition or ignorance of social cues, and how they respond in social situations, especially in situations of perceived conflict (Harvey et al., 2001). Young children who frequently exhibit aggression may interpret situations more negatively than do young children who exhibit less aggressive behavior (Harvey et al., 2001). Furthermore, aggressive children's responses to situations they interpret negatively are likely to be more extreme, in terms of physical violence or verbal assault, than responses to the same situations by children with a more prosocial perspective.

Aggressive children often have experienced aggressive acts and ideation in their own social interactions, causing them to regard aggressive behavior as normal and even expected (Harvey et al., 2001). Because of this bias toward aggression instilled in some children, how these children understand the domains of personal, social-conventional, moral, and prudential judgment reflects an adversarial worldview, requiring them to take

aggressive action to protect their interests in the moment. Harvey et al. (2001) compared the social reasoning of aggressive children to that of their more prosocial peers, and determined that young aggressive children focus on their personal stake in social interactions and take personally any restriction by authority figures of their ability to defend what they see as violations of their personal autonomy. This negative framing of social situations affects the decision making of aggressive children and contributes to their disruptive behavior in the classroom.

The notion that social conventions comprise separate conceptual areas related to broader aspects of culture and social organization was described by Nucci and Turiel (1978). Such conceptions concern topics such as family structures, manners, dress codes, sex roles, sexual mores, national or religious orders and regulations, and issues surrounding. authority, norms, and rules. Development of social conventions can be seen as the enculturation of the child by his or her caregivers, such as parents or teachers (Nucci & Turiel, 1978). According to Nucci and Turiel, three distinct domains guide children's understanding of social concepts in preschool: morality (justice), society (social systems, social organizations), and psychology (individual attributes and causes of behavior). As a result of the interaction between the child and their environment, children's conceptual frameworks are influenced by their surroundings including by those around them.

Because SIP suggests that aggressive behavior involves reciprocal actions by the child and the teacher, and how each interprets a situation, I interviewed teachers

regarding their perspectives of SIP factors in children that may lead to ISS as a response to children's aggressive behavior. The research questions for this study integrate attention to SIP domains as a mechanism by which to examine precise aspects of teacher perspectives regarding children's aggressive behavior.

Review of Literature Related to Key Concepts and Variables

Preschool teachers use ISS to help create a safe environment for preschool students and teachers, create a positive learning environment, teach preschool students social skills needed for school success, and to reduce the number of future misbehaviors (Martinsone et al., 2022). Preschool students engage in challenging behaviors such as physical aggression, disruption, leaving a specified area without permission, not following directions, and spitting (An & Horn, 2022). It is essential that teachers assist them to move beyond their self-centeredness to show empathy and concern for others (Jeon et al., 2019). In this section, I will address types of aggression seen in preschool students, including physical aggression, relational aggression, proactive aggression, and reactive aggression, and factors that may contribute to children's aggressive behavior.

Types of Aggressive Behaviors in Preschool Students

Aggression is commonly used to describe hostile behavior or attitude between others (Miller & Tolan, 2019). Aggressive behavior in preschool students described as a behavior intended to harm or injure others (Miller & Tolan, 2019). Externalizing behaviors is an adaptive behavior that includes delinquency, aggressiveness, and hyperactivity in childhood. Cheating, physical aggression, and stealing are examples of

externalizing behavior, because the target is the student's immediate environment (Kim et al., 2020). Internalizing behaviors are the ones aimed toward oneself (Frigoletto et al., 2022). Internalizing behaviors, such as sadness and withdrawal, are individuals anticipating those behaviors (Racine et al., 2021). Internalizing behaviors are concerning but generally are not associated with misbehavior or disruption of the classroom (Frigoletto et al., 2022).

Aggressive behaviors have caused students in preschool through second grade to be suspended both in and out of school. According to Texans Care for Children (2019), in 2017-2018, the most recent year for which data are available, 62,557 preschool children in Texas were punished with ISS. According to an article in the newspaper local to the focus city, the number of preschool children who experienced ISS in 2017-2018 was third highest in the state. To understand preschool students' vulnerability to ISS, it is essential to explore types of aggressive behaviors, causes of negative behaviors, teachers' response to aggressive acts across four domains, and ISS as a method to resolve aggressive acts which I will be discussing in this section.

Physical Aggression

Physical aggression occurs when an individual causes physical harm to another person (Baker & Liu, 2021). Physical aggression in preschoolers caused them to push, hit, bit, or kick others (Correia et al., 2021). Physical aggression is typical in preschool students (Correia et al., 2021). According to an article in the newspaper local to the focus city, teachers in Texas reported that during the school year of 2017-2018, 702 out of

3,812 preschool students were disciplined for aggressive behavior with in-school suspension and another 265 preschool students OSS. An example of aggressive behavior that may result in disciplinary action was provided by Perry and Ostrov (2019), who described a 5-year-old boy who bit another student because he wanted the same toy. Perry and Ostrov also reported a 5-year-old girl was observed hitting several friends in the classroom, and preschool students were crying due to the hitting. Physically aggressive behavior among preschool students has been an ongoing concern in the learning environment (Correia et al., 2021).

Children's physical aggression starts to emerge when they leave infancy since it requires large motor coordination and body strength (Baker et al., 2023). Pre-verbal children, typically aged 12 to 30 months, frequently bite (Correia et al., 2021), and may shove a peer (Christos, 2019). When preschoolers increase their social skills such in-school dance programs, teachers expect them to communicate their feelings and share with peers (Rajan & Aker, 2024). At the same time, the greater motor control and body strength of children ages 3 to 5 provides them with the ability to kick, punch, slap, pinch, and wrestle with a rival (Baker & Liu, 2021). When such behaviors are condoned or even modeled by adults in the child's life, physically aggressive responses may become habitual (Correia et al., 2021). Preschool students may act aggressively toward their peers because they are exposed to aggressive behavior at home (Baker, 2022). Teachers, caregivers, parents, and others may exhibit physically aggressive behaviors that are then copied by young children (Ersan, 2020).

In addition to age differences in physical aggression, preschool children are also disciplined differently according to their racial and gender backgrounds (Babinski & McQuade, 2019). For example, Zeng et al. (2019) found African American children account for 50% of public preschool suspensions, even though they represent only 20% of the preschool population. Zeng et al. reported African American students between 3 and 5 are more likely than their White classmates to receive an OSS for physical aggression (Owens & McLanahan, 2020). Most of the preschool children suspended for physical aggression are African American boys (Zeng et al., 2019). African American boys between ages 3 and 5 are expelled at a rate more than 4.5 times that of African American girls. Correia et al. (2021) noted physical aggression is more prevalent in preschool boys than in preschool girls. Relational aggression is more common in preschool girls than physical aggression (Babinski & McQuade, 2019).

Relational Aggression

Relational aggression is harm inflicted on another by manipulating social relationships (Ostrov et al., 2019). Acts of relational aggression include spreading rumors about the target person, practicing social exclusion, and threatening to withdraw friendship (Correia et al., 2021). Relational aggression can damage relationships by disrupting friendships or causing feelings of exclusion (Kamper-DeMarco & Ostrov, 2019). Relational aggression causes damage to reputations, relationships, and social standing (Beasley, 2020). In preschool children, relational aggression levels increase as the sense of anger increases (Jeon et al., 2019).

Preschools girls are more likely to use relational aggression than are preschool boys, and the prevalence of relational aggression in preschool girls may be greater when they form same-sex dyads and engage in gender-specific socializing (Beasley, 2020). Preschool teachers reported dyads made up of preschool girls increase in relational aggression over the school year (Kamper-DeMarco & Ostrov, 2019). Relational aggression is complicated by recursive emotions; as reported by Jambon and Smetana (2020), preschool girls have a tendency to exhibit relational aggression when stealing from one another, because preschool girls feel badly about the situation their thievery created and respond to their own embarrassment and shame by acting unfairly toward their peers. At the same time, a preschool boy's lack of compassion and kindness suggests interpersonal considerations are less pressing, and he is less relationally aggressive than girls in the classroom. (Ersan, 2020). Preschool girls also are more likely than preschool boys to feel victimized by relational aggression because of rejection from peers (Beasley, 2020). Interestingly, preschool girls who enjoy strongly positive peer relationships are more likely than less popular girls to use relationship aggression against peers (Jeon et al., 2019). Preschool teachers stated relational aggression among preschool girls tends to occur when another preschool student hurts their feelings or the preschool student feels ignored by a peer (Hart & Ostrov, 2020). As preschool girls interact with their peers, they develop social skills and coping mechanisms that influence their future behavior (Perry & Ostrov, 2019).

Preschool students have been reported to be engaging in relational aggression that

interferes with academic instruction (Correia et al., 2021), which creates concern among preschool teachers. Relational aggressive behavior, such as name-calling, negatively affects preschool students and preschool teachers' behaviors, especially when it becomes widespread in the class or habitual in a particular student (Savina, 2021). For example, Christos (2019) reported one preschool student called one child "fat" and another child "skinny" every day, then expanded this to name-call every student in the class with what were intended to be pejorative names. Preschool teachers also reported an increase in the number of preschool children who are victimized by relational aggression who then respond to the perpetrator with relational or even physical aggression, compounding the behavior problem created by the original incident of relational aggression (Hart & Ostrov, 2020). Although physical aggression and relational aggression were both viewed by preschool teachers as wrong, relational aggression is a greater concern for teachers when working with preschool girls (Hart & Ostrov, 2020).

Proactive Aggression

Proactive aggression is shown in the absence of anger or provocation, with the goal of taking possession of things or intimidating others (Song et al., 2020). It is typified by calm, deliberate aggressive acts that are unpredicted by the situation, and suggest a child's poor anger regulation and low levels of interpersonal trust (Perry & Ostrov, 2019). During preschool years, anger regulation should be protective against proactive aggression, but many preschool children struggle with managing their emotions and behaviors (Perry & Ostrov, 2019). As described earlier, reactive aggression may be

associated with dysfunctional or insufficient anger regulation because it is often the expression of provoked anger that has gone unresolved (Evans et al., 2019). In proactive aggression, preschool children lack self-regulatory capacities and struggle with expressing their desires in socially acceptable ways (McRae et al., 2022). It is not uncommon for preschool children, especially younger children and those with limited experience in group care, to engage in proactive forms of aggression as they struggle to control their impulses (Song et al., 2020).

Because proactive aggression is often regarded as part of the child's personality, there is a deficit in strategies to address proactive aggression (Evans et al., 2019). It may be possible to solve the problem of proactive aggression if teachers focus their attention on children's arguments about moral concepts during preschool years (Slaughter et al., 2020). The understanding of moral judgments and reasoning plays an important role in preschool children's social behavior, but this understanding is not inborn and must be taught (Baker et al., 2023). By highlighting the moral or conventional nature of transgressions instead of interpreting them as innate characteristics, proactive aggression could be reframed as acts that occur in context (Slaughter et al., 2020). In the classroom environment, proactive aggression is commonplace: a preschool student pushes another student to be the first in line to kick the ball at recess, takes another student's lunch money, or pushes another student off the slide because they want to go down the slide first (Perry & Ostrov, 2019). When a preschooler commits proactive aggression toward another child, they are aware they intend to harm the other child, but not out of anger or

grief (McRae et al., 2022).

Reactive Aggression

Reactive aggression consists of impulsive, angry behavior motivated by a desire to harm someone or a response to a provocation (Baker & Liu, 2021). For example, a preschool student called another preschool "red face" when taking his favorite truck away during indoor playtime (Christos, 2019); in this incident, the taking of the truck was an act of physical or proactive aggression, but the name-calling was reactive in that it was a reaction to the ongoing situation. Reactive aggression is a hot form of aggression (Baker & Liu, 2021), often driven by rage or terror (Christos, 2019). Reactive aggression occurs without prior intention or objective and demonstrates a lack of impulse control (Chen et al., 2021). An inability to control one's emotions and reactions is typical of very young children (Jambon & Smetana, 2020), but children older than toddlers are expected to master the ability to take turns, share, and negotiate conflict (Chen et al., 2021). Developing these skills in young children is an essential part of preschool teachers' work (Chen et al., 2021). The older preschool child who frequently exhibits reactive aggression may be considered incorrigible and may be asked to leave the classroom (Hart & Ostrov, 2020).

Causes of Preschool Students' Aggressive Behaviors

Preschool students find it difficult to communicate their thoughts, to get along with their classmates, understand social cues, and students' achievements in the learning environment that cause negative behaviors (Hadley & Dickinson, 2020). Causes of

children's aggressive behavior include factors in the child, factors in parenting, and factors in the school. I will address each of these.

Child Factors in Children's Aggressive Behaviors

Various aspects of the child and their experience can be factors in children's aggressive behaviors. These aspects include exposure to aggressive models, different temperaments, and poor emotional controls. Perry and Ostrov (2019) argued aggressive behavior is shaped by the environment, and preschool students emulate aggressive models. For example, preschool students who watch violent television programs may become more aggressive themselves (Giordano et al., 2022). Preschool students who are physically punished by parents may strike out more often at peers (Ersan, 2020).

Impulsive behaviors in preschool students can begin with a small action and become a large challenge for teachers (Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2020). Whenever preschool students are acting without thinking about the consequences, they are acting impulsively (Ersan, 2020). Preschool students can be impulsive because of their developing prefrontal cortex that is responsible for impulse control and decision-making (Chen et al., 2021). Preschool students may kick, pinch, bite, scream, and throw a tantrum when impulsive behaviors are uncontrollable (Park et al., 2019). Preschool behaviors that are inappropriate must be dealt with before becoming a major issue (Bass & Childers, 2019). In addition, preschool students' lack of understanding of consequences might lead to impulsive behavior that is not controllable (Ersan, 2020). The effect of stress at home, such as a divorce between parents, can contribute to a preschool

student's lack of emotional stability and tendency toward impulsive behavior (Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2020). Preschool students often do not have control over their behavior and cannot control their actions and thoughts (Bass & Childers, 2019).

It is common for preschool students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) to behave unpredictably, unmindfully, and impatient when frustrated (Slaughter et al., 2020). Evans et al. (2019) revealed 5% of young children are diagnosed with ADHD. Preschool students with ADHD may blurt out words or forget things (Bass & Childers, 2019). Preschool students with ADHD may be unable to delay gratification and demand immediate attention to their perceived needs (Chow et al., 2021). Preschool students with ADHD may be self-centered and want things their way all the time (Evans et al., 2019). ADHD-related behavior, including impulsivity and inattention, has been a concern among preschool teachers for quite some time (Park et al., 2019).

Temper tantrums are the most common behavioral problem among children between 4 through 12 years old (Yu-Lefler et al., 2022). A tantrum can include a range of disruptive behaviors, including complaining, crying, shouting, throwing, stomping, hitting, violent defiance, and weeping (Bani Salameh et al., 2021). In the US and UK, tantrum behavior peaks between 18 and 24 months, when 87% of children have tantrums. After 42 months, tantrums decrease sharply to 59% (Bani Salameh et al., 2021). In addition, there is little research on temper tantrums, even though temper tantrums may be the first indication of an ongoing behavior problem of a preschool student. Among 1490 preschool children between 3 and 5, most (83.7%) experienced a tantrum in the past

month (Bani Salameh et al., 2021). Tantrum is a non-directed expression of the change of behaviors such as aggression (Yu-Lefler et al., 2022). Preschool students can become frustrated for different reasons (Muller et al., 2019). Preschool students may not have the words to express their needs and wants that lead to feelings of frustration (Sette et al., 2019). Preschool students may be dealing with stressors such as separation anxiety or changes in routines (Kertz et al., 2019), but because preschool students often are unable to express their frustration or control their anger, these stressors can lead to tantrums (Engle et al., 2021).

Anxiety also contributes to preschool students' tendency to act out *(*Racine et al., 2021). Some preschool students have more anxiety than others and may experience anxiety when they face certain events, new situations, and unfamiliar experiences (Kertz et al., 2019). Anxiety occurs when preschool students feel helpless in the face of something experienced as dangerous (Racine et al., 2021). For instance, preschool students may have anxiety when going to a new school, during stormy weather, or in response to disruptions in the family (Kertz et al., 2019). According to Creswell et al. (2020), bad dreams and nightmares, which become more common as children enter the preschool years at about age 3, may contribute to children's anxiety during the day. Anxiety can trigger aggressive behavior in some preschool students (Kertz et al., 2019).

Numerous factors inherent in the preschool child's emotional and social development may contribute to aggressive behavior in the classroom. The tendency among preschool students to act aggressively can be exacerbated by the emotional

climate around them, which may increase their anxiety, anger, and frustration. The emotional climate around preschool children are co-created with the adults in children's lives, including their parents and their teachers. In the next section, I will present literature about parenting factors that may contribute to children's aggressive behavior in the preschool classroom and may contribute to the high rate of preschool suspension in the study district.

Parenting Factors in Children's Aggressive Behavior

The chances of aggressive or antisocial behavior in preschool students are higher when they are exposed to aggression or maltreatment at home (Brand et al., 2019). This exposure can include experience with domestic violence and the disruption associated with parental separation and divorce. According to Martinsone et al. (2022), people learn from observing others' behavior, and this is especially true in preschool students. The most important people in a child's life are their parents.

When parents divorce or separate, preschool students' mental health may be negatively affected, even when the marital disruption is amicable; this can result in children's feelings of sadness, anxiety, and unhappiness (Goldberg et al., 2021). When separation and divorce are not amicable, but are preceded by parents' heated arguments, tears, and even ultimatums that may reference children in the family, preschool students may be traumatized by what they witness. Students from divorced families make up about 50% of the preschool population (Brand et al., 2019). There is a greater risk of behavioral disorders in preschool students whose parents' divorce, such as hostility and

social difficulties, compared to that of students in less fraught home situations (Rosso et al., 2019).

Domestic violence is witnessed and experienced by preschool students in families preceding parental divorce but also in families that remain intact despite the violence (Brand et al., 2019). Domestic violence has a 45% to 60% rate of co-occurrence among preschool students, which is 15% higher than the average, in homes where violence exists between parents or partners (Boserup et al., 2020). If preschool students witness violent acts at home, preschool students are likely also to be physically harmed (Boserup et al., 2020). Child abuse and domestic violence are linked so 40% of children who witness domestic violence are also victims of abuse themselves at the hands of a parent (Boserup et al., 2020). Children who experience domestic abuse are at risk of emotional, physical, and social development problems (Brand et al., 2019). Preschool students who are victims of child abuse tend to demonstrate significant behavior difficulties in school (Brand et al., 2019).

Separation and divorce typically result in loss of daily support from one parent and may contribute to financial strain and housing disruption for the child and their custodial parent (Brand et al., 2019). Loss of a parent can also occur when a parent is incarcerated through the criminal justice system, and this also can affect the family's stability and functioning (Gibson, 2019). Preschool students of incarcerated parents, as well as their remaining parents, can suffer from strained relationships due to the void left by an absent parent (Burak & Wachino, 2023). Financial struggles may be experienced

by single-parent households, especially if one parent is jailed (Norris et al., 2021). There may be a lack of access to healthcare and education for the family that remains, as well as insecure housing and food supplies (Gibson, 2019). Stress and strain experienced by the remaining parent can affect the parent's ability to provide emotional support to a preschool student (Shlafer et al., 2019). Preschool students who grow up in families disrupted by one or both parents incarcerated face adverse challenges at an early age, and these challenges may lead to disruptive behavior in school (Burak & Wachino, 2023).

Even in families not affected by incarceration, divorce, or domestic violence, harsh parenting can contribute to a preschool student's aggressive behavior (Godleski et al., 2022). Parents who use coercive parenting styles, which involve excessive control, criticism, and punishment, can contribute to aggressive behavior in preschool students (Oshri et al., 2020). Preschool students may learn that aggression is acceptable when parents use harsh discipline techniques, such as spanking, physical abuse, or yelling (Lent & Murray, 2022). A lack of consistency in discipline can also lead to confusion and frustration in preschool students, potentially increasing their aggressive behavior (Godleski et al., 2022). Preschool students are more likely to behave aggressively when parents do not provide a nurturing and supportive environment with positive reinforcement and consistent rules (Lent & Murray, 2022). In summary, preschool students who live in households disrupted by a variety of stressors may respond with aggressive behavior in the classroom.

School Factors in Children's Aggressive Behavior

In addition to factors inherent in the child and present in their home environment, factors in the school setting may also contribute to children's aggressive behavior. These factors include lack of application of supportive solutions, use of zero-tolerance policies, and infliction of harsh punishments. Another school factor is the stress felt by preschool teachers themselves. I will describe each of these in turn.

Preschool students' behavior often challenges teachers (Martin-Herz et al., 2022); however, teachers often respond to challenging behavior in ways that remove the child from the classroom but do not address the behavior itself (Garrity et al., 2019). According to Zelinski (2019), teachers in Texas reported that during the school year of 2017-2018, 54% of the state's pre-K assigned children to OSS and 44% assigned children to ISS, and assigned multiple suspensions to the same children for repeated behaviors issues. Minority preschool students are overrepresented in OSS and ISS (Owens & McLanahan, 2020). The harshest and most exclusionary forms of school discipline are faced by Black and Latinx students compared to White students (Zelinski, 2019). Among students of color, suspensions are more common as early as preschool (Giordano et al., 2021). Despite only comprising 18.2% of preschool students in New York City, Black students account for 43% of all suspensions of U.S. preschoolers (Garrity et al., 2019). Some preschool children with behavioral challenges receive isolated instruction through intervention programs that have a pull-out approach (Zinsser et al., 2019). Instead of protecting preschool students from trauma, schools exclude those who have experienced

varying levels of trauma involving mental health issues and dysfunctional families (Anderson et al., 2019). Exclusionary practices do not consider the outside factors that can contribute to these incidents and are themselves an ongoing problem in schools (Garrity et al., 2019).

It is common to have zero-tolerance policies that punish students for misbehavior even on the first offense (Weaver & Swank, 2020). A zero-tolerance policy in schools specifies punishments or consequences for certain offenses, no matter what the situation or context (Javdani, 2019). Drug and weapons possession were originally covered by these policies but have expanded over time to include bullying and tardiness as well (Kyere et al., 2020). Such policies often fail to account for triggering situations that contribute to wrongdoing, or how zero-tolerance affects relationships between individuals and environments (Weaver & Swank, 2020). Zero tolerance policies often are linked to use police as part of the support system of school (Watson & Stevenson, 2022). Students of color and students with disabilities are disproportionately affected by zero tolerance policies enforced by school resource officers, which indicates a need to eliminate discipline disparities in school policies (Javdani, 2019). There were 62,557 suspensions in the 2017-2018 school year in the state of Texas (Texans Care for Children, 2019). Of these, the suspension rate was 25% for African American boys and 14% for African American girls out of 16% of the population; African American girls and boys each represent only 8% of the school population (Texans Care for Children, 2019). Most school administrators say they support discipline that is firm and fair, consistent across

the student population and reflects local expectations, including application of zero-tolerance (Kyere et al., 2020). School resource officers and zero tolerance policies are defended by supporters as necessary to maintain safety and security in schools, and as deterrents to crime and violence (Watson & Stevenson, 2022). Despite support in some circles for zero-tolerance programs, zero-tolerance has been ineffective at controlling student behavior (Dunning-Lozano, 2022).

Harsh punishment is defined as any more severe or punitive disciplinary action than is necessary to correct a particular behavior (Yildirim et al., 2020). Cultural, societal, and individual perspectives all play major roles in what constitutes harsh punishment (Feely et al., 2019). A teacher who is physically harsh with a preschool student causes the student discomfort, harm, or pain (Feely et al., 2019). Hits, slaps, and pushes are all examples of physical harshness by preschool teachers (Yildirim et al., 2020). Harsh physical punishments are commonplace in the experience of preschool students living below the poverty line (Feely et al., 2019). Caregivers reported 43% of preschool students experienced physical neglect and physical abuse in the childcare center (Feely et al., 2019).

Academic performance is negatively affected by harsh punishment (Oshri et al., 2020). In states that permit harsh punishment, students regularly perform worse academically than do students in other states (Feely et al., 2019). It is not uncommon for children who experience harsh punishment in school to feel anxious and sad, and even to have suicidal thoughts (Godleski et al., 2022). As a result of harsh punishment, students'

cognitive development is negatively impacted (Oshri et al., 2020). The victims of harsh punishment in school exhibit poor peer relationships, difficulty paying attention, decreased school performance, and antisocial behavior (Lent & Murray, 2022).

Finally, teachers' own feelings of stress may contribute to the level of aggression they report in their students. For example, Jeon et al. (2019) found personal stress reported by lead and assistant preschool teachers was associated with frequency and level of children's anger and aggression, but that teachers' emotional exhaustion was associated with children's anxiety, withdrawal, and lack of social competence. Preschool and assistant teachers who report high levels of stress also report high levels of aggression, anger, and anxiety withdrawal in preschool students than preschool and assistant teachers who are less stressed in the school environment (Loomis & Panlilio, 2022). When the teachers and assistant teachers are stressed, they are unable to seek assistance from each other (Loomis & Panlilio, 2022). Preschool students' level of social competence was associated with preschool assistant teachers' levels of high or low stress in the classroom environment (Jeon et al., 2019). Preschool lead and assistant teachers' stress-level affected preschool social-emotional behavior problems in the classrooms (Clayback & Williford, 2021).

Stress experienced by preschool teachers may be caused by a variety of factors. For example, Jeon et al. (2019) noted the low pay and long hours associated with work in childcare settings can cause stress. Childcare workers may have limited educational attainment (Jeon et al., 2019), and so may have limited understanding of best practices in

classroom management and behavior guidance (Gaspar et al., 2022). Poor classroom management practices contribute to a chaotic preschool environment, which is stressful for teachers (Jeon et al., 2019). All of these factors that may cause stress in preschool teachers are common in the state that is the focus of this study, as described by Moffett (2019), and may contribute to the high rate of ISS among preschool students in response to their aggressive behavior.

Summary and Conclusions

In this literature review section, I presented the domain model of social reasoning with links to SIP, as described by Harvey et al. (2001). In analyzing the framework, I showed how SIP could help explore the high rate of ISS among preschool students in Texas in response to children's aggressive behavior. SIP involves reciprocal actions by the child and the teacher, and how each interprets a situation. I explored factors that contribute to the prevalence of children's aggressive behavior, including child factors, such as impulsive behaviors in preschool students can begin with a small action and become a large challenge for teachers (Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2020). I presented evidence that parenting factors contribute to children's aggressive behavior, such as the fact that when parents' divorce or separate preschool students' mental health may be negatively affected, even when the marital disruption is amicable; this can result in children's feelings of sadness, anxiety, and unhappiness (Goldberg et al., 2021). Finally, I discussed factors occurring in the preschool environment that contribute to high levels of aggression in students, including zero-tolerance policies that punish students for

misbehavior even on the first offense (Weaver & Swank, 2020). A gap in practice exists because of the high rate of ISS among preschool students in Texas in response to children's aggressive behavior. In Chapter 3, I present the method by which I will explore preschool teachers' perspectives regarding children's aggressive behavior that may lead to in-school suspension as a response to that behavior.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore perspectives of preschool teachers working in childcare centers in one city in Texas regarding children's aggressive behavior that may lead to ISS as a response to that behavior. In Chapter 3, I provide information regarding my study research design and rationale, my role as the researcher, the method I used to select study participants, the instrument I used to conduct interviews, my data analysis plan, and the plans to ensure trustworthiness of the data and ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

Four RQs guided this study. These RQs reflect the study's purpose and its conceptual framework:

- RQ 1: How do preschool teachers in central Texas describe the level of personal choice exercised by children who engage in aggressive behavior that may trigger ISS and their responses to those choices?
- RQ 2: How do preschool teachers in central Texas describe the acceptance of social conventions in children who engage in aggressive behavior that may trigger ISS and their responses to that level of acceptance?
- RQ 3: How do preschool teachers in central Texas describe the understanding of right and wrong in children who engage in aggressive behavior that may trigger ISS and their responses to that level of understanding?
- RQ 4: How do preschool teachers in central Texas describe concern for safety

as part of their response to children who engage in aggressive behavior that may trigger ISS and their response in light of safety concerns?

The phenomenon under study was preschool teachers' perspectives regarding children's aggressive behavior that may lead to ISS as a response to that behavior.

I used a basic qualitative design using interviews, as described by Caelli et al. (2003). According to Caelli et al., a basic qualitative design using interviews is appropriate in a study that relies on perspectives of those with experience of the phenomenon under study. In qualitative research, descriptions of lived experiences are used to convey understanding and meaning (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Using data to develop concepts for qualitative investigation, the researcher gains insight into a phenomenon and explores its depths (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This makes qualitative research the most suitable method for studying educational problems (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To collect data for the study, I gained an understanding of the participants' perspectives by conducting interviews (see Burkholder et al., 2020).

A quantitative approach was considered when designing the study. A quantitative research method using a survey would have allowed the study to be generalized to a large population; however, a survey design would have been ineffective in fulfilling the study's purpose of exploring teacher perspectives (see Burkholder et al., 2020). The study involved variables that could not be controlled in a quantitative study, such as the experience and behaviors of the teacher, the physical environment the student is placed in, or the diversity of preschool children in the classroom (see Burkholder et al., 2020). In

addition, a different qualitative method, such as observations of teachers' classroom interactions, would have been ineffective in exploring teachers' perspectives. Therefore, this basic qualitative study consisted of interviews. I interviewed 11 lead teachers who worked with children ages 3 to 5 in childcare centers in one mid-sized city in Texas. I conducted interviews by telephone or Zoom, using open-ended interview questions based on the study's conceptual framework. Interview data was subjected to thematic analysis as described by Saldaña (2021).

Role of the Researcher

My role in this study was an observer, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), because I was a listener and observer of the participant interviews and avoided participating myself except in this role. Prior to beginning this study, I worked as a military family childcare provider and teacher assistant for over 8 years, and I found challenging behaviors affect preschool students and their teachers. I had preexisting ideas about classroom management and child guidance, which may have been different from the ideas expressed by participants in this study. Following the advice of Merriam and Tisdell, I was aware of my own experiences to avoid introducing personal assumptions, prejudices, and viewpoints into this study. I endeavored to remain objective during analysis process, data collection, and stay open-minded when I worked with study participants. To guard against ethical problems, I did not recruit participants from the place where I worked. I did not have any supervisory authority over any teachers who volunteered to be part of this study.

I conducted my study at a time following the COVID-19 pandemic, so I conducted interviews remotely, using Zoom or the telephone. This may have affected the completeness of the information I gathered from participants, because I was not able to see body language or facial expressions, and I may not have been able to establish a warm, conversational connection with some participants. Also, because COVID-19 disrupted preschool practice and the lives of children prior to the study, children's behavior may have been affected, along with teachers' experiences with that behavior.

Methodology

A qualitative design was used to explore preschool teachers' perspectives regarding children's aggressive behavior that may lead to in-school suspension as a response to that behavior. In this section, I describe the method by which I made this exploration. I begin by describing how I located and selected participants then describe the interview questions that formed the data collection instrument. I then describe the procedures by which I conducted this study and my plans for analyzing the data that resulted from the interviews.

Participant Selection

The population for this study included lead teachers working in independently funded childcare facilities located in one county in Texas. To collect a representative sample, I used purposeful sampling as described by Ravitch and Carl (2021). Using purposeful sampling allows the inquirer to choose sites and individuals who will provide a comprehensive understanding of a central issue (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Criteria I

applied to identify participants for this study included (a) position as a lead teacher, (b) working with children ages 3 to 5 in (c) an independently-funded childcare facility (d) located in the county of focus in Texas. Lead teachers are responsible for what happens in a preschool classroom, and so were assumed to be better able than assistant teachers to give me relevant information regarding children's aggressive behavior that may trigger suspension from the classroom, and how teachers respond to this behavior. Teachers of preschool children between the ages 3 to 5 years were expected be a great fit for this study because children of this age are physically capable of acting aggressively toward peers but are expected to be able to self-regulate their behavior and so be responsible for aggressive acts. Participant criteria were described in the participant recruitment flyer and in the consent form. I confirmed participants' eligibility at the start of each interview. I excluded teachers with whom I had a personal or professional relationship.

I interviewed 11 lead preschool teachers. This number was sufficient for an interview-based study, because a sample size of six to 12 participants is typically recommended for saturation in a study based on individual perspectives (see Guest et al., 2006). Dworkin (2012) stated 5 to 50 participants may be a sufficient sample to inform an interview-based study. Eleven participants appeared to be enough to provide rich and detailed information in the study because it seemed data saturation was achieved as indicated by the lack of new information in the final interviews. I recruited participants for my study from independently funded childcare facilities located in the focus county because this county had a history a high rate of ISS among preschool students in response

to children's aggressive behavior.

Using the Google search engine, I located 11 licensed, independently funded childcare centers in the target county that offered preschool programs. I excluded two childcare centers, because they did not appear to offer care for preschool age children. Assuming each center employed four lead teachers for preschool-age children, these 11 centers appeared sufficient to provide a pool of over 40 prospective participants. I contacted the directors of these 11 preschool programs to explain the study and ask their help in distributing a flyer to their teachers. After getting agreement from each director, I emailed the flyer to the director so they could share it with their teachers. As preschool teachers responded to me by email that they were interested in participating in the study, I replied with an email that included a consent form. Teachers who wished to volunteer to be interviewed replied to that email with the words, "I consent." I then scheduled the interviews.

Instrumentation

As the researcher, I was the first instrument of data collection for this study. Burkholder et al. (2020) found interpretation is a key component of qualitative research, which involves planning, analyzing, and writing reports. I maintained a research journal where I recorded my views, observations, and transcriptions and remained as unbiased as possible by using reflexive journaling (see Meyer & Willis, 2019).

I used an interview of 11 questions as my data collection instrument. This interview instrument was researcher-produced and included 11 open-ended questions

supported by possible follow-up questions to assist me in probing for more detail as needed. I created the interview instrument based on my study framework and research questions, all of which emphasized the topic of children's aggressive behavior and in-school suspension. The first interview question asked the participant to tell me a bit about children's aggressive behavior they encounter in the classroom; this question was designed to introduce the topic of the conversation and to confirm that the participant had experienced aggressive behavior in the classroom. Interview question 2 further framed the conversation by asking the participant to explain why some children engage in aggressive behavior that may trigger an in-school suspension. Interview question 3 asked about participant experiences related to children's decision to be aggressive as a personal choice, and requested an example of this sort of experience. Question 3 was aligned with RQ1, about personal choice as a motivation for aggressive behavior. Interview question 4 asked about participants' perspective of aggressive children's understanding of classroom rules and processes, as suggested by RQ2. This question also included a request for an example. In interview question 5, I sought how preschool teachers described the ability to tell right from wrong in children who engage in aggressive behavior, with a request for an example. This interview question was aligned with RQ3.

The remaining interview questions solicited participants' overall view of the motivations to act aggressively and their assessment of the effectiveness of suspension and expulsion as remedies for this behavior. Interview question 6 asked the participant to identify the key factors that make a particular child act aggressively. Interview question 7

asked about a time the participant either suspended or expelled a child or wanted to but did not. Interview questions 8 and 9 asked about the possible effects of suspending or expelling a child and also the possible effects of not suspending them. These questions aligned with RQ4, about safety concerns, and follow-up questions probed specifically about concerns for safety. Interview question 10 asked about the sorts of guidance or intervention that might help an aggressive child behave better if teachers were not permitted to suspend or expel them. Finally, interview question 11 asked the participant for any final or additional thoughts and signaled the conclusion of the interview.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

After Walden's Internal Review Board (IRB) approved my study (05-09-24-0761765), I recruited participants for my study from independently-funded childcare facilities located in the focus county. I gathered my study participants from the county because it created a high rate of ISS among preschool students in response to children's aggressive behavior. I used Google Chrome's search engine to search for a list of childcare centers in the target county. I located 11 childcare centers, each of which included about four lead preschool teachers. Google Chrome's search engine listed the childcare centers' contact numbers and addresses to call or go to the childcare center to get permission from each center director to distribute recruitment flyers about the study. After getting approval from a site director or assistant director, I sent the director an electronic file of the flyer to distribute to their preschool teachers. As lead preschool teachers responded to me that they were interested in participating and wanted to be

interviewed by email or telephone, I replied with an email that included a consent form. Teachers who wished to volunteer to be interviewed replied to that email with the words, "I consent." I then scheduled the interviews at a mutually convenient day and time, avoiding participants' work hours. I sent each participant a reminder 1day prior to the interview. I also explained the interview should last approximately 45 to 60 minutes and each participant would receive a copy of the interview transcript later by email.

Because all interviews were to be conducted via telephone or Zoom while participants were at home on weekends or at the center after their scheduled weekday shifts, no access to sites was necessary. I strongly suggested each teacher participate in the interview from a comfortable and quiet location with good internet access or cell phone reception, and where they were unlikely to be interrupted. All interviews were conducted from a quiet room in my house, in the absence of distractions, as recommended by Burkholder et al. (2020). On my phone and laptop, I installed an audio recording app in advance. Each interview took approximately 50 minutes, but the timeframe was flexible to meet my participants' needs.

As part of each interview, I greeted the participant and provide them with an overview of the study and details about their rights and confidentiality. Using a recording device, I captured each participant's audio responses without stopping to take notes. An observation and notetaking sheet was used to record my own thoughts and reminders as the interviews progressed. I thanked each interviewee at the end of the interviews. I reminded each participant they would receive a copy of the interview transcript later by

email. I recorded each meeting's time and date on my audit trail.

I transcribed the interview audio files using the Kaltura automated transcription tool and edited the resulting transcriptions while listening to the audio. These edited transcripts were what I emailed to each participant for their review. If any participant wished corrections to be made to their transcript, I intended to make those changes; however, no changes were requested. The final, confirmed transcripts were the basis for data analysis.

Data Analysis Plan

I assigned each participant a code name (such as P1, P2, and so forth), and replaced any use of their actual name with this code name on the transcripts and audio files. I removed any other names, such as the name of a child, from the transcripts, replacing those with [a child] or whatever signifier was appropriate. These steps protect participants' confidentiality and mask any reference to the school or community. I then proceeded with data analysis.

In qualitative data analysis, codes are used to decipher or symbolize data (Saldaña, 2021). I manually coded each transcribed interview as individual, verbatim ideas expressed by participants (see Saldaña, 2021). Codes were entered into a three-column table, where the right column was for participant identifier, the middle column was for transcripts, and the left column was for notes as I proceeded. The first step in the coding process was to read the transcripts several times while journaling my ideas, thoughts, and questions along the way (see Saldaña, 2021). I identified participant

statements that were relevant to answering my research questions and highlighted those phrases and statements. This first coding cycle allows researchers to break down qualitative data into distinct parts, analyze them thoroughly, and compare them (see Saldaña, 2021).

During second-level coding, I organized codes derived from the transcripts by identifying patterns in them, creating categories for those patterns, determining their interrelationships, and then combining them into a coherent understanding of the phenomenon of the unit of analysis (see Burkholder et al., 2020). In this way, the large number of codes were grouped into a smaller number of categories. I then identified themes through a similar grouping process, to distill five key ideas that ran through the data. These themes helped me to answer the research questions.

As part of the data analysis, I also addressed any discrepancies or biases in the data resulting in a lack of agreement or balance (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data discrepancies occur when researchers discover inconsistencies after the interview; a person says one thing at one point but the opposite at a later point in the interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used the transcript review opportunity to ask the participant to clarify any discrepancies I noticed. In Chapter 4, I discuss any discrepant cases.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, individuals' or groups' subjective meanings and experiences are used to understand phenomena in their social and cultural context (Stahl & King, 2020). Qualitative research cannot be conducted with the same rigor and control

as quantitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). As rigor makes quantitative research valid and reliable, trustworthiness makes qualitative research valid and reliable (Stahl & King, 2020). In qualitative research, trustworthiness signifies an ethical, transparent, and rigorous approach, as well as credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Credibility

To increase the trustworthiness of my study, I maintained credibility within the research process. The credibility of a study is a measure of its accuracy and truthfulness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To support credibility, I engaged my participants in member checking of their interview transcripts, to confirm the accuracy of my data (see Saldaña, 2021). As I conducted interviews and analyzed the data, I isolated my own thoughts and feelings in a reflective journal to help me be transparent about my biases.

Transferability

For a study to be transferable, the data and explanations must be descriptive and clear so other researchers and audiences can make comparisons based on the study data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To support the transferability of my data, I focused on gathering thick, rich descriptions relevant to my study. The reader will find the data more meaningful if the accounts are rich and detailed (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this manner, I provided my readers with the necessary information to make a valid judgment about how my results translate to other contexts based on the data I presented, alongside my discussions of participants' recruitment and interview processes.

Dependability

Dependability refers to reporting consistency, with regard to collecting data and data analysis in a research study (see Burkholder et al., 2020). Another researcher should be able to replicate the results of my study, based on accurate descriptions of the research processes. Through reflexivity, I examined my preconceptions as a researcher and acknowledged them to establish dependability (see Meyer & Willis, 2019). Through an audit trial, I was able to demonstrate the recruitment, interviewing, and follow-up processes I used to collect my data (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Confirmability

Because qualitative studies rely heavily on the researcher for data collection, the researcher must avoid influencing the research process with their biases regarding confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Confirmability was supported by ensuring the data reflect participants' perspectives of the children's aggressive behavior and in-school suspension, not mine. To do so, I deliberately refrained from commenting throughout the interview process and asked only questions that clarified understanding (see Saldaña, 2021). Another potential area for improvement in the study was that there was only one coder. I coded the data twice to address this issue and establish intracoder reliability. I conducted two coding sessions to ensure I categorized content across codes accurately and consistently (see Burkholder et al., 2020).

Ethical Procedures

Walden's IRB approval was required before I conducted research to ensure any

ethical issues were addressed to protect participants. Upon approval, I recruited participants for my study from independently funded childcare facilities located in the focus county. Participants who met inclusion criteria and expressed interest were sent a consent form. I interviewed only teachers who consented. I maintained the confidentiality of my participants' information by using pseudonyms, by refraining from disclosing the location of the study, and by keeping study data secure. My laptop is password-protected for all digital data and any paper files are kept in my private office. Upon completion of my study, I will retain data for 5 years, then destroy any printed data with a paper shredder and erase any data saved on my laptop.

Summary

Throughout Chapter 3, I summarized my research design, described my role as a researcher, and discussed problems of trustworthiness in my study. I recruited 11 participants to explore preschool teachers' perspectives regarding children's aggressive behavior that may lead to in-school suspension as a response to that behavior. I conducted individual interviews via Zoom or telephone and transcribed interview audio files using an automated transcription tool. I analyzed the data through in vivo coding to develop emergent themes. This study is important and worth doing because children's aggressive behavior may trigger various punishments, including suspension from the classroom; exploring how teachers think about and respond to this behavior may inform management of aggressive behavior. The results of the data collection and analysis are presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore perspectives of preschool teachers working in childcare centers in one city in Texas regarding children's aggressive behavior that may lead to in-school suspension as a response to that behavior. I was guided by four RQs regarding preschool teachers' description of children who engage in aggressive behavior with response to children's application of personal choice, children's acceptance of social conventions, and children's understanding of right and wrong, and regarding teachers' concern for safety in their management of children's aggressive behavior. In Chapter 4, I provide information regarding my study research setting, data collection, data analysis, results, evidence of trustworthiness, and summary.

Setting

On June 01, 2024, a storm caused power outages in the community where I lived. There was no internet or telephone connection during that time. Fortunately, the power source came back just in time for me to prepare for the first interview through Zoom, and the participant was able to connect also. No other issues threatened the data collection process, and I was not aware of other problems in the community that might have affected participants. Seven of the 11 study participants were females and four were males. Each participant in the study stated he or she dealt with challenging behaviors in the classroom when working with preschoolers ages 3 to 5.

Data Collection

I successfully recruited my intended 12 participants but only 11 participants

participated in the interview. Two participants who had scheduled interviews did not show up on Zoom. I emailed one of these participants and found the problem was with their internet connection. We rescheduled it for the same day at a later time, and we completed that interview. The other participant had a family emergency, and we rescheduled it for another day and time, but again the participant did not join me on Zoom. I emailed the participant and got no response, so I concluded the data collection process with 11 interviews. As noted above, seven participants were female and four were male.

Each participant was interviewed only once. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 45 minutes. My laptop was set up with Zoom and Microsoft Clipchamp for recording and transcribing interviews. Microsoft Clipchamp transcriptions and audio data were stored on a password-protected computer. I sent each participant a copy of the transcription with a request they confirm everything was accurate. The participants did not request any change on the transcription, and the transcriptions as they were sent comprised the data set in the study. Data collection proceeded as described in Chapter 3.

Data Analysis

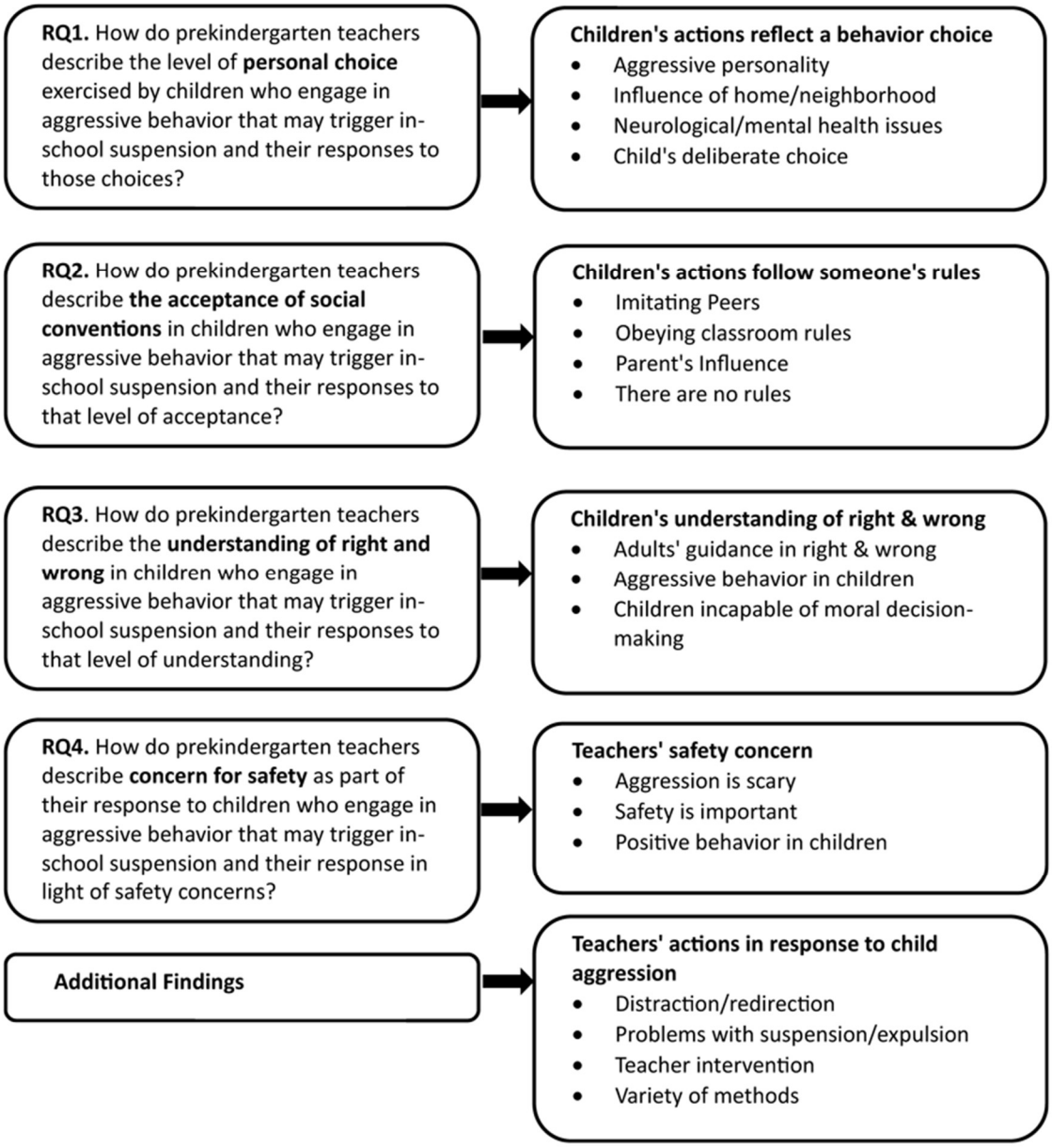
The study data were analyzed by coding, which I did manually using an Excel spreadsheet. Codes were entered into a three-column table, where I created columns for participant identifiers (Column A), codes (Column B), and themes with categories (Columns C through G). I followed the process described in my data analysis plan in identifying in vivo then grouping them into themes and categories. The themes were

associated with my research questions, with an additional theme for codes not associated with any of the research questions.

This process of data analysis led to 260 unique codes across the 98 pages of interview transcripts. Based on similarity, I grouped and organized codes into 18 categories: adults' guidance in right and wrong, aggression is scary, aggressive behavior in children, aggressive in personality, children incapable of moral decision-making, child's deliberate choice, distraction/redirection, imitating peers, influence of home/neighborhood, neurological/mental health issues, obeying classroom rules, parent's influence, positive behavior in children, problems with suspension/expulsion, safety is important, teacher intervention, there are no rules, and variety of methods. Five themes emerged from the 18 categories: children's actions reflect a behavior choice, children's actions follow someone's rules, children's understanding of right and wrong, teachers' safety concerns, and teachers' actions in response to child aggression (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Themes and Research Questions and Associated Categories



According to the findings of the data analysis, a number of factors cause children's aggressive behavior and may lead to in-school suspension as a response to that behavior. Based on interviews, participants' perspectives were consistent regarding children's aggressive behavior and in-school suspension. In this case, there were no discrepant data. In the next section, I will present verbatim quotes from participant interviews.

Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore perspectives of preschool teachers working in childcare centers in one city in Texas regarding children's aggressive behavior that may lead to ISS as a response to that behavior. Eleven lead preschool teachers from state licensed independently funded childcare facility in central Texas were selected to participate in this qualitative case study. Data were collected using semistructured interviews exploring content knowledge.

Results for RQ 1

RQ 1 asked, "How do preschool teachers in central Texas describe the level of personal choice exercised by children who engage in aggressive behavior that may trigger ISS and their responses to those choices?" The theme that applied to this question stated that children's actions reflect a behavior choice. This theme included categories of aggressive personality, influence of home and neighborhood, neurological and mental health issues, and child's deliberate choice.

In general, lead preschool teachers said an aggressive personality could be a

factor that contributes to children's aggressive behaviors in the environment. P10 declared that,

> The children's behaviors are aggressive. They are disruptive. The child started hitting the other child and called the other child loser. He started hitting the girl. I tried to stop the child, and the child wouldn't listen and became aggressive.

According to P2, "A student in the classroom acts nicely one day, then the next day the students come into the classroom throwing things at another student."

P3 stated:

> The children's behaviors are aggressive. They are disruptive. The child started hitting the other child and called the other child loser. He started hitting the girl. I tried to stop the child, and the child wouldn't listen and became aggressive.

P4 described,

> They might get angry in the house because of thing or the other and when they come to school, they try to display this anger with the classmates, fighting with classmates, bullying each other, and destroying things. I don't think any parents, or any responsible parents will want their child to behave aggressively.

P2 also said, "I've experienced students bullying each other. I've experienced them fighting."

The second idea that emerged with regard to RQ 1 is that some preschool lead teachers stated a personal choice to be aggressive could result from experiences children have in the neighborhood with aggressive role models and with their parents. For

example, P11 noted preschool children imitate peers in the environment, saying, “In social learning, they have limited imitation of behaviors like imitating what they’re seeing around such as a friend is doing this thing. We have impulse control, environmental influence, and language difficulty.” P8 suggested this imitation is a personal choice, in saying, “Some of them imitate others, seeing their friend fighting, or seeing their friend destroying things. They want to imitate what their friends are doing.” P1 added, “Being aggressive could be from the neighborhood and the parents. I talked about the neighborhood, how their other kids in the neighborhood do behave. Some of them can adopt the character, some of the neighborhood kids.” P8 noted, “A lot of backgrounds that are coming from home does affect them a lot. It’s a choice for some and for others it’s kind of an influence from their peer pressure or from the background they’re coming from.”

Participants also described negative influences from adults in children’s lives. For example, P2 stated,

> Maybe around the neighborhood they see these adults who behave this certain way. They tend to behave like that same person, too. If [an adult is] a bully, that child is going to end up being a bully too.

P11 included the example of parents’ behavior, noting:

> They have family dynamics which involve the parents, caregivers and the behaviors to separate persons, acknowledging that family dynamics and administrators can contribute to aggressive behaviors. He or she wants to imitate

> what their friend is doing. In school, a friend is smart, he or she wants to copy what a friend is doing. Some are the peer relationship, the friends they work with.

Participants suggested lack of attention from parents or too much pressure to do well in school can cause aggressive behavior. P9 noted:

> The lack of discipline at home or school can cause that. The lack of proper attention and a kind of pressure from parents for the child to get good grades in school can trigger the child to behave that way. Depending on what triggers the behavior might be intentional, like based on the child's experience.

P6 agreed, saying, "Inconsistent discipline or lack of consequences for aggressive behaviors." P3 stated, "In some cultures aggression is more accepted or even encouraged, which can affect children's decision about aggression." P3 added, "What they practice at home is what they bring to school."

Participants described personal choice as part of a behavior pattern in children, P11 illustrated:

> The child wants others to do what he or she is doing. Child wants others to repeat the same mistake he or she is doing in school. The incidents keep happening and in school and for children in the class.

P5 indicated the choice to engage in aggressive behaviors repeatedly may be due to lack of more socially-accepted coping skills, noting:

> Lack of expression, self-expression, lack of communication. The way you can express yourself, you can't communicate. Then you are forced to act out of

aggression, which is, or which might be violent.

The third idea that emerged with regard to RQ1 is some preschool lead teachers stated that behavior choice could be result from children's neurological and mental health issues. P4 declared, "Some of them experienced mental issues. They bully other children in the classroom." P4 continued saying: "It can come from genetics." P6 noted it is important

> To understand the symptoms of underlying issues and address the root causes. That can help prevent such incidents and support the child's development. Some children may act out aggressively due to underlying emotional struggles such as anxiety and frustration or trauma.

P6 continued saying, "For the trauma and stress, it's unresolved experiences or challenges that lead to the emotional [outbursts]." P7 added,

> There might be some underlying emotional problems like anxiety, depression, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder that makes them other for them to manage their emotions. We discovered he was diagnosed with ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder], and he constantly needs to move around makes him feel restless and irritable during quiet activities. Children might lash out in the heat of the moment without fully thinking about the consequences.

P8 argued, "Some are just because of ODD and mental disorder they have. Some of them are a result of ODD that they become so aggressive." P6 reported, "Children's aggressive behaviors can be influenced by various factors such as brain development,

environment, social learning and emotional struggles. Physical harm or injury from the aggressive child's behavior." P3 reported, "Emotional development can impact their decision about aggression." P10 described,

> Some are trauma and stress, experiencing or witnessing violence, abuse or neglect. Some trauma and stress related to home life and lack of emotional regulation skills. Some of them are feelings of anxiety and depression. Children who have aggressive behaviors can be influenced in so many ways like brain development, the environment, social learning, emotional struggles, and developmental stages.

P11 noted, "We have neurodevelopmental practice that recognizes aggressive behavior can be linked to neurodevelopmental disorders such as ADHD, autism, or ODD." P6 described children who

> Have environmental distress, feelings of rejection, shame and anger. It caused emotional exhaustion and stress. Some are emotional regulation difficulties; some are lack of impulse and control. Some are trauma and stress and some modelling behaviors. Some are frustrated with academics; some are lacking consequences.

P11 agreed: "Some have neurodevelopmental factors such as conditions like ADHD or optional defiant disorder. There are social and emotional struggles, difficulty with empathy, impulse control and problem solving."

The fourth idea that emerged with regard to RQ 1 is some preschool lead teachers stated that behavior choice could be from the child's deliberate decision to act

aggressively. They explained different reasons why they felt that way. According to P4,

> Some of them are their personal choice that is a result of influence from their parents. Many of them make this personal choice, but there are some where they find this pleasure in destroying people's things, fighting with each other, bullying each other.

P5 said, "A personal choice because they hardly comprehend the implications of what they are doing. They are like adventurers. They want to discover things. This is compounded for them. They want to see the outcome of it." P6 argued, "It's a simple matter of personal choice. While children do make choices, the decision-making processes are still developing, and they may not fully understand the consequences of the actions." P11 added, "Children's aggressive behavior is a complex issue, and it's a simple matter of personal choice." P11 went on to add, "They make a personal choice to do what they do. It's according to moral reasoning such as, their cultural context of the social influences." P10 declared, "Some children have an act of aggressiveness, and some of the choices they have developmental stage, environmental influence, trauma, and stress. They seem as less of a person or a criminal."

In summary, preschool teachers discussed various ways in which personal choice leads to aggressive behaviors in children. Personal choice seemed to come from various factors, including an aggressive personality, the influence of home and neighborhood, neurological and mental health issues, and, finally, the child's deliberate choice to be aggressive. Preschool children who are engage in aggressive behavior make a personal

choice to do so, teachers in this study believed.

Results for RQ 2

RQ2 asked, "How do preschool teachers describe the acceptance of social conventions in children who engage in aggressive behavior that may trigger ISS and their responses to that level of acceptance?" The results of many interview questions were used to answer this question. These responses contributed to the second theme that children's actions follow someone's rules. The key element in this theme is the rules aggressive children follow may come from a variety of sources and reflect expectations for behavior that are not a teacher's expectations.

For example, lead preschool teachers said children want to be accepted by their peers and so follow the behavior expectations they see in friends. According to P4, "Some of the factors are environmental factors, but the major one is peer pressure like a friend who they associate with." P8 said, "These behaviors are influenced by peer pressure." P4 stated, "It is one of the video games that involves fighting that the child was imitating. That's where he learns how to fight." P11 described the behavior of a student and peer, noting:

> She purposely carried the school bag and threw it back at me, but I couldn't do anything. I just had to pick it up and pat the child. Other imitation, imitating what others are doing because they're exposed to aggressive behaviors from others, such as parents, social media, and peers.

P6 noted: "It's called to manage emotions like anger, frustration or anxiety. Then social

observing and imitating aggressive behaviors from others." P9 agreed, saying,

> A child might be meeting other people, like family members, or their peer groups, or neighbors. Seeing other people in that way might trigger the child to behave in that way too. Children portray that kind of behavior as drama.

P1 reported, "Some of the kids were rejected, telling me that their parents didn't like it. Parents do not want them to get stuff from other people outside."

The second idea that emerged with regard to the theme that children's behavior follows someone's rules is that lead preschool teachers said aggressive behavior in children could be a result of parents' expectations and modeled actions. According to P3, "I can say it's from home, parents, or caregivers. The students might get the problems from home. They do what they see their parents doing or the caregivers. They bring the experience to school." P4 agreed aggressive behavior develops in the child's home, saying:

> Another factor is the environmental factor in how they were brought up. Some of them seem to be aggressive depending on the environment. Your parents tend to come from a family that has issues.

P 4 continued saying:

> Some children's background led to their behavior where they come from. The parents' fighting, divorcing, and breakup are some concerns for children's behaviors. Children try to imitate what their parents did at home. They try to exhibit the kind of character the parents have at home.

P10 noted, “He told me that he saw it from his father, that his father has been beating up his mother at home. Environmental influence, what they see, their family, and peer group relationship.” P8 said, “Some of them are learning from their parents at home, seeing your parents maybe fighting or exchanging words.”

P1 included neighbors in describing out-of-school factors that support children’s aggressive behavior, saying, “Being in a neighborhood and you see your neighbors, how they talk to their parents and how their parents do can them and other kids in the neighborhood do behave. and they allow them to fight. It could also affect the other kids as well.” P2 agreed, noting,

> Around the neighborhood they see these adults who behave this certain way. They tend to behave like that same person too.” P4 summed up the influence of parents and neighbors with, “A lot of children depend on the kind of friends they play with, or their parents are making. Children come to the classroom to fight their friends or abuse them because of what they have seen from their family or friends at home.

The third idea that emerged with regard to RQ2 is that some preschool lead teachers describe the difficulty some children have with obeying classroom rules. P8 stated, “There are a lot of rules. They seem not to respond to the rules.” P2 described rules that seemed reasonable but were not followed by aggressive children:

> In a classroom, there are rules that the children must follow. We have rules in class such as no noise making in class during class periods, no bullying, and no

> use of certain words in class. The rules are not accepted, and they're not being followed by this set of children.

P4 noted, "In the classroom, we have rules like you don't fight with anybody. You don't quit assignments, you don't exchange things, and you don't abuse each other." P7 stated, "Some students genuinely want to follow the rules but need help developing coping mechanisms for dealing with frustrations. It can be very frustrating for the teacher and classmates." P7 continued saying:

> Sometimes language barrier or learning disability can make it harder for them to grasp the expectations. Some aggressive children might understand the rules or struggle to control their impulse in the class. Others might have difficulty processing social cause or interpreting situations correctly. Some students defer to the rules.

P11 continued saying:

> Children with aggressive tendencies have difficulties in understanding and following rules and processes in the classroom due to various reasons like lack of empathy. They fully do not understand or care about how their behaviors affect others. They may feel overwhelmed by rules and processes leading to acting out. When children with aggressive tendencies seem to understand and accept the rules and processes, it's often due to some clear explanations and impulse control.

P9 simply said, "It's a normal thing for a class to have rules and regulations, but not all children do abide by those rules.

The fourth idea that emerged with regard to RQ2 is aggressive children may follow no rules at all. They described a sort of radical freedom in these children to do whatever they feel like at any moment. According to P2, "I've seen students being disobedient to rules and regulations." P3 noted,

> The students might not follow rules, or they might be engaging in off-task activities. Which is inappropriate in some manner. They might be talking a lot of time by making noise. Or even refusing to follow instructions, which is quite disruptive in the classroom.

P6 stated,

> Aggressive children … may be deliberately disobeying rules, like they disobey rules, testing boundaries and challenging authorities' figures. Some manipulate or exploit. Children may try to bend rules to the advantage or take advantage of rules. Some of them understand, but they find it difficult to understand and to comply with.

P11 described children who reject classroom rules, stating,

> When children reject classroom rules, it can manifest in so many ways, such as following directions. If the teacher asks them to do a particular thing, he or she prefers to do what they want and then they're so argumentative. They argue and show defiance. You have intentional rule breaking, and they don't want to listen to you.

P3 noted, "It's sad when they reject classroom rules because these are small children.

You must handle them with care. You just don't start too harsh on them." P3 noted, "Some children might not grow up following rules even in school and at home. The students don't quite understand the rules and the difference between right and wrong."

In summary, preschool teachers described four ways in which aggressive children reject social conventions necessary for a cooperative classroom environment. They noted that aggressive children may be following the implicit rules and expectations of their peers and trying to win their friends' attention, and children may be influenced by the example set by parents and neighbors who are or condone violence. Participants indicated aggressive children may struggle to understand classroom rules or to follow them when they are frustrated by teacher expectations, and participants also noted aggressive children can act as if there were no rules and they are free to do whatever they like, without concern for the consequences. Preschool children struggle with acceptance of social conventions for behavior in the learning environment.

Results for RQ 3

RQ3 asked, "How do preschool teachers describe the understanding of right and wrong in children who engage in aggressive behavior that may trigger ISS and their responses to that level of understanding?" Lead preschool teachers in this study said children's understanding of right and wrong could be influenced by their personalities, abilities, and prior experiences. For example, P5 stated, "A student being able to figure out the right from the wrong can be from the parents. The parents can help and know the future. You have the right to differentiate the right from the wrong for your student." P5

explained, “The ethics, the norms, the rules, the principles that bend the conduct or their behaviors in the society. They learn to adapt to these rules and regulations which reflect their wrong or their sense of rightness and wrongs.” P6 stated, “Most children, even those with aggressive tendencies, can claim basic morals like hitting is bad. Children know what is bad and good.” P7 explained it this way:

> Distinguishing right from wrong depends on his child age and development. Younger children will not fully understand the consequences of their actions. There could be cultural differences in acceptable behavior, too. A student gets into trouble with another student because of her age. It can create a sense of disruption and disrupt the classroom routine. He started getting into physical fights with classmates after numerous interventions and attempts to address the root cause. Suspension became necessary to ensure everyone’s safety.

P8 argued however that what appears to be confusion over a moral choice is actually an expression of willful disregard for rules and social conventions:

> Aggressive children know right from wrong. Most of these aggressive children choose by choice. It’s right or wrong or some of them don’t know it’s because if you see if they destroy anything and maybe you’re going to like to do as if you’re going close to the person you see, but the child acting remorseful but the one that’s doing it purposely, you’ll see their reaction. He knows that what he’s doing is wrong. What a child did or what their classmate did was wrong. They don’t have to repeat what’s the same mistake the classmate was making.

P11 said, “Some of them know right from wrong but choose to ignore and choose to overlook whatever you’re doing. They have family dynamics which involve the parents, caregivers and the behaviors to separate people.” P3 believed some children don’t understand what is right or wrong, reporting, “This student was shouting at another child. I told him to stop shouting at the child, and the child just looked at me angry as if I said something which was wrong.” P10 illustrated, “Children know it’s wrong and what is right.”

Lead preschool teachers said the understanding of right and wrong in children could be a factor that contributes to children being incapable of moral decision-making. According to P2, “They don’t make a personal choice. It’s not intentional. They’re being influenced because children can’t control their impulses.” P11 stated:

> While children do make choices, their decision-making processes are still developing, and they may not fully understand the consequences of their actions. Children are still learning and developing, and they do not fully comprehend complex moral concepts or struggle to impulse control.

P2 stated, “Children can’t control their impulses on their own.” P2 noted, “Most times some of the things are wrong. They don’t even know they are wrong. They’re not even aware.” P4 believed,

> They are so aggressive. They tend to throw tantrums. They are destroying things. Fighting with peers in the classroom. They assume this is the right thing for them to do. There are some children who know what is right, and they promise you

> they're not going to do it again.

P5 indicated, "Children find it difficult to differentiate between right and wrong. The teachers are there to mentor them, to direct them on the principles of right and wrong. They learn as they grow, they grow to understand." P6 stated, Many aggressive children can understand the concept, the concept of right and wrong to some extent." P9 declared:

> It's kind of a little bit difficult for them to differentiate between right and wrong. But if they're wrong, peers will be frowning and sad. Make them believe that everyone needs to do things right so that you have friends, you have peers to talk to them. But when you are doing things wrongly, peers will fear you and will not even want to be your friend. So those kinds of talks might stop bullying.

P4 argued, "They feel like it's right for them to behave that way."

In summary, preschool teachers described ways aggressive children do not understand right and wrong in the classroom environment. They noted aggressive children may need adults' guidance in right and wrong and moral decision-making. Preschool children struggle with understanding of right and wrong, which can contribute to aggressive behavior in the learning environment.

Results for RQ 4

RQ4 asked, "How do preschool teachers describe concern for safety as part of their response to children who engage in aggressive behavior that may trigger ISS and their response in light of safety concerns?" The results of many interview questions were used to answer this question. These responses contributed to the fourth theme about

teachers' safety concern.

In general, lead preschool teachers said concern for safety is linked to the fact that aggression is scary. P3 stated, "The aggressive child disturbs other children in class. The children in the classroom are in fear of aggressive children." P1 explained, "I had to stop someone in the classroom. Other kids were very scared as well and other teachers were scared." P7 described an incident in which a child "was in suspension. Some classmates felt scared that he might return and lash out again, and this created a tense of environment for a while." P9 declared,

> Concerning safety, the children in the class might cause them some kind of physical harm. It can lead to fear in the children like being with or being 'on the list' of aggressive children. It would stop learning in the class because the children will fear what the aggressive child will do next.

P7 reported:

> The stress of dealing with aggressive behaviors can take a toll on the teacher. It can be emotionally draining and take away time from teaching other students. Just imagine constantly having to break up fights or redirect negative behaviors for him.

P11 noted, "They don't pay attention to whether it affects others or not."

Some preschool teachers said concern for safety is part of their response to children who engage in aggressive behavior because safety is important in the environment. P10 believed action to curtail aggression "will increase safety risk because

of allowing an aggressive child. There is a lack of accountability because if you fail to address aggressive behavior, it may send a message to outsiders, and the behavior is not acceptable." P1 reported, "I will just get closer to [my student] so other kids can feel safe, so they won't be scared at home and talk to their parents about it. I know [my safety] is important and other kids' safety is important." P7 revealed, "We put measures in place to ensure if the student is increasingly aggressive, we isolate them to ensure that other students are safe." P8 described, "[Other students] will be saved from a particular child destroying their things, causing fights or bullying them. I got him protected and I feel like he's safer there."

P4 described safety from another angle, saying, "My safety concern is I don't like him expelling the child. There's a way of not helping children that are aggressive to express their feelings." P6 declared, "The academic setbacks expelling the child missed class, you know, missing classes and assignment can lead to failing behind the peers." P9 believed,

> [Expulsion] might increase the child's level of anger, which might not really be good because the child will not think he or she is being expelled for aggressive behavior. Suspension is not the best option. It's addressing the child's needs.

P8 stated,

> For the aggressive child, the safety there is learn instead of him to continue with the behavior. The child will be prevented from causing a fight or continuing with the behaviors. The safety is the child stopped with the behaviors he was

possessing.

P7 noted, “As the child makes positive changes in behaviors, he benefited everyone in the classroom by creating a safer and more positive learning environment.” P3 said, “You can provide guidance, mentorship to the child, or neutral directions, and the approach could stop the child from engaging in aggressive behavior. You must tell them the importance of being a good child.” P4 explained, “At [my school,] we’ve not been given the authority to expel any child. The child is back in school, and I train the child with such behavior not to repeat again.” P11 expressed the idea,

> If suspension and expel are not options, teachers and schools can consider following guidance and interventions to help an aggressive child behave better in school, develop individualized plans that address the child’s specific needs, goals and strategies for improvement with the counselling and the therapy.

P3 stated, “[We are training these small children to become responsible adults in future and if we don’t shape their future, they will really be troublesome.]”

In summary, preschool teachers acknowledged aggression is scary and the safety of other children and the adults in the classroom is a top priority. At the same time, the safety of the aggressive child is also important and safety includes preserving the child’s time in school and avoiding simply removing the child. Teachers in this study recognized that they have a responsibility to preserve a calm learning atmosphere for all children and at the same time support the aggressive child in learning how to manage their anger and control their emotions so they can participate fully in the social and instructional life of

the classroom.

Additional Findings

Several findings that described teachers' actions in response to child aggression were not associated with any RQ but were important to address. These findings included techniques teachers used to deescalate aggressive behavior and their opinions on the usefulness of ISS in shaping children's behavior. These additional findings suggest lead preschool teachers in this study feel responsible for shaping children's behavior in prosocial ways and that they cannot accomplish that goal when the child is suspended from school.

For example, teachers described in the moment actions they take to guide or redirect a student. P10 reported, "I must redirect and reinforce the children. Don't shout, 'Don't do this thing, don't do that, don't do this!' They will at least build trust with you. Then I give them support. I act like their parents in school." P1 described talking with aggressive children privately, saying, "You tell them the disadvantages of what they are doing and what we can come up with and we can advise them." Even so, teachers recognized some children simply may be unable to manage their outbursts. P11 described, "Children will struggle to understand the consequences. They have limited empathy. It might lead them to focus on their needs and disregarding the impacts on others."

Teachers indicated they may need to enlist the help of others in shaping the behavior of aggressive children. For example, P11 expressed, "I'll report to the director

or the head of staff and to the parents. We work together so we can identify the underlying causes of the child's behavior such as anxiety, frustration or difficulty with impulse control." P7 believed, "Individualized behaviors plans can be created to address the root causes of their creation, and social emotional learning programs can teach them coping mechanisms for dealing with anger and frustration." P11 agreed having a written plan in place is essential, saying,

> Teachers make sure they have a behavioral support plan, including strategies for managing emotions and impulse control, to provide counselling and therapy for the child, and then offer additional support and accommodation in the classroom to help the child succeed.

P7 summed up the need for involvement of all adults connected to the child, suggesting, "Collaboration between teachers, parents and counsellor is very crucial in creating a supportive network for these students."

Teachers in this study took responsibility for knowing how to help aggressive children become more prosocial. P1 said, "There are many ways to correct a child when he or she is aggressive. There are many ways to correct it." P11 noted resources are available to teachers, indicating, "I do online ongoing training and support to the child providing choices, autonomy, and teaching alternative behaviors such as reinforce alternative behaviors to learn aggressive ones. They are communication skills, problem solving strategies, and emotional regulation techniques." P9 offered a solution-oriented approach, saying, "The possible solution is to identify the source of the behavior and try

solving the problem without suspension." P7 agreed, saying "There are many positive interventions before resulting in suspension."

Teachers in this study rejected ISS as a viable method of managing children who exhibit aggressive behavior. P9 stated, "I don't like suspending a child. The school will suspend children. The child needs extra support and attention. Suspension will not work, because that child will be emotional." P10 explained, "The child who is disconnected from school and lacks positive outlets, then the child feels ashamed, rejected, and has lost self-esteem. The long-term consequences are the child's educational career perspective and well-being." P9 noted ISS disrupts social connections that are essential to promotion of prosocial behavior, saying, "If you suspend a child, he or she is going to miss the seatmate." Teachers recognized that aggression is a serious problem. As P11 declared, "For the aggressive child to bring physical harm to themselves or others, potential for emotional trauma and psychological distress to others and themselves. They have the risks of social isolation or stigma from peers." Yet, as P9 said, "If a child is suspended, it's not good." No teacher in this study supported ISS.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

As stated in Chapter 3, the credibility of a study is a measure of its accuracy and truthfulness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To establish credibility, the transcription files were reviewed for accuracy by each participant. I used a reflective journal to help manage my own biases and opinions. To establish the transferability of my data, I assisted the reader in determining if my findings are relevant to their context or situation

by using thick descriptions and clear explanations of the setting, participants, and methods in this study. My reflective journal helped me present thick descriptions. To establish dependability, I used the process of reflexivity to consciously acknowledge and examine the preconceptions as a researcher and acknowledge them to establish dependability. I followed described processes faithfully, which help to establish consistency of results. To provide confirmability, I deliberately avoided making any comments during interviews except for the purpose of clarifying understanding. My analysis of the data started with participants reviewing their transcripts for accuracy. I coded the data twice on two separate occasions over two quarters and then compared coding results and resolved differences in the two coding schemes before finalizing coding presented in the study. While writing the results, I supported confirmability by using the interview transcripts and direct quotes from participants to accurately depict preschool teachers' perspectives regarding children's aggressive behavior and in-school suspension.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I presented a description of the study's setting and conditions, as well as demographics and characteristics of participation in the study. During data analysis, I combined categories based on reoccurring themes and group codes into categories. By comparing the coded units, 18 categories were developed, which further led to five themes: children's actions reflect a behavior choice, children's actions follow someone's rules, children's understanding of right and wrong, teachers' safety concerns,

and teachers' actions in response to child aggression. Results indicated teachers expect aggressive children to follow norms and expectations of peers or parents but that only a small number of aggressive children are believed by teachers to be completely ungoverned by any rules. Teachers in this study indicated aggressive children may have a flawed understanding of right and wrong and may be incapable of moral decision-making. Teachers in this study were supportive of children who exhibit aggressive behavior but also recognized their responsibility to maintain safety in the classroom. Teachers did not support expulsion or suspension, reasoning that isolating the child away from school does more harm than good. Evidence of trustworthiness was provided to support the validity of these results. In Chapter 5, I summarize the findings, discuss recommendations, and describe the potential impact for positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore perspectives of preschool teachers working in childcare centers in one city in Texas regarding children's aggressive behavior that may lead to ISS as a response to that behavior. To achieve this, I conducted a basic qualitative study using individual interviews via Zoom and transcribed interview audio files using an automated transcription tool. I interviewed 11 preschool teachers who identified many characteristics and factors that were common among aggressive children, including that aggressive actions may reflect a behavior choice and may conform to rules and expectations from outside the school, children have an imperfect understanding of right and wrong, and teachers' concerns for safety guide their responses to aggressive behavior. Teachers reported suspension and expulsion of aggressive children does not help those children and may lead to long term problems for them. In Chapter 5, I provide information regarding my interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications, and conclusion.

Interpretation of Findings

A key finding in this study was that lead preschool teachers said an aggressive personality could be a factor that contributes to children's aggressive behaviors in the environment. For example, P2 described, "A student in the classroom acts nicely one day, then the next day the students come into the classroom throwing things at another student." Hadley and Dickinson (2020) found some preschool students find it difficult to communicate their thoughts, to get along with their classmates, understand social cues,

and students' achievements in the learning environment that cause negative behaviors. Perry and Ostrov (2019) argued aggressive behavior is shaped by the environment, and that preschool students emulate aggressive models. For example, preschool students who watch violent television programs may become more aggressive themselves (Giordano et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is little research on temper tantrums, even though temper tantrums may be the first indication of an ongoing behavior problem of a preschool student. Among 1,490 preschool children between 3 and 5, most (83.7%) experienced a tantrum in the previous month (Bani Salameh et al., 2021). Tantrum is a non-directed expression of the change of behaviors such as aggression (Yu-Lefler et al., 2022). Preschool students can become frustrated for different reasons (Muller et al., 2019) and may not have the words to express their needs and wants that lead to feelings of frustration (Sette et al., 2019).

Another key finding in this study was that lead preschool teachers said children want to be accepted by their peers and so follow the behavior and expectations they see in friends. For example, P4 described, "Some of the factors are environmental factors, but the major one is peer pressure like a friend who they associate with." Teachers, caregivers, parents, and others may exhibit physically aggressive behaviors that are then copied by young children (Ersan, 2020). According to Martinsone et al. (2022), people learn from observing others' behavior, especially preschool students. The most important people in a child's life are their parents; domestic violence has a 45% to 60% rate of co-occurrence among preschool students, which is 15% higher than the average, in homes

where violence exists between parents or partners (Boserup et al., 2020). If preschool students witness violent acts at home, preschool students will likely be physically harmed too. Boserup et al. (2020) reported that 40% of children who witness domestic violence are also victims of abuse themselves at the hands of a parent. Preschool students who are victims of child abuse tend to demonstrate significant behavior difficulties in school (Brand et al., 2019). Preschool students who grow up in families in which one or both parents are incarcerated face adversity at an early age, and these challenges may lead to disruptive behavior in school (Burak & Wachino, 2023).

A third key finding in this study was that lead preschool teachers in this study said children's understanding of right and wrong may not be fully developed. For instance, P2 noted, "Most times some of the things are wrong. They don't even know they are wrong. They're not even aware." Miller and Tolan (2019) found that in the classroom environment proactive aggression is commonplace. A preschool student pushes another student, takes another student's toy, or hits another student because they want something or some privilege the other student possesses (Perry & Ostrov, 2019). When a preschooler commits proactive aggression toward another child, they are aware they intend to harm the other child, but out of a feeling of entitlement, not out of anger (McRae et al., 2022). Any sense an action may be morally wrong is not part of their decision-making.

A further finding in this study was that lead preschool teachers were concerned for safety in the classroom when aggressive children were present. For instance, P7

described an incident in which a child "was in suspension. Some classmates felt scared that he might return and lash out again, and this created a tense environment for a while." Zelinski (2019) reported during the school year of 2017-2018 in two southwestern cities, 702 out of 3,812 preschool students were disciplined for aggressive behavior with ISS and another 265 preschool students with OSS. Physically aggressive behavior among preschool students is an ongoing concern in the learning environment (Correia et al., 2021). Preschool students' behavior often challenges teachers (Gaspar et al., 2022); however, teachers often respond to challenging behavior in ways that remove the child from the classroom but do not address the behavior itself (Garrity et al., 2019). As P7 noted, "[Teachers] put measures in place to ensure if the student is increasingly aggressive we isolate them to ensure that other students are safe."

A final key finding in this study was that some preschool teachers said concern for safety includes supporting the aggressive child in receiving an education and learning prosocial ways of engaging in the classroom. P4 said, "My safety concern is I don't like him expelling the child. There's a way of not helping children that are aggressive to express their feelings." This finding echoes the work of Garrity et al. (2019), who indicated exclusionary practices themselves an ongoing problem in schools. School resource officers and zero tolerance policies are defended by supporters as necessary to maintain safety and security in schools, and as deterrents to crime and violence (Watson & Stevenson, 2022) but do not account for the fact that preschool students may not have the words to express their needs and wants that lead to feelings of frustration (Sette et al.,

2019). In addition, preschool students' lack of understanding of consequences might lead to impulsive behavior that is not controllable (Ersan, 2020). Preschool students often do not have control over their behavior and cannot control their actions and thoughts (Bass & Childers, 2019). Some preschool children with behavioral challenges receive isolated instruction through intervention programs that have a pull-out approach (Zinsser et al., 2019). Instead of protecting preschool students from trauma, schools exclude those who have experienced varying levels of trauma, those with mental health issues, and children from dysfunctional families (Anderson et al., 2019). Teachers in this study expressed commitment to helping aggressive children manage their behavior in the classroom and used suspension and expulsion as a last resort.

Harvey et al. (2001) identified differences in young children's commitment to aggressive acts across four domains: personal, social-conventional, moral, and prudential. In this study, lead preschool teachers agreed the reasons for preschool children's included that children's actions reflect a behavior choice, children's actions follow someone's rules, children have an imperfect understanding of right and wrong, teachers have safety concerns, and teachers act in response to child aggression. Participants who took part in the study indicated children who exhibit aggressive behavior may deliberately choose to be aggressive but that they also may be affected by personality issues, mental health problems, and negative influences in their homes and neighborhoods. Participants expressed understanding of the issues that cause children's aggression and a commitment to helping these children rather than excluding them from the classroom.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study was that interviews were not conducted in person, but, because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, over Zoom. As a result, some interviews were disrupted. For example, two participants who had scheduled interviews did not show up on Zoom. I emailed one of these participants and found the problem was with their internet connection. We rescheduled it for the same day at a later time, and we completed that interview. One participant had a family emergency, and the participant did not join me in Zoom. I emailed the participant and got no response. Other interviews were interrupted by people talking in the background and pets barking. These distractions led to some participants having to pause telling other family members to go into another space to talk or take the pet outside.

Another limitation of this study lack of gender balance among participants in that there were only four males but seven females. This limitation was likely unavoidable because there is a critical lack of male teachers in the early childhood workplace (Eldred et al., 2022). Adrangi and Jeszenszki (2025) indicated a lack of male teachers may affect how behavior problems are regarded and addressed in the preschool classroom.

Recommendations

One recommendation for future research is to replicate this study in other regions of the state or in other regions in the United States by compare attitudes toward aggressive behavior in different types of preschools such as independent, public elementary school ones, or family childcare homes. Participants consistently described

majority of the aggressive behaviors from preschool children come from the home and community environment that preschool children bring into the classroom, along with other factors. Educators participating in these studies may not accurately reflect actual classroom practices (An & Horn, 2022).

A second recommendation is a more in-depth investigation of preschool children's aggressive behavior and ISS in an actual preschool classroom setting. Entering the classroom and observing this case study on a deeper level regarding preschool children's aggressive behaviors could help expand the understanding of preschool children's aggressive behavior and in-school suspension. In addition, further research is needed on what happens to the class when a child is suspended or expelled. The social dynamics of the group may shift, so a child may emerge as an aggressor to fill the gap or the teacher focus negative attention on the child who is the next most-troublesome student. This study revealed the preschool children's aggressive behaviors repeated after returning to the classroom after being suspended, which may create another shift in classroom dynamics.

A final recommendation is for future research that includes the perspectives of male teachers in comparison to those of female teachers. Aggressive behavior is more common in boys than in girls, which may lead to a gender effect in teacher expectations of students by gender. Similarly, students may believe they have more latitude for aggressive behavior with teachers of one gender or another. The social dynamics of a preschool classroom surrounding children's aggressive behavior may be influenced by

the gender of students and teachers.

Implications

Preschool teachers maintain a very close relationship with children who exhibited aggressive behavior problems despite experiencing challenging behavior themselves in the study. This finding implies that, even with aggressive behaviors of preschool children, preschool teachers include and educate everyone. It is essential that teachers be supported in assisting the aggressive child to move beyond their self-centeredness and grow in ability to show empathy and concern for others (see Jeon et al., 2019). Preschool teachers should also receive training when dealing with preschool children in the classroom environment. Training may increase preschool teachers' awareness of the emotional needs of children and help them use effective techniques in dealing with preschool children's aggressive behaviors in the classroom.

Administrators of childcare programs may need to reframe children's aggressive behavior so they can support teachers in the child-focused guidance teachers in this study described. ISS and expulsion were not endorsed by these teachers, so administrators may need to work with teachers to avoid removing children from the classroom, rather than taking the expedient action of ISS. Administrators should increase their understanding of the causes of children's aggressive attitudes and behaviors, and how the cultivation of positive relationships described by preschool teachers in this study can reduce problem behaviors. At the same time, administrators must recognize the strain teachers experience in these situations and do more to support teachers. This support may take the form of

additional training in behavior management, including financing pursuit of certification or special endorsement to ensure teachers are prepared for the challenge of aggressive behavior. In addition, preschool program administrators might also find it worth considering intervention programs that provide preschool children who exhibit aggressive behavior with strategic guidance without needing them to apply ISS.

Such programs and supports require monetary investment that may be beyond the means of many independently-funded childcare programs. This suggests that how childcare is funded and the costs of intervention and teacher training programs in particular should be examined by state agencies and legislatures. Providing all children with a good beginning to their education is important, and preschool teachers in this study demonstrated their willingness to provide that good beginning by keeping children who exhibit aggressive behavior in their classrooms and providing them with. Teachers cannot do this alone, however, but require more support.

Conclusion

The problem that I addressed through this study is the high rate of ISS among preschool students in response to children's aggressive behavior. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore perspectives of preschool teachers working in childcare centers in one city in Texas regarding children's aggressive behavior that may lead to ISSas a response to that behavior. I used an interview of 11 questions as my data collection instrument. I recruited 11 preschool teachers who I interviewed via Zoom or telephone; audio files were transcribed using an automated transcription tool. I analyzed

the data through in vivo coding to develop emergent themes. Themes were derived from the conceptual framework regarding children's agency in choosing behavior, their application of social rules, their understanding of right and wrong, and teachers' concern for safety. An additional theme of teacher actions in response to aggressive behavior emerged.

Results indicated preschool teachers expect aggressive children to follow the norms and expectations of peers or parents but only a small number of aggressive children are believed by teachers to be completely ungoverned by any rules. Preschool teachers in this study reported aggressive children may have a flawed understanding of right and wrong and may be incapable of moral decision-making. Teachers in this study were supportive of children who exhibit aggressive behavior but also recognized their responsibility to maintain safety in the classroom. Teachers did not support expulsion or ISS, reasoning that isolating the child away from school does more harm than good. This study was important and worth doing because children's aggressive behavior may trigger various punishments, including ISS. The insight provided in this study regarding how teachers think about and respond to children's aggressive behavior can inform management of aggressive behavior. Positive social change will result from these findings when teachers are supported in guiding children towards prosocial behavior and in avoiding disruptions in children's education caused by ISS. Increased support for children and the preschool teachers who work with them may lead to a decrease in ISS among preschool children and an increase in student learning and socioemotional

development. The positive environment and learning that results may reduce behavioral disruptions in school and increase school success.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. We are going to be talking about aggressive behavior in children that triggers in-school suspension. Tell me a bit about children's aggressive behavior that you encounter in the classroom…
2. What are the reasons some children engage in aggressive behavior that may trigger in- school suspension?
3. Tell me your thoughts about children's decision to be aggressive. Do you think they make a personal choice to do what they do?
    a. Can you give me an example?
4. There are a lot of rules and processes in any classroom. Tell me about aggressive children's understanding of those rules and processes. Do they seem to understand and accept them or not?
    a. Can you think of a time when a child seemed to reject classroom rules?
5. How about aggressive children's ability to tell right from wrong. Tell me about how much you think they can tell the difference between right and wrong?
    a. Can you think of an example of this?
6. What do you think are the key factors that make a particular child act aggressively?
7. Can you give me an example of a time when you suspended or expelled a child or when you really wanted to?
8. What do you think the possible effects are of suspending a child or of expelling

them?

   a. Explain a bit more about the effects on yourself, the effects on other children in the class, and the effects on the aggressive child…
   b. Can you give me an example?

9. What do you think are the possible effects of NOT suspending or expelling a child who is aggressive?
   a. Explain a bit more about your safety concerns for yourself, the children in the class, and for the aggressive child…
   b. Can you give me an example?
10. What sorts of guidance or intervention do you think might help an aggressive child behave better, if teachers are not permitted to suspend or expel them?
   a. Tell me what you've tried…
11. What more can you tell me that we haven't already talked about when it comes to aggressive behavior in children that triggers in-school suspension?