Perceptions of Practitioners in a Voluntary Prekindergarten on Probation

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Perceptions of Practitioners in a Voluntary Prekindergarten Program on Probation

by

Susan Weber

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education
University of South Florida

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my husband, Jonathan Weber. He stood by me, encouraged me, wiped my tears, and loved with each struggle and achievement. I also dedicate this to my children, Jonathan Cameron Weber and Brooke Madison Weber for motivating me and supporting me as I tried to do too many things and once. In addition, I dedicate this project to early childhood professionals who face conflict with policy and procedures. The best things in life are never easy.
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to describe and explain the perspectives and beliefs that practitioners have about prekindergarten in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program unable to meet minimal accountability requirements. The exploratory questions included: What are the beliefs and perceptions about effective and appropriate early childhood education among practitioners in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program on probation? And in what ways does probation influence practitioners’ perceptions and beliefs about early childhood education? I used participants from a school where I conducted a pilot study. My data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews, resumes, my research reflective journal, and the centers program improvement plan. Social constructivism was applied to understand the participants’ perceptions and beliefs of Voluntary Prekindergarten Program. The findings indicated the practitioners and administrators in a Voluntary Prekindergarten not meeting readiness requirements believe the need for programs to have systems of accountability. They believe accountability is important; however, they believe holding programs accountable for a test at the beginning of kindergarten is ineffective. In addition, the findings denoted more information and more action is needed to accurately conclude approved Voluntary Prekindergarten programs are meeting all five components of the criteria in Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V. The findings denoted further studies are necessary to assist practitioners to understand the importance of teaching children at where they are developmentally and just beyond. The amount of time that is offered in the Voluntary Prekindergarten programs needs to be examined, especially in the summertime.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

What happens to a child in the first five years establishes the foundation for lifetime learning. How a child is taught in the early years is critical to his/her subsequent school success because that initial experience can either establish a foundation for a strong or fragile start. With positive guidance and powerful experiences, the possibilities of optimal achievement may be realized. Every child deserves to have access to high quality learning contexts that promote these ideal outcomes. According to research (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), quality education is dependent on low teacher/child ratios, small group sizes, extensive teacher preparation and education, and teacher experience.

Since I began working with young children, conceptualizations on how to best prepare children for primary school have greatly transformed. Some of that transformation occurred at the start of the 21st century, which brought marked changes in how the public views preschool education. There was a national effort to expand access to preschool education as research supported the benefits of young children beginning school prior to kindergarten to increase academic achievement (Belfield & Garcia, 2014; Brown, 2013; Dotterer et al., 2013; Ebbeck, Teo, Tan, & Goh, 2014). In 1995, Georgia sparked this national effort, becoming the first state to provide a universal state-funded program for pre-kindergarten children (Swiniarski, 2014).

I have worked in the early childhood field for over twenty years. I can remember talking about the upcoming Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) mandate with my peers. It was clear that
directors and teachers were both concerned and excited about the change. It was a time where many providers felt a sense of pride because the government was beginning to realize the importance of their profession. It was also a time of apprehension because the mandate would bring accountability, a new requirement for the preschool field that had always been driven by a focus on child development rather than predetermined outcomes. Children entering kindergarten had been tested upon entry for nearly a decade, but the VPK mandate would now connect the preschool to the test results and use the outcomes as a measure of quality. I remember speaking to a few directors about these reforms, and they would say we are just going to do what we always do because we believe in the power of play. A few years later the same directors voiced their concern with not meeting the accountability requirements. They said they needed to be more like a kindergarten for children to pass the kindergarten assessment. I was motivated to learn more about what happens to a program when a center does not meet accountability requirements and to learn more about their training and practices. There was a need to understand as the results could aid in informing local practices.

A preschool center approved to teach Voluntary Prekindergarten can offer a free prekindergarten experience for children who are four-years old on or before September 1st. The programs offer an opportunity to provide a seamless transition from the preschool years to kindergarten. If providers offered learning experiences for young children to gain the foundational skills needed to succeed, preschools would provide a valuable resource to the community. In order to access services for a child, parents/guardians just need to provide a center with a voucher from the local Early Learning Coalition (i.e., the agency responsible for delivering services) as a reimbursement promise to the approved program from the Department of Education. In order for programs to continue to receive the subsidies, 70 percent of children
who leave the program and enter kindergarten must be able to pass the administered kindergarten screening. Programs that are not able to reach 70 percent are placed on probation and are at risk for losing the funding. The use of scores as a way to determine quality of a classroom and/or a program has been a prominent practice within the Florida educational system since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (Act, 2002). The screening is currently being implemented as the evaluation tool for both assessment and accountability.

Child assessment and program accountability are vital in any educational system. Child assessment provides the foundation for examining gains, identifying individual needs, creating lesson plans, and instructing with specific goals (Brown, 2013; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Spodek & Saracho, 2014). Program accountability contributes to the effectiveness of plans and for the progression of individual goals (Stipek; 2006; Spodek and Saracho, 2014). However, neither accountability nor assessment are simplistic processes (Comber, 2013). There are components of both assessment and accountability that need careful attention for successful implementation in the educational realm (Fuller & Skidmore, 2014). According to social constructivist theory a complex part of education involves the processes of teaching and learning (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). When individual assessment and system accountability are focused on the developmental growth of a child and to how teachers teach they can provide powerful information to incite change and build paths for improvement. Improvement leads to higher quality, and higher quality leads to enhanced outcomes (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Educational programs should be held accountable to ensure children are educated and to ensure they have the opportunity to reach their potential. According to Brooks and Brooks (1993), how teachers teach young children is a strong variable in the outcome of learning. From a social constructivist perspective idealized educational outcomes are not achieved through the diffusion of knowledge
as truths (i.e., hard facts, rote memorization), but rather learning occurs through construction, previous experiences, and social discourse (Fosnot, 2013).

In the early childhood field the outcomes of the program are commonly designed to teach children the skills needed to begin primary education successfully and to have long-term school achievement (Dotterer, Burchinal, Bryant, Early, & Pianta, 2013; Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligini, Ritchie, Howes, & Karoly, 2008; Jay, Knaus, & Hesterman, 2014; Ma, Nelson, Shen, & Krenn, 2014). A common controversy in prekindergarten is the varied differences in what the specific skills are needed for a young child to be ready for kindergarten. Dewey (1938/1998), believed that young children need a foundation for learning before acquiring academic concepts and before young children could take those concepts and make meaning from the new knowledge.

During the years I taught preschool children, accountability had a different connotation that was driven by teachers’ perspectives on the process of preparing children for kindergarten. As a preschool classroom teacher I tracked progress through observation, anecdotal records, checklists, work samples, and assessments, creating a portfolio. I used these multiple data sources to evaluate the child and plan for lessons and activities. My evaluation of the child was shared with parents, but the portfolio would not follow the child to kindergarten. I was ignorant to the success of each child upon transitioning to kindergarten. There was no checklist or report card given to me to inform me on my role as each child’s first teacher. I remember often being curious if I was doing everything I could to prepare my students for primary school.

Fifteen years later, forty states were providing state funds for pre-kindergarten programs. Research indicated in 2001 only 15% of four-year-olds were enrolled in state or federally funded preschools, and the majority of those were enrolled in Head Start (Barnett & Carolan, 2013). According to Barnett and Carolan (2013), currently 30% of four-year-olds are enrolled in state
funded pre-kindergarten programs nationwide, almost double the numbers served by Head Start. With this rise in preschool attendance and state and federal monies supporting early education, additional research was needed to monitor progress in preschools. With the support of the Foundation for Child Development and the U.S. Department of Education to the Center of Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes, the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) began to publish yearly reports on state funded preschool programs. NIEER’s preschool report card tracks the state funded programs with ten benchmarks. According to Barnett and Carolan (2013), the benchmarks are quality indicators that include:

- The lead teacher has earned at least a bachelor’s degree;
- Preschool teachers must have training that specifically prepares them for teaching young preschool children;
- Assistants in the classroom must have earned a Child Development Associate or a degree equivalent;
- Each year teachers earn at least 15 hour of specialized in service training;
- Class sizes are limited to 20 children or less;
- Teachers/Assistants have ten children or less per staff member;
- Early Learning Standards specified by the National Goals Panel;
- Able to offer services for health screening and referrals;
- Offer at least one meal during the daily program;
- Preschool programs are monitored for quality at least every five years. (Barnett & Carolyn, 2013, pp. 7-8)

The State of Preschool Yearbook that NIEER provides contributes to the overall picture of state funded early childhood programs in the nation. The report provides an evaluation of the
states preschools by scoring each state with a number between one and ten. This score could be viewed as a measure of quality. However, measuring quality is a complex task, and even operationalizing quality elicits contentious debate in the field. Throughout this paper, I use the standards of developmentally appropriate practice created by the National Association for the Education of Young Children as my reference point to gauge quality. I believe developmentally appropriate practices offers exemplar recommendations to early childhood specialists and those that monitor and assess them. The recommendations can be individualized to meet the individual needs of young children. The recommendations include: “1) creating a caring community of learners, 2) teaching to enhance development and learning, 3) planning curriculum to achieve important goals, 4) assessing development and learning, and 5) establishing reciprocal relationships” (Copple & d Bredekamp, 2009, p. 16). These guidelines emanate from a belief that learning occurs through shared social constructs within real world experiences. The recommendations may be considered general to some and could be broadly interpreted. How the implementation of these practices are applied in the classroom setting needs to be monitored but that monitoring should be accomplished through multi-modalities. Assessment and accountability is needed as a part of Florida’s early childhood pre-kindergarten programs to ensure the dollars are well spent (Belfield & Garcia, 2014; Brown, 2013; Dotterer et al., 2013; Ebbeck et al., 2014).

Florida has been a leader in increasing enrollment in state funded preschools since 2005, serving 78% of 4-year-olds as part of the efforts to improve school readiness upon kindergarten entry. According the 2013 NIEER report card, Florida is ranked second in the nation in its ability to offer access to early education (Barnett & Carolan, 2013). Programs are offered in every county in the state, and there is no income eligibility for families. Remarkably, Florida
does not rank well on the NIEER report card, earning only three out of the ten quality benchmark indicators in the 2013 school year (Barnett & Carolan, 2013). The three benchmarks include comprehensive state early learning standards, maximum class size of 20 or lower, and monitoring through site visits. But what information does that score tell the public? According to NIEER, the processes of assessing the programs in each state are informed by the analysis of questionnaires completed by providers. A comparison between NIEER’s quality assessment process and Florida’s mechanism of measuring program quality highlights how data sources can differentially inform assessment outcomes and exemplifies the complexity of gauging quality when there is not consensus in the parameters used.

Whereas NIEER reports progress by assessing the number of programs who meet the quality benchmark indicators in the state, Florida’s means of assessing programs takes another approach. The current trend in State-funded prekindergarten programs in Florida is to evaluate the preschool centers approved to offer families Voluntary Prekindergarten based on a kindergarten readiness score. The kindergarten readiness score is created from the score children earn during an assessment administered in the first 30 days of school. The readiness score is the statewide indicator that children are ready for school. The assessment is known as the Florida Kindergarten However, previous use of the screener was limited to determining the child’s developmental functioning (Voluntary Prekindergarten, 2012). In order for teachers to make informed decisions about where the child should be placed in kindergarten. In the current context, the kindergarten screen has high stakes implications for the preschools since it serves as a key measure of their quality.

The chosen method of both assessment and accountability for Florida’s Voluntary Prekindergarten is calculated from a readiness score. The appraisal of a school from an
assessment score on a group of students is known as high stakes testing and is a long debated practice in the education field (DellaMattera, 2010; Ishimine & Tayler, 2014; Papay, 2011; Stipek, 2006; Zigler, Gilliam, & Barnett, 2011). Teaching children is complex, which makes accountability multifaceted. Various factors influence the intricate issues that can contribute to a child’s developmental level. These include: parenting styles, eating patterns, exposures to stress, environmental quality, and heredity factors (Kirp, 2009; Rose, 2010). When a child enters a classroom, he or she comes with multiple differences and varying experiences, creating a unique baseline of abilities established from experience and exposure.

Since, children come to prekindergarten at differing developmental levels, holding a program accountable for a score from a group of children who attended a center and who entered the public school system is worthy of study. It continues to be important to debate high stakes testing, especially as it pertains to young children. My interest in assessment and accountability was directed at a preschool program that did not earn the readiness score required by the State mandate. My attention to the practitioners derived from a need to document their experiences by describing their perspectives and beliefs of working in a program not meeting the accountability requirements.

Statement of the Problem

On January 1, 2005, the first Voluntary Prekindergarten programs opened after Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V (See Appendix A) was appended to the Florida Constitution (The 2014 Florida Statues, 2014). Voluntary Prekindergarten was added to the Florida Constitution after voters supported a proposal brought on by a social movement to improve education for young children. The social movement began after David Lawrence, a former newspaper entrepreneur, and Alex Penelas, then Mayor of Miami-Dade County, spearheaded a statewide campaign to
bring a universal prekindergarten program to Florida (Hartle & Ghazvini, 2014). The initiative guaranteed every four-year-old child born on or before September 1st of each school year opportunity to access to a free prekindergarten program (Florida House of Representatives, 2011). The goal of Voluntary Prekindergarten was to ensure that every child entering school would be “ready for kindergarten.” Lawrence and Penelas were able to collect 722,000 petitions and to raise 1.8 million dollars (Hartle & Ghazvini, 2014). Their dedication was considered a success after Florida voters approved the amendment in 2002.

Listed in the mandate were five requirements that providers must meet and maintain to be an approved Voluntary Prekindergarten program they included: (1) ensuring the program applied developmentally appropriate practices, (2) ensuring children were exposed to early literacy, (3) ensuring children were prepared for kindergarten, (4) ensuring Voluntary Prekindergarten performance standards were the foundation for strengthening the progress of children, and (5) ensuring children enter kindergarten were able to pass the statewide kindergarten screening (Florida House of Representative, 2011). The Department of Education, Agency for Workforce Innovation, and the Department of Children and Families are the agencies responsible for monitoring the outcomes that the criteria of the mandate are reached. The percentage of how many children are able to pass the statewide kindergarten screening is the primary method of monitoring. The other four requirements were monitored through a checklist completed upon application to be approved as a Voluntary Prekindergarten program.

The goal of Voluntary Prekindergarten was to ensure every child was “ready for kindergarten.” How practitioners describe how they reach the goal when the children do not meet the readiness rate was not in the research. This was important because the process of learning is to elucidate meaningful experiences from previous knowledge to promote higher-
level thinking (Dewey, 1938/1998). The goal should not be to prepare the child for an assessment, but to create a child who has success as a lifetime learner. The story of professionals in the field in a program on probation provided a starting point in understanding how the practitioners transform in an attempt to meet the State mandate. A study designed to describe, explain, and understand the perceptions of the practitioners working in a program on probation can assist in making sense of how practitioners adapt to high-stakes accountability.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to describe and explain the perspectives and beliefs about pre-kindergarten among practitioners, in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program on probation unable to meet minimal accountability requirements. Before Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V, accountability in preschool settings was sparse and inconsistent. The amount of freedom and choice was based on their licensing agencies and subcontracting agencies. For some programs, there have always been checklists and criteria to which they had to abide. For example, in the program I directed we were required to have painting available daily, to have at least 50 books on the shelves, and to have 100 blocks in a center in the classroom. These are just a few examples among many. The positives to the checklist are that when we were monitored and the scores were high we felt accomplished. When the scores were low we were given technical assistance and opportunity to improve. The system also assisted the program to be a high quality center by addressing multiple components of the center such as teacher/child relationships, teacher professional development, parent involvement, classroom organization, and classroom materials. However, this was not connected to children’s progress. For example, teachers were required to screen children and to collect documentation but they were not monitored on the developmental growth of each child. From my experience, the checklists and criteria were
linked to safety, health, nutrition, and/or developmentally appropriate practices, depending on the monitoring agency. Since the implementation of Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V, how practitioners in Voluntary Prekindergarten programs on probation responded when they were unsuccessful at reaching the readiness requirement was a missing piece in the literature. This study reduces the gap in the present literature.

**Exploratory Questions**

The exploratory questions that guided my study were:

1. Among practitioners in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program on probation, what are their beliefs and perspectives about effective and appropriate early childhood education?

2. In what ways does probation influence practitioners’ perspectives and beliefs about early childhood education?

**Importance of the Study**

According to Twombly (2014), educators may teach with traditional instruction by concentrating on discrete skills and rote memorization when practitioners are driven by a fear to meet a common score. Traditional instruction in early childhood includes teaching that limits creativity, problem-solving skills, and social engagement (Dewey, 1938/1998). The traditional approach is problematic because unless the classroom curriculum provides growth of intellectual dispositions through exploration with materials that can be meaningfully applied, knowledge may be lost (Helm & Katz, 2010). Dewey (1938/1998) stated when learning occurs in traditional styles, children can recite information; however, they may not understand the information or know how to apply it to real world contexts. Nonetheless, preschools may revert to formal traditional environments that emphasize cognitive skills to increase test scores (Heckman, 2011).
Despite this shift in emphasis on cognitive skill development, Heckman (2011) notes there is a bounty of evidence suggesting children need skills such as self-control, sociability, and delay of gratification to succeed. To achieve these outcomes, it is critical to establish an environment where children are able to problem solve, create, and invent (Dewey, 1938/1998). Research suggests that how a young child is taught plays a major role in their school success (Brown, 2014; Keys, Farkas, Burchinal, Duncan, Vendell, Li, & Ruzek, 2013; Epstein, 2014). Thus, what happens in the classroom may be more important to a child’s wellbeing than a score on a screening tool (Brown, 2014; Keys, Farkas, Burchinal, Duncan, Vendell, Li, & Ruzek, 2013).

I feel that assessment and accountability need to be part of education. They should be used as a tool that would allow teachers to generate new information about their students so teachers can interpret the data to make good decisions for planning. In addition, I believe assessment and accountability should lead to program improvement and assist leaders in ensuring that dollars are well spent. Due to the importance of program improvement and the desire for children to succeed in school it is important to learn about how high stakes accountability could affect a preschool program. This study is about the practitioners in one program who are working to improve readiness scores. In this study I provide information on what ready for kindergarten means and discuss the rationale on the need to improve scores. The results of this study will be shared with the Voluntary Prekindergarten program on probation and with the local Early Learning Coalition to assist in professional development for Voluntary Prekindergarten practitioners.

**Research Design**

The literature on preschool accountability has a gap in the literature: the viewpoints of the practitioners most affected by high stakes assessment. The literature provided suggested that
high stakes accountability could sway practitioners to teach to a test (Brown, 2014; Hatch, 2002; Kowalski, Brown, & Pretti-Frontczak, 2005; Stipek, 2006). Literature is needed on how practitioners working with young children describe and explain how they meet accountability requirements as their perceptions may inform our understanding of practices in early childhood settings that struggle to meet legislated mandates attention. The people directly working with children who have not been able to successfully meet the accountability mandate have had minimal opportunity to explain their dilemma. This study shares the story of how some practitioners are dealing with accountability.

Qualitative research allowed me to understand the complex issues of Voluntary Prekindergarten practitioners working in a program on probation. Qualitative researchers are concerned with natural conflicts and have a desire to describe and explain situations, events, and phenomena. Examining the practitioners’ description of the program and how they explain what they are doing to increase the children’s scores assisted me to understand more about a struggling program and augment the insufficient existing data.

I chose a qualitative multi-case study as my methodological approach to understand the practitioners in a Voluntary Prekindergarten experiencing conflict. Each community, each family, each practitioner, and each child are unique, and each one brings a distinct experience to every classroom and program. When qualitative research is illuminated, the research can provide an insight to conflict, enlightening the reality (Marrian, 2009; Patton, 2002).

The structure of the interviews was based on the work of Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin (2012). They view interviewing as a way to seek new information and build knowledge as both a social experience and a learning experience. The study utilized interview as the primary tool, allowing me to understand the practitioners’ multiple realities of Voluntary Prekindergarten
implementation. My chosen basic data collection technique was semi-structured interviews, augmented with a reflective research journal and selective documents for rigorous analysis.

This case study included five participants in a Voluntary Prekindergarten approved center on probation at the time of the study. The center was placed on probation because the school readiness rate determined by the Department of Education was not met when the minimal number of children who attended the approved program did not pass the kindergarten assessment upon entry to kindergarten. The participants were an owner, a director, and three Voluntary Prekindergarten practitioners with experience in the field since the beginning of the Voluntary Prekindergarten mandate. It was ideal for the director or lead Voluntary Prekindergarten practitioner to have eight years of experience in order to be able to describe possible changes in practice. The criteria of eight years was necessary to ensure the participants had prekindergarten classroom experiences prior to Voluntary Prekindergarten implementation so that they could draw from their frame of reference of teaching under different requirements and expectations.

In order to understand the participants’ experiences, I sought to identify how the practitioners make sense of Voluntary Prekindergarten. The participants were given an opportunity to voice their lived experiences, so I could understand the phenomena from their perspective. I entered the study describing myself to the participants as a student attending graduate school that was wearing a researcher hat, bringing a balance of subjectivity and objectivity to the analysis. I was curious in discovering whether the participants experienced a transformation because of the implementation of Voluntary Prekindergarten and what created that change. In Chapter Three I describe in detail the research method for this study.
**Personal Perspectives**

I have been in the early childhood profession for over 20 years. I have experienced multiple roles that have extended my lens of teaching, directing, researching, and writing. At the beginning of this study, I worked directly with new practitioners in both basic training to enter the field and higher education. During the study my experience changed from a Head Start setting to creating and leading a model preschool in a poverty stricken city in Florida. Throughout my 20 years of experience, I have followed social constructivist theory.

Social constructivist theory is referred to in developmentally appropriate practices and in professional development trainings. John Dewey was a well-known advocate of social constructivist theory. I resonate with Dewey’s assertion that we all learn best from real experiences, and I implement this conviction in my professional experiences. My view was that education should be taught and experienced within a social constructivist perspective. As I taught others I provided both hands on and real world experiences for my students as well as time for reflection and improvement. My philosophy on how we learn was similar to how qualitative research is conducted. Qualitative research was a construct that allowed me to understand the complex issues of voluntary prekindergarten practitioners working in a program on probation. This was similar to Dewey’s (1938/1998) assumptions of the importance of discovering conflicts in order to begin new practices.

A University of South Florida course in case study research led me to this study from an interview assignment. I interviewed an owner who struggled with many low-income children leaving her program not earning adequate scores on the kindergarten screener. She believed her program met the children’s needs, both academically and emotionally. She faced the possibility of losing her certificate to offer Voluntary Prekindergarten to the parents and children in her
community. I remembered her concerns, “How do you judge a child who may not have ever held a book before, or one who was never read to with others? How do you test them with children who have had those experiences?” I felt both her passion and her conflict during the interview. That assignment influenced me to intently examine this area of inquiry.

I believed there were both benefits and challenges yet to be discovered from learning about a Voluntary Prekindergarten not able to meet the accountability criteria of the mandate. I entered the field wanting to make a positive difference in the community and I believed by working with children and families and with those who influence them I could provoke positive change. Twenty–two years later the one subject continuing to awe me was accountability because without it we fail to have evidence of the progress of our efforts. When the Voluntary Prekindergarten mandate was on the initiative to be voted on by citizens I attended informational sessions and attempted to learn everything I could about what was in the mandate and how it was implemented. I could recall traveling to Orlando where early childhood professionals collaborated and were able to offer input to how it was written into Legislature. How programs were held accountable was in that discussion. There was dialogue about creating a system of pre and post-test for children who enter the program because of the concern of the absence of actual developmental growth measurements of children. Later, I learned that a pre and post-test was too expensive to implement and children were assessed upon kindergarten entry only. I recalled speaking with a director and being told she was going to do what she had always done in her prekindergarten classroom because she felt play would provide the foundation needed for children to successfully enter kindergarten. A few years later that same director shared with me that her school was on probation and that she had decided to have her practitioners teach more didactically; implementing worksheets, flashcards, and rote learning activities. She shared it was
not what she believed in but the financial support the program gave to her center was vital. I began hearing her scenario repeatedly as I attended meetings and trainings with other teachers, directors, and owners. I suspected a conflict in the field similar to a pendulum in motion, swinging from side to side. One side seemed to be the social constructivist view, with the ideal preschool teaching through intentional play, leading with hands-on activities, and observing with a goal to seek the needs of each child (developmentally appropriate practices/progressive practices). On the other side was the behaviorist view that educates with a teacher-directed stance and assesses with quizzes and exams (i.e., what is known as traditional practices). Dewey wrote, “The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative” (1938/1998, p. 13). My understanding of this quote was just because a subject or concept was taught does not make it applicable or usable if it has no pertinence to any function or purpose.

Constructivists believe in multiple realities and those realities are shaped by cultural constructs (Patton, 2002; Powell & Kalina, 2010). As such, it was important to examine the paradigm shift Voluntary Prekindergarten practitioners were currently experiencing, shaping their program culture. The program culture is what happens inside the program and the influences contributing to the program strengths and weaknesses. I believed their experiences should be examined, and I believed it was necessary to understand if the transition had formed a new reality for the program.

**Theoretical Framework: Social Constructivism**

Qualitative research provides a structure for researchers to inquire phenomena through various methods (Patton, 2002; Piantanida & Garman, 2009). According to Merriam (2009), the chosen frame which researchers use in their studies provides the foundation to research and the
avenues to seek answers to questions. This framework was based on a pragmatism philosophy and premised on how learning was transferred. Our reality, perspectives, and opinions are data (Patton, 2002; Piantanida & Garman, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

As the participants shared their beliefs with me, I searched for what influenced them the most. I examined if they were aware of their practices and was curious about how they explained them as they struggled with a force that might or might not change their teaching styles. As a follower of Dewey I sought to learn more through the social constructs of interviewing and building a relationship with each participant.

The framework of social constructivism added to the authenticity of the study. I predicted a tension between the practice and training and felt that the phenomena of Voluntary Prekindergarten accountability should be examined contextually in depth. Many times as I taught professional development in the field I worried that the participants did not take what I taught and apply it to classroom practices. If the children are not gaining the benefit of new techniques because of a practitioner does not use the training in practice it is important to understand why and provide assistance.

Throughout the study I reflected on what I heard and what I wrote in an attempt to remove my own opinions as much as possible to accurately construe the participants’ words. I wanted to assess the data and avoid over-generalizations to share the particular phenomenon that transpired. Research reveals positive outcomes when educators practice reflection (Alvestad & Sheridan, 2014; Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003; Neuman & Kamil, 2010).

By learning about the perspectives of Voluntary Prekindergarten practitioners struggling with meeting an evaluative sanction, the link between how accountability and practice can be better understood by those experiencing the common dilemma. I believed their perspectives
would hold value, and the missing component in the literature could be exposed from listening to their stories. Just before I began interviewing the participants I was training and shared the excerpt from Pictures of Hollis Woods by Patricia Reily Giff created by National School Reform Facility for a training (see Appendix B: Reflective journal entry thoughts on a training). I wrote my experience in my journal as I reflected on accountability and practice.

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I tried to read with passion. My goal was to touch on the emotions of the participants at this training was created to enhance their ability to plan, implement, and assess professional development trainings. I gave the participants a few minutes to silently reflect on their thoughts and feelings about this reading. The participants reacted as I predicted, “child feels helpless and that she doesn’t care”, “The teacher is uncaring and distant”, “The child is mistaken, sad, and misunderstood”, and “The teacher is a witch”. These are just a few of the reflections. I am not sure why but I took a different approach to the discussion than the curriculum suggested. I said, “I want to think a little outside the box. Think about the teacher. Why would she react in this manner? What are the variables that we do not know about? Is there a chance that a higher power such as a Principal may demand that every child know the letter “w” by a certain time? What if her (the teacher) pay or her job relied on how many children knew the alphabet? What if she had additional 29 children in her class? What about how she was trained?” I am not sure why I took this approach—but I saw several mouths drops when I began to stick up or defend this teacher’s unacceptable practices. I brought it back to the purpose of the activity-reflection.
Research on the effects of accountability is not new (Belfield & Garcia, 2014). In my journal reflection I wrote that it appeared sometimes teachers hold beliefs about what was appropriate practice, but when it comes to being held accountable, teaching perspectives of appropriate practice change. Many researchers have explored the relations between accountability and decision-making (Belfield & Garcia, 2014; Biesta, 2004; DellaMattera, 2010; Kowalski, Brown, & Pretti-Frontczak, 2005; Stipek, 2006). According to Schoen and Fusarelli (2008), practitioners face a conflict between constructivist theory and freedom of how and what they want to teach to ensure children are successful at a specific set of skills. They believed fear drove teachers to teach to a test versus the individual needs of the student (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). As I articulated the participants’ stories, I described and explained possible phenomena and concerns.

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms were used throughout the study. These definitions were derived from the social constructivist view of education. In Chapter Two I provided more in depth descriptions.

**Accountability.** Accountability is a means of monitoring finances, fairness, and/or performance. In the educational domain accountability has expanded to be determined and controlled by political authorities (McDonnell, 2013).

**Assessment.** Assessments can cover many broad topics. For the purposes of this study the assessment administered by practitioners is the Florida Voluntary Prekindergarten Assessment. This assessment includes print knowledge, phonological awareness, math, vocabulary, and oral language. The four sections in the assessment cover 61 items (Flanagan, & Greenberg, 2013).
Classroom Curriculum. There are numerous definitions of the term curriculum. I chose to follow the definition that is closest to my beliefs and would correlate with social constructivism. According to McLachlan, Fleer, and Edwards (2013), the curriculum is a guide designed to teach objectives and methods together with evaluation and assessment for a specific set of students in a given program.

Director’s Credential. A credential that is required for all directors in Florida’s licensed preschools.

Early Learning Coalition. The agency that oversees the day-to-day functioning of approved Voluntary Prekindergarten programs (Florida House of Representatives, 2011).

Good Cause Exemption. This is an option for providers who disagree with the results of the kindergarten assessment. Providers may apply if they have earned low readiness scores for three consecutive years and they have become ineligible to receive state funds for the program (Florida Department of Education, 2011).

High Stakes Testing. A test administered to determine the effectiveness of a program. Policy makers use high stakes tests to improve student achievement and generally have a negative connotation from educators to teach a test (Brown, 2014).

Kindergarten Readiness Screener. The Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener for all children entering kindergarten includes the Early Childhood Observation System and the Florida Assessments for Instruction in Reading. This screening is administered 30 days after the start of kindergarten at all Florida publically funded schools (Florida House of Representatives, 2012).

Low Performing Providers. Preschool providers approved to implement Voluntary Prekindergarten and did not meet the readiness rate (Florida House of Representative, 2011).
**Preschool.** A center licensed to care for children ranging from ages birth to five years old.

**Practitioner.** A teacher of young children in an approved Voluntary Prekindergarten program. Note: I deliberately chose to refrain from the term teacher because to me teaching is an art form that takes continuous reflective practice, experience, and education. Some of the participants in this study deserved the title, while others have not reached some criteria, as I believed as necessary.

**Prescribed Curriculum.** A curriculum prepared for teachers that includes written lesson plans, letter of the week, specific questions to ask, and what activities to prepare. According to Milner (2013), prescribed curricula are often provided by administrators to ensure skills are taught at certain times in a specific order.

**Provider on Probation.** An approved Voluntary Prekindergarten center that did not have 70% of the students pass the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (Florida House of Representative, 2011).

**“Ready for Kindergarten”**. According to Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V, child able to pass the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (Florida House of Representative, 2011).

**Readiness Score.** A readiness score is a measuring method for the performance of Voluntary Prekindergarten provider set by State Board of Education calculated each year (Florida House of Representatives, 2011).
**Social Constructivist Theory.** A theory asserting our reality is formed by our social experiences and events. It is an understanding that reality is individual and can be described in multiple ways (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

**Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V.** The mandate to the Florida Constitution in 2002 allowing Florida children who were of age to attend an approved preschool offering Voluntary Prekindergarten (Florida House of Representatives, 2011).

**Voluntary Prekindergarten.** A prekindergarten approved by the Office of Early Learning to offer prekindergarten to 4-year-old children with a reimbursement from the state.

**Limitations**

This study was dependent on the participants’ description of their experience. It was critical that I interpreted their accounts accurately. According to Janesick (1999), the researcher is a tool in the study and will often find it a challenge to disconnect the research and the researcher. Throughout this study I employed member checks to reduce misinterpretations. The participants were provided a copy of the transcripts and were asked if they agreed with what was written. I implemented this approach to avoid misrepresentation of the participant’s perceptions. A peer reviewed the notes and the analysis to minimalize misinterpretation.

**Summary of the Chapter**

In Chapter One, I described the purpose of the study and my methodological approach. The Florida Mandate, Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V, was created to assist young children in developing the skills they need for kindergarten. Research suggests numerous advantages to children when programs meet the five Voluntary Prekindergarten requirements (Holland & Suiter, 2008; Howes, Burchinal, Pianta, Early, Clifford, & Barbarin, 2008; Kirp, 2009; Rose, 2010; The Pew Center of States, 2010; Wong, Cook, Barnett & Jung, 2008). The five
requirements that providers must meet and maintain to be an approved Voluntary Prekindergarten program is included in the State mandate. They included: (1) ensuring the program applied developmentally appropriate practices, (2) ensuring children were exposed to early literacy, (3) ensuring children were prepared for kindergarten, (4) ensuring Voluntary Prekindergarten performance standards were the foundation for strengthening the progress of children, and (5) ensuring children enter kindergarten were able to pass the statewide kindergarten screening (Florida House of Representative, 2011).

The challenge was Voluntary Prekindergarten programs in the State of Florida were only accountable for one requirement. That requirement was that children were prepared for kindergarten. An added controversy, shared more in Chapter 2, was that being ready for kindergarten could be defined in numerous ways. Because there was a lack of agreement from researchers on what it meant to be ready for kindergarten, the manner in which the State mandate defined it may be a poor measurement. When policy-makers create an accountability system based on one outcome, they fail to examine the most salient dimensions of the programs. How programs prepare children for kindergarten is a critical missing link to what the research supports as beneficial to children.

According to Copple and Bredekamp (2009), there was a growing pressure to teach to a test felt by public school teachers that may now be moving down to our preschool practitioners because of the policies holding programs accountable. Policies driven by educational accountability promote a culture of fear and may lead the powerless to change, even if it is against their beliefs and teaching styles (Freire, 2005). In addition, teaching begins to conform to what is best to improve scores versus what is best for the child.
How practitioners plan, assess, and reflect as part of teaching plays a critical role in how the child experiences early childhood (Almon & Miller, 2011; Copple & Brendekamp, 2009; Keys et al., 2013; Kirp, 2009; Rose; 2010, Spodek & Saracho, 2014; Stipek, 2006). Because of the importance of how skills are taught from the viewpoint of practitioners, qualitative research was appropriate for this study. The type of data needed to answer the research questions required the personal experiences of the providers (Danaher & Briod, 2005; Van Manen, 1990). It was important to understand what practitioners are doing to meet accountability requirements because how Voluntary Prekindergarten programs attempt to improve the scores was absent from the evaluation process. This study tells a story of how practitioners from one Voluntary Prekindergarten program affected by the accountability system in the Florida mandate viewed their dilemma. In Chapter Two, I explain the literature on Voluntary Prekindergarten, readiness for school, and accountability.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Teaching is complex. Educating others entails planning, assessing, and reflecting. Knowing how to engage in these tasks takes education, motivation, experience, and opportunity. How a teacher enacts these tasks can either lead or detract from high quality care. Research has indicated higher school success when children receive high quality care in the preschool years and has sparked attention for the need of positive early childhood experiences for young children (Almon & Miller, 2011; Copple & Brendekamp, 2009; Kirp, 2009; Rose; 2010, Spodek & Saracho, 2014; Stipek, 2006).

In Chapter One, I described the social movement in Florida led by David Lawrence and Alex Penelas. The movement provoked a ballot initiative that was supported by voters to append Florida’s Constitution to provide a Voluntary Prekindergarten program. The Voluntary Prekindergarten program (also known as Universal Prekindergarten because it was accessible to all families no matter social economic status) was a state funded program that offered families an opportunity to place a child in prekindergarten if they turn 4 on or before September 1st of any school year. As part of that movement, I hoped that we would see improvements in the quality of preschool programs like reducing teacher/child ratios, classroom sizes, and increasing teachers’ levels of education.

There was conflict with this movement. The state had not invested in early childhood beyond providing subsidies for economically disadvantaged families and high-risk children. This
would bring a change that would mean more children could attend school the year before kindergarten. There was tension between the costs and the process of regulating preschool centers to determine they met desired outcomes that extended beyond basic licensing requirements.

According to Dewey (1938/1998), conflicts are one result of social movements. Until recently, there were little if any accountability linkages between a child and the preschool program he or she attended (Rous, Lobianco, Moffett, & Lund, 2005; Stipek, 2006; Waterman, McDermott, Fantuzzo, & Gadsden, 2012). Conflicts that have been reported by researchers include teaching to a test, increasing time spent in formal instruction, and decreasing activities that promote social and emotional development (Almon & Miller, 2011; Kirp, 2009; Rose, 2010; Spodek & Saracho, 2014; Stipek, 2006). The challenges the conflicts produce create a dilemma between teaching philosophies that have been present for centuries. According to social constructivism theory children should learn by doing and by active meaningful experiences. This approach contrasts with how teachers teach when there is a desire for children to pass a test.

In this chapter I review the literature on the theoretical framework and the relationship the framework has to this study of inquiry. I follow the research on the framework with the literature review on three key topics, including (1) Voluntary Prekindergarten, (2) “ready for kindergarten”, and (3) program accountability. First, I offer the definition of Voluntary Prekindergarten, along with the legislative intent. The definition is continued with an in-depth review of the multiple descriptions of how “ready for kindergarten” can be defined other than how it is defined in the State mandate. Finally, I connect a historic review of early childhood program accountability with a description of the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener, along with the benefits and challenges of the past and current systems. I selected these three key topics
to review because they directly relate to the inquiry and the phenomena examined. Figure 1 is a visual map of the schematic literature review.

**Figure 1. A visual map of the schematic literature review**

The exploratory questions that guided my study were:

1. Among practitioners in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program on probation, what are their beliefs and perceptions about effective and appropriate early childhood education?
2. In what ways does probation influence practitioners’ perceptions and beliefs about early childhood education?
It is important to understand how the professionals in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program on probation react in order to improve the scores to help children be “ready for school.” Research suggests how practitioners educate young children contributes to their later school success (Ackerman & Barnett, 2009; Brown, 2013; Kirp, 2009; Stipek, 2006). What early childhood practitioners do and how they teach are important. This study describes and explains the perspectives and beliefs that five participants (three practitioners and two administrators) had about prekindergarten in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program unable to meet minimal accountability requirements.

**Theoretical Framework: Social Constructivism Theory**

According to Merriam (2009), the chosen framework for qualitative research is a guide for the investigation for a study. The framework for this case study is social constructivism. Constructivism accepts the authenticity of one’s perspectives and believes humans bring subjectivity to research. Included in the theory of social constructivism is a belief that learning occurs in social situations and the process of learning is as important as what is learned. This theory is based on a post-positivism empirical philosophy and premised on ontological ideologies. Our reality, perspectives, and opinions are data (Patton, 2002). As I proceeded in this study I planned, implemented, and reflected with a social constructivism lens. This theory guided me to create the research questions, the review of literature, the methodology for data collection, the analysis, and the interpretation of findings as suggested by Merriam (2009).

John Dewey (1938/1998) was a leader in the field of education. He supported educational freedom and opportunities for children to have real experiences. The freedom he described is not chaotic or having no boundaries; it is a type of freedom where learning deepens. Dewey categorized education within two primary constructs, the traditional and the progressive
Early childhood professionals are commonly taught to teach with progressive styles aligned to social constructivist theory.

Dewey (1938/1998) believed that the system of education battles between traditional and progressive education. Dewey (1938/1998) asserted that traditional methods impose education on children and progressive methods allow for experience and opportunities for education to occur within real life contexts. In addition, Dewey suggested that traditional education teaches children for automatic responses that may restrict the child to develop lower levels cognitive skills while progressive education encourages curiosity and problem solving assisting the child to develop high-level cognitive skills (Dewey, 1938/1998).

I chose to connect to John Dewey and the social constructivist paradigm. Practitioners who practice traditional styles will most likely teach children without real experience and are linked to behaviorist positivist theory (Dewey, 1938/1998). A premise of social constructivist theory is that experiences build knowledge and learning derives from previous knowledge. It is a belief that learning becomes more effective and meaningful when more senses are engaged. This theory encourages teachers to limit teaching with direct instruction and attempt to guide the students through inquiry and open-ended questions. As I conducted this study I took the stance of a social constructivist researcher basing my assumptions of developmentally appropriate practices and high quality from this theoretical stance that was established by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

**Literature Review**

This literature review provides research on the two competing views of education; progressive versus traditional. To critically evaluate the three themes: (1) brain research, (2) ready for kindergarten, and (3) assessment, I describe research from a Dewey viewpoint and
from a traditional stance. This evaluation will provide opportunity for a reflection on the
variables that are presented as the participants share their experience as a provider on probation
in Chapter Four.

**Voluntary Prekindergarten**

The Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V initiative was a promise for all of Florida’s
prekindergarten children to have an opportunity to attend a preschool program (Florida House of
Representatives, 2011). The promise was derived from a need for more young children to enter
kindergarten with the skills they need for school success (Waterman, McDermott, Fantuzzo, &
Gadsden, 2012). The need for this promise grew from a rising poverty rate, school dropout rate,
and illiteracy rate placed in the forefront of news media (Children’s Defense Fund, 2002; Kirp,
2009; Tout, Halle, Daily, Albertson-Junkans, & Moodie, 2013). Some research supported a need
to invest in young children to prevent these society concerns from occurring. Researchers
suggest when children attend prekindergarten, they benefit from higher academic skills when
Howes et al., 2008; Li, Farkas, Duncan, Burchinal, & Vandell, 2013).

The goal of Voluntary Prekindergarten was for children to be “ready for kindergarten.”
For the purposes of this study “ready for kindergarten” is defined as the child passing the
kindergarten assessment. This is the definition included in the Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V
mandate. The number of children able to pass the kindergarten assessment is how the
Department of Education holds Voluntary Prekindergarten programs accountable (Florida House
of Representatives, 2011). How accountability in preschools affects program implementation is
critical to know if, in attempt to meet the mandate, practitioners deviate from developmentally
appropriate practices.
Research indicated that preschool programs should expose children to high quality early childhood experiences to positively affect school outcomes and success (Howes et al., 2008; Kirp, 2009; National Institute for Early Education Research, 2010; Stipek, 2006; Watson, 2011). High quality experiences are linked to many factors (e.g., education, practices, environment, curriculum, and teacher/child ratio). When high quality is applied, children enter school with the foundation needed to be successful. Moreover, it places them at a lower risk of dropping out of high school and entering into a punitive justice system (Heckman, Pinto, & Savalev, 2013).

**Quality**

The term quality is often used to describe educational practices aligned to best teaching methods. In the early childhood realm, quality is often aligned with the recommendations from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). As I use this term throughout this study I refer to how NAEYC presents quality. However, quality is not always defined this way. In fact, there are multiple perspectives on how quality is experienced and valued.

Developmentally appropriate practices as defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is a pedagogical philosophy that considers factors such as teacher training, teacher-child interactions, teacher-child ratio, environmental organization, and lesson planning and implementation. These are considered some of the essential ingredients for high quality. I briefly share information on the complexity of quality and professionalism in the field as it pertains to training.

One argument is that the term, quality, places a value on a subjective concept. Because subjectivity is formed from opinions, it cannot be measureable. It is true that quality is a description that can be described with bias. However, the early childhood profession needs both
a term for goal setting (high quality) and a guideline for achievement (developmentally appropriate practices). In addition, although the term is a challenge to be defined and can assume a variety of forms based on the diverse cultural lens from which it is being interpreted, it is a common practice to define quality as represented in scenarios when a teacher promotes new ideas among their students, engages children in dialogue, and facilitates children’s construction of knowledge through seeking answers to questions of relevance and interest.

Another argument is that quality is a culturally sensitive educational phenomenon with structural characteristics (Sheridan, 2011). Because of sensitivity to cultural constructs, arguments usually surround the possibility of bias when placing a value on how children are cared for because of deep-rooted beliefs and family child rearing principles. There are numerous factors in cultural practices that differ on values and acceptable experiences.

In addition, it has been argued that research is conflicting about the benefits of quality to children in early childhood. Numerous studies indicate minimal to moderate effects on child outcomes to preschool quality (Burchinal, Kainz, & Cai, 2011). The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development conducted the Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development and found that there was moderate and consistent improvement to both cognitive and language development among children when exposed to high quality preschool (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network & Duncan, 2003). The study also indicated that high quality was especially beneficial to children who lived in poverty. Three other studies that indicated similar results were the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort, the Early Head Start study, and the National Center for Early Development and Learning study (Keys et al., 2013). These studies are often criticized for the lack of ability that researchers have to control multiple variables that may have also affected academic growth. The need to define high quality is real,
but the need to provide high quality is consistent. Unfortunately, high-quality care is not prevalent in preschool centers, and more children are exposed to low or moderate care (Wilcox-Herzog, McLaren, Ward, & Wong, 2013). To increase quality NAEYC has suggested standards.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children has recommended practices for early childhood providers. The recommendations include: “1) creating a caring community of learners, 2) teaching to enhance development and learning, 3) planning curriculum to achieve important goals, 4) assessing development and learning, and 5) establishing reciprocal relationships” (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 16). These guidelines emanate from a belief that learning occurs through shared social constructs within real world experiences.

A challenge with developmentally appropriate practices arises since some consider the approach complicated and contentious (Lonigan, Farver, Phillips, & Menchetti, 2011). The misunderstanding often focuses on instructional styles. Given the strong foundational belief that children learn through play, some interpret developmentally appropriate practices to mean no direct instruction and therefore classrooms may lack academic focus (Lonigan et al., 2013). Another view is that quality is relative and cannot be defined linearly (Sheridan, 2011). However, certain aspects to quality can be operationalized. One controversy in the field is a tension between quality and level of teacher education.

**Professional Development**

Copple and Bredekamp recommend for early childhood teachers to have a minimum of a Bachelors degree (2009). However, there are numerous programs that offer early childhood certification based on completion of a two-year degree program offering a Child Development Associate (CDA) or Child Development Associate Equivalency. According to the Florida VPK mandate, the school year Voluntary Prekindergarten programs can be taught by a practitioner
with a CDA or higher. Conversely, the summer Voluntary Prekindergarten programs can only be taught by a teacher with a Bachelors degree.

The topic of teacher education has stirred controversy in early childhood. The people working in the field are viewed typically as babysitters or caregivers versus educators. I myself struggle with the term teacher because there is minimal criterion of meeting the level of a preschool teacher. From my experience I have found a majority of programs hire practitioners with a CDA. One reason is finding and retaining a degreed teacher is not only expensive but it is a challenge to compete with public school systems that can offer staff higher salaries and benefits.

Research does not always support that teachers with degrees are the best option for children. According to Zaslow et al. (2011), education is not enough to ensure quality. Quality derives from teacher knowledge, teacher practice, and student outcomes.

Toyan, Mamikkonian-Zarpas, and Chien (2013) suggest that teachers do not necessarily “practice what they preach” (p. 1). The researchers examined data from the Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. By conducting a cluster analysis and segregating the data into five groups they found that people do not consistently do what they believe. In addition background and beliefs are complex but may link to decision-making. Dunst and Trivette (2009) examined what methods would be most effective for adults to both learn from and then apply to practice. They analyzed 70 studies in a meta-analysis. Their research indicated a succession of methods that link to higher implementation. They suggest the trainings should provide an introduction, illustrations, practice, evaluation, reflection, and learner assessment to have more positive outcomes for the participant. They developed the Participatory Adult Learning Strategy
(PALS) from their results. PALS included active learning in each stage of the training and on-going self-reflection (Dunst & Trivette, 2009).

According to Barnett (2008), preschool teachers should be continuously reflecting on practices and seek improvement, ideally with intensive supervision and coaching. Studies have indicated that trainings that include opportunities for participants to model, rehearse, and reflect with mentor and trainer feedback will be practiced more in the classroom (Conroy et al., 2014). According to Zaslow et al., (2011) the findings indicate the need for professional development opportunities that are continuous and supportive in order to realize successful educational outcomes with young learners.

Despite the complexity and contention over operationalizing quality in early childhood, the Voluntary Prekindergarten mandate was an aspiration to achieve high quality throughout the early learning and care system in Florida. Numerous variables contributed to the Florida VPK initiative, but two of them were most pronounced: (1) brain research studies suggesting the foundation for learning is acquired through experiences in the younger years (Howe et al., 2008); and (2) research correlating quality preschool experiences with higher academic achievement (Kirp, 2009).

**Brain Research**

*Neurons to Neighborhoods* (Shonkoff, 2003) is a study that brought a great deal of attention to the importance of early childhood. The study indicated the importance of close relationships between a young child and a parent or caregiver. Positive relationships along with quality early experiences offered to the child would stimulate the brain and create a foundation for later learning (Liew, McTigue, Barrois, & Hughes, 2008; Raver & Knitzer, 2002; Shonkoff, 2003). The findings were based on both neuroscience and developmental science. According to
the study, developmental neurologists discovered hard evidence to support how early experiences wired the architecture of the brain (Shonkoff, 2003). In short, each experience created a connection for learning. With every interaction, the brain forms a pattern of networks that could either help or hinder later learning. The study publicized the importance of early intervention and quality early experiences across all developmental domains (Raver & Knitzer, 2002).

The findings from *Neurons to Neighborhoods* (Shonkoff, 2003) suggested the importance of children being taught in a social constructivist frame or progressive frame, opposite of how the public school system educated children (Rushton & Larkin, 2001). According to Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2002), when a curriculum emphasizes learning as memorizing facts, students might lack the necessary opportunity they needed for understanding. This didactic form of teaching was similar with the research from *Neurons to Neighborhoods*. *Neurons to Neighborhoods* and social constructivist theory together provide a foundation for children to learn in socially active environments where children are offered opportunity to construct meaning and to interact with their environment. Learning occurs best when it is child-directed with specific intentional goals promoting hands-on inquiry and creative problem solving. This is an environment where the practitioner is not the giver of knowledge; the practitioner facilitates and guides learning.

Findings from the study *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (Bransford et al., 2002), conducted by committees appointed by the Commission on Behavioral and Social Science and the Education of the National Research Council, suggests there are three core-learning principles:
1. Teachers should realize children have preexisting understandings of knowledge;
2. Teachers should introduce concepts in depth, providing multiple concrete examples to provide a foundation for knowledge;
3. Metacognitive skills should be integrated in all subject areas in the curriculum.

The three principles of learning contribute a lens for teachers to use as they work with learners. *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* also indicated learners must see what they are learning as useful, and realize how the information can be applied. If the child does not recognize the new knowledge as useful he or she cannot go beyond memorization to application (Dewey, 1938/1998).

It can be argued the time children spend in play can assist in creating connections for later literacy and academic advancements (Barnett, 2003; Liew, McTigue, Barrois, & Hughes, 2008; Kirp, 2009; Stipek, 2006). Buysse and Sparkman (2003) agreed with this finding, as they believed that learning must occur in natural settings in daily activities and should be linked to socialization with peers.

According to Shonkoff (2003), the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine reviewed the findings from the *Neurons to Neighborhood* report. They agreed children were born ready to learn. In addition, they agreed there is importance in early relationships and environments, and that interactions between science, policy, and practice are critical in the early childhood field (Shonkoff, 2003). The findings were consistent; however, not in total alignment with the former study. The two committees found agreement in many areas. Yet, they had different views on the absoolution of the nature versus nurture debate, the emphasis of “windows of opportunity”, and special stimulation needed for advanced brain development in infants.
Neurons to Neighborhoods linked learning with hard science followed with How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School. These were not the first studies but they were publicized more than others. For example Neurons to Neighborhoods was a front-page topic in Time Magazine. An outcome of these studies was the highly published results that children needed quality experiences and early brain stimulation to make connections for later learning. These studies suggested children can learn when they have early experiences in play activities promoting planning, problem-solving, social opportunities, and creative role-playing (Bransford et al., 2002; Shonkoff, 2003). Brain research was not the only factor that contributed to the rising interest to investing in young children. There were many studies that supported positive outcomes to high quality preschool experiences and high student achievement.

Preschool studies linked to high student achievement. The vision of Voluntary Prekindergarten was created out of years of research indicating positive effects of prekindergarten programs and benefits to children, families, and society. The most regarded studies were the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, the Carolina Abecedarian Study, and the Chicago Child-Parent Center Program Study (Barnett & Yarosz, 2004; Burke, 2009). These longitudinal studies indicated a positive financial investment to society, and a developmental advantage to at-risk children, when children were exposed to high quality early childhood care. The benefit-cost analysis quantified savings to the state by investing in young children. The studies found similar results, suggesting reductions in crime, welfare assistance, health cost, and increases in education and earnings (Barnett & Yarosz, 2004; Burke, 2009).

In the 1960’s, the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project (Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, & Barnett, 2005) followed the participants from preschool to adulthood. The participants were from poverty-stricken families in Chicago. Each of the 58 three- to four-year-old children were
deemed at risk for school failure and were tracked until they were 40 years old. The children attended the program a few hours daily and were visited at home by staff. The Perry Preschool Project had a strong emphasis on ensuring resources were available for the family, and the family needs were met. The program followed developmentally appropriate practices (practices suggested by Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; explained in the beginning of this chapter) including a strong emphasis on language and literacy and numerous child-initiated learning activities aligned to social-constructivist theory.

Key findings included higher wages, higher home ownerships, an increase in graduation rates, and fewer arrests for the children who attended the program (Rose, 2010). The results of the Perry Preschool Project study were emphasized in the media. The researcher conducting the study used a causal model. The causal model does suggest higher intellectual advantages when beginning school, higher school completion, and higher earnings (Schweinhart, 2003). However, this model fails to consider measurement error and also assumes quality preschool causes higher achievement, when many other variables have contributed; thereby, potentially weakening the correlations.

In 1971, the Carolina Abercrombie Project included 104 participants. That random assignment study had three research groups: one infant to five-year-old group, one school age group (over five years old), and one control group. The participants were followed until they were 21 years old. According to Kirp (2009), the Carolina Abercrombie Project indicated similar results as the Perry Preschool Project. Key findings included, participants in the treatment groups had significantly higher cognitive skills and reading and writing skills, were more likely to attend college and establish secure employment, and were more likely to begin a family after marriage (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Kirp,
The project had similar characteristics to the Perry Preschool Project in following developmentally appropriate practices; however, it did not include home visits, and there were not as many resources available to families. Barnett and Masse (2007) cautioned the children in the Abecedarian project were not typical of the general population. The study indicated gains in cognitive skills with insignificant gains in social skills.

Additionally, The Chicago Child-Parent Center Program, the largest of the major studies, was conducted in the 1980’s, with 1539 low-income participants from age three to nine years old and across eleven states (Reynolds, Temple, Robertson & Mann, 2002). The study indicated children who attend quality pre-kindergarten programs entered kindergarten with higher academic and social skills than their peers who did not have the benefit of quality preschool (Howes et al., 2008). The researchers stated the participants in the study had higher achievement in school, higher graduation rates, and lower remediation (Reynolds et al., 2002). The quality indicators for the program included a strong emphasis on literacy, opportunities for parent involvement, and educated staff. In a sample study conducted for the evaluation of the Chicago Child-Parent Center Program, the results were over-generalized and failed to account for significant variables such as gender, family size, and the mother’s educational level (Ou, 2005).

Thus, past research has supported the possible benefits of quality prekindergarten to children, families, and society (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2011). The major inconsistencies are the variables that cannot be controlled such as socioeconomic status, health status, mother’s education level, and exposure to literature inside of preschool. The suggested benefits to the children who attend quality prekindergarten include:

1. More likely to complete high school and enroll in college than children who do not attend quality environments (Holland & Soifer, 2008);
2. Screened and are offered opportunity for early intervention services. Research indicates these children are less likely to be enrolled in special education classes in higher grades (Holland & Suiter, 2008); 

3. More likely to increase pre-reading, pre-writing, pre-numeracy abilities in all children, especially for non-white children and children who are from low-income families (Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, & Dawson, 2005); 

4. More likely to display higher levels of executive functions (self control, attentiveness, persistence); 

5. Less likely to be arrested (Holland & Soifer, 2008). 

Model preschools like the ones in the three previous major research studies are rare (Kirp, 2009; Stipek, 2006). There was research indicating some preschool environments may cause learning challenges (Kirp, 2009; Stipek, 2006). Magnuson, Ruhm, and Waldfogel (2007) interpreted data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Class of 1998-1999 using fixed-effect, along with instrumental variable methods and propensity scores. They suggested when children attended preschool they may have higher math and reading performance when they enter school. However, they often displayed more aggressive behavior and less self-control than their counterparts. Magnuson et al. (2007) indicated the negative behavior remains, while the cognitive advantages fade. The researchers also noted the preschools in that study were typical and not considered model preschools (Magnuson et al., 2007). Thus, it cannot be assumed that a preschool program will benefit children or prepare them for kindergarten because the type of instruction and care plays a role in gains. 

Some research indicated curriculum plays a role in learning. The researchers conducting the High Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study randomly assigned 68 at-risk children
to one of three preschool classes implementing different curriculums. They include: (1) direct instruction, (2) play-based instruction, and (3) High Scope instruction. All children demonstrated an increase in intelligent quotient scores. However, the direct-instruction group displayed characteristics in social development at age 23 that the other two groups did not. These included 34% had felony offense arrest records, while the other two had 9%; 27% had been suspended from employment; none were married, while 31% of the others were; and 11% volunteered in the community, while 43% of the counterparts contributed to volunteer service (Almon & Miller, 2011).

The research was not consistent regarding if all preschools promoted academic benefits; however, there was research indicating when academic benefits do occur, children lose the cognitive advantages by the second grade (Almon & Miller, 2011; Gormley et al., 2005; Pianta & Garmen, 2007). In addition, there were reports that indicated concerns regarding the minimal amount of “quality” programs available to young children (Barnett & Yarosz, 2004; Kirp, 2009; Stipek, 2006). Factors such as teacher/child ratio, educational status of the practitioner, class size, and curriculum could contribute to differences in programs. Preschools could have negative outcomes on children, when the program focuses on didactic teaching in skills such as letter and number recognition implemented in traditional educational practices (Almon & Miller, 2011).

The National Center for Early Education Research Development and Learning Multi-State Study (Mashburn et al., 2008) examined the differences in quality experiences and the outcomes between prekindergarten and kindergarten across six states. Each participating state had 40 classrooms assessed and four children in each classroom were randomly selected for individual assessment. Although variables included teacher, state, and demographic
characteristics, and data included observation, surveys, and assessments; the study negated the effects of practitioner education and class size. These discrepancies help to describe the complexities to the field.

The National Institute for the Early Education Research has documented the progress of state funded preschools since 2001. The State of Preschool Yearbook tracks yearly progress regarding the availability and the quality of services each state provides. Included in the report is a quality standard checklist summary. The report examines whether the states require the following quality indicators (Barnett et al., 2011):

1. Lead teacher with a BA degree;
2. Lead teacher with specialized training in early childhood;
3. Assistant teacher with a child development associate degree or higher;
4. Practitioners earn a minimum of 15 hours of in-service training annually;
5. Early Learning Standards;
6. Class sizes of 20 or fewer;
7. Teacher/child ratios of 1:10 or better;
8. Screening/referral services;
9. At least one meal for children daily;
10. Site visits from agencies

The National Institute for Early Education Research supported the need for federally/state funded preschool and quality. According to Watson (2010), current prekindergarten programs were successful. However, how they were successful and whether the programs implement quality was not factored in the measurement of success.
The First Steps Study researched the effect of teaching practices in reading and mathematics including 1268 kindergarten children. The researchers suggested children have a higher interest in reading and math when teachers apply social constructivist theory and wait until they are older to begin formal education on the topics (Lerkkanen et al., 2012). The researchers collected data through observations using the Early Childhood Classroom Observation Measure. The results indicated children need more time experiencing child-centered learning and play.

There are numerous studies that suggest a quality environment encompasses a philosophy where children are learning through play with the guidance from a teacher who is educated and who can intentionally provide meaningful ways for children to learn (Barnett & Carolan, 2013; Kirp, 2009; Pianta et al., 2007; Spidek, 2006). The term quality is written throughout this study. Studies indicate children will have high student achievement when they experience high quality experiences, yet researchers admit “quality” cannot easily be defined as it can be interpreted numerous way (Howes et al., 2008; Kirp, 2009; Spidek, 2006). The National Institute for Early Education Research and the National Association for the Education of Young Children both provide high quality indicators that align to social constructivist theory.

Social constructivist theory informed early childhood professionals on the importance of learning through techniques that encourage children to investigate, to explore, to problem solve, and to work with others in small groups. The quality factors not being examined are critical to the functionality and the success of preparing children to be “ready for kindergarten.”

“Ready for Kindergarten”

The intention of the Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V mandate was for children to enter school “ready for kindergarten.” For the purposes of this study, the definition of “ready for
“kindergarten” is when a child successfully passes the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener. Describing the meaning of “ready for kindergarten” was a challenge. Many authors expend the terms school-readiness and ready-for-school prolifically in articles or reports. Yet, authors often fail to explain the meaning behind the term. According to Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Ritchie, Howes, and Karoly (2008), there was a large variation in what “ready for school” means. In a Google Scholar search of 68 peer-reviewed journal articles with school readiness as a key topic, not one author specifically defined what school readiness means. The term is used freely, as if being school ready were common knowledge.

In 2002, President George W. Bush presented a definition for “ready for kindergarten.” He stated, “On the first day of school, children need to know letters and numbers. They need a strong vocabulary. These are the building blocks of learning, and this nation must provide them” (Bush, 2002, p.12). The former President defined “ready for kindergarten” from an academic perspective. There are researchers who would disagree with his words. Holland and Suiter (2008) stated to prepare children for kindergarten they need to be in programs supporting early literacy and social skills. In addition, a study conducted by Magnuson et al. (2007) found a cognitively stimulating environment enhances academic outcomes at school entry. The setting they describe was one where the practitioners are purposeful in their lessons creating thought-provoking problem-solving activities.

On the contrary, Duncan et al. (2007) examined six longitudinal studies, to seek the key development elements for later school success. They found children were most successful when they entered school with academic knowledge, the ability to pay attention, and positive socio-emotional skills. The authors stated math skills had the greatest predictive power, followed by reading skills, and then by attention skills. The study did not offer descriptors on what the
specific math, reading, and attention elements were for later school success. For example, math skills such as counting, patterning, or matching were not illuminated in the study.

In 2006, The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement endorsed the Preprimary Project. The Preprimary Project was developed to seek answers to identify and document the specific characteristics in early childhood programs that enhance cognitive and language performances (Montie, Xiang, & Schweinhart, 2006). The project assessed the child in preschool, and again three years later, analyzing data from ten countries implementing a three-level hierarchal linear model. The model provided opportunity to assess three components, including variation of children within settings, within countries, and among countries. The findings suggested children who participated in child-initiated programs with practitioners teaching with concrete realistic experiences displayed higher academic performances at school entry.

Open-ended play is a child-initiated activity that offers experiences that allow children to understand and make sense of their world (Epstein, 2014). Carol Copple and Sue Bredekamp (2009), the editors of Developmentally Appropriate Practices, support the fact that children need time to play, to discover, and to make sense of their world. The time a child spends in play advances the child’s cognitive skills, among other areas of academic development. Rushton and Larkin (2001) indicated both social-emotional and cognitive scores rise when the child engages in a learner-centered environment based on the child’s interests. The children exposed to these learning experiences early on, score higher on creativity, language, and cognitive skills and they display higher confidence than children who do not share the same experiences.

When readiness is confined to a list of what the child can and cannot do, it often fails to embrace the child’s previous experiences, culture, and home environment. According to Graue
(2010), when standards and success were linked to a test, the practitioner will shift the curriculum to include more lessons on what is expected to be on the test. This exercise of alternating practice is opposite to what is recommended—to base lessons from assessment results and create activities surrounding a child’s needs and interests.

How a program prepares a child to be “ready for kindergarten” is not measured as part of Voluntary Prekindergarten program efficiency. Pianta et al. (2007) stated when the measurement of achievement is based on a norm-referenced test and not on progress; accountability becomes unbalanced, placing excessive emphasis on one domain. Zigler, Gilliam, and Barnett (2011) concluded learning is hindered when a child enters kindergarten with the capability of deciphering letter sounds and naming letters, but lacks the ability to listen, to share, or to interact appropriately with others. They suggest children need social skills in order to be successful in school.

An additional challenge to placing disproportionate weight on a test is what is expected to be normal on the test are, more often than not, more typical of white middle and upper class families than of minorities and lower and middle class families (Graue, 2006). Screenings and assessments may be discriminating of individual abilities, cultural differences, and creative curiosity. Pianta et al. (2007) continued to state if efficiency is based on outcomes assessments, more attention is given to a narrow set of skills instead of to what a child can understand.

Readiness should be about the whole child and should not be limited to a set of academic constraints. The young child needs time to explore, to create, and to play. Expecting children to be “ready for kindergarten” without considering culture, experiences, and family dynamics may force practitioners to teach skills that some children will have difficulty learning.
Accountability

Florida taxpayers fund Voluntary Prekindergarten from the General Appropriations Act. In order to ensure the dollars are well spent, written into Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V mandate is a system to hold Voluntary Prekindergarten providers accountable. Accountability offers opportunity for program enhancement and continued improvement towards higher quality and student achievement (Pianta et al., 2007). Accountability can also drive instruction to emphasis a test versus individual needs, causing tension on educators.

According to the Administration Manual for the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener, “Section 1002.69 (1), Florida Statutes (F.S.) directed the Florida Department of Education a kindergarten readiness screening based upon the performance standards adopted by the Department of Education” (Florida House of Representatives, 2011, p. 2). The chosen assessment is the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener, which was designed to align with the Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standards for Four-Year-Olds. The standards address what children should be able to do in each area of development; Social and Emotional, Approaches to Learning, Physical Development, Language Communication and Emergent Literacy, and Cognitive Development and General Knowledge.

Voluntary Prekindergarten programs are approved on what they are able to provide to children. Approved Voluntary Prekindergarten providers are required to: (1) ensure the program applies developmentally appropriate practices, (2) ensure children are exposed to early literacy, (3) ensure children are prepared for kindergarten, (4) ensure Voluntary Prekindergarten performance standards are the foundation for strengthening the progress of children, and (5) ensure children enter kindergarten able to pass the statewide kindergarten screening (Florida House of Representative, 2011).
Ensuring the Program Applies Developmentally Appropriate Practices

Developmentally appropriate practices is an ideology in the early childhood field that is how, why, and what is best practices for young children (Naughton, 2005). It is a framework constructed in research that offers guidelines to practitioners as a methodology to create an optimal learning environment for children birth to eight years old (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Early-childhood practitioners in Florida receive training based on these practices and are considered the forefront of the profession. Practitioners are taught developmentally appropriate practices as advised from the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The term means to “meet children where they are” and to “help each child reach challenging and achievable goals” (Copple & Bredekamp, 2006, p. 3). Such education is part of their foundational training in the field. Practices suggested include: “(a) creating a caring community of learners, (b) teaching to enhance development and learning, (c) planning curriculum to achieve important goals, (d) assessing development and learning, and (e) establishing reciprocal relationships” (p. 16). This is a belief learning occurs through shared social constructs within real world experiences.

Lack of Play

Play may have different meanings. In this report, it can be defined as child-led activities such as building, pretending, drawing, and moving, with a purpose but not necessarily a product. Play, which can occur independently or socially, is considered a key medium to social and emotional development. According to Copple and Bredekamp (2009), “social and emotional development is as important as language and literacy development and is the foundation for cognitive and academic competence” (p. 120). Best practices advise practitioners to allow “at
least an hour of uninterrupted play in order to become involved and engrossed in complex levels of pretending and constructing and investigating” (p. 153).

**Use of Formal Assessment**

Formal assessments are typically created for educators to check the progress of a child in one or more areas of development. They are often purchased and have been evaluated for validity and reliability. If implemented with other indicators of progress, they can be beneficial in learning a child’s strengths and weaknesses. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) recommended assessing to plan for activities that are related to the children’s interests. Assessment should be repetitive and continuous and included as a part of their daily activities and experiences. Assessment should include “multiple modalities such as work sample, notes, and recordings” (p. 180). This type of assessment is known as authentic assessment. The purpose of assessment is to measure progress and effectiveness. The outcomes of assessment are the foundation for lesson planning, room arrangement, and resources. Authentic assessment is intended to provide both measurement and outcomes in this manner.

**Inflexible schedule.** The ideal environment would allow the practitioner to create a schedule that is predictable for children. The schedule could be modified to lengthen or shorten with activities but should remain as consistent as possible so children can be comforted knowing what will happen next. Daily schedules should include both active and quiet activities allowing time for both nutrition and rest. Practitioners should avoid over-scheduling and providing limited in child-led experiences. Flexibility reduces pressures on both practitioners and children. It allows for extra time or reduced time if children are engaged in play or another activity or if the planned activity was not successful.
**Homework and worksheets.** Homework and worksheets are not considered age appropriate for young children. Many times these activities are used to teach isolated skills or for children to practice a concept taught in school. It is typical to see this in primary grades, often as a way to practice letter knowledge. Other teaching methods are recommended in best practices. For example, teaching children letter knowledge is encouraged. However, it is emphasized in meaningful ways that can be connected to an interest of the child. This aligns with children learning the letters in their names first versus the alphabet by the letter of the week. Concepts should be introduced in ways that are real to children. The premise is learning the letter B by looking and reciting a flashcard or connecting the dots on a ditto will not be meaningful to a child; and therefore, the child will not be able to connect the letter to reading or writing.

**Direct instruction.** Direct instruction is a restrictive form of adult-led teaching. It is needed for some activities; however, it should be the exemption not the rule. Copple and Bedekamp (2009) suggest teaching with multiple formats in various styles. The rationale is that “children learn by employing numerous strategies to assist children in mastering new skills through thoughtful and intentional opportunities while asking open questions and offering cues” (p. 154). The premise of teaching with indirect instruction is so that the child can problem-solve, critically think, and to deepen understanding.

According to the Voluntary Prekindergarten Provider Kindergarten Readiness Rate website, an appropriate curriculum would have learning experiences that keep the child active and engaged (Office of Early Learning, 2014). They should also encourage activities where the child can be the leader. The site suggests that teachers use multiple methods to teaching and include building positive relationships with the children and for the children to have with each
Ensuring Children Are Exposed to Early Literacy

The National Early Literacy Panel was tasked to examine the methods of literacy instruction in the early years and determine which practices were the most effective (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009). The purpose of this analysis was to address the challenge that 37 percent of fourth graders are unable to display basic reading skills, according to the National Assessment of Education Progress. The panel conducted a meta-analysis research of 500 articles to indicate relationship with instruction and literacy growth. The panel concluded there were six concepts that increased achievement in literacy:

1. Alphabet knowledge of printed letters and sounds;
2. Differentiate between phonemes;
3. Name letters and numbers in order quickly;
4. Label pictures of objects at random and quickly;
5. Write name upon request;
6. Recall information for a minimal amount of time.

The panel found that these skills were important; however, there was a lack of evidence suggesting these concepts should be the emphasis of instruction. The instructional practices that supported literacy skills were code-focused, oral language, and shared reading (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009). The National Center for Family Literacy (2009) recommended guiding children to learn these skills through a balance of direct instruction, play, and inquiry within the framework of developmentally appropriate instruction. Highly effective early childhood teachers provide opportunities for children to learn by embedding instruction into hands-on
activities that relate to children (Stipek, 2006). Because how children learn literacy is as important as or more so than what is learned, the outcomes of a child’s assessment should not be the chosen accountability method of ensuring children are exposed to literacy.

Lonigan Farver, Phillips, and Menchetti (2009), analyzed a literacy-focused curriculum that accompanied training for teachers in forty-eight preschools. The cluster-randomized study revealed moderate increases to literacy skills in young children and no significant effects for training.

According to Copple and Bredekamp (2009), language and literacy development begins with adults engaging in true conversations with children. By engaging in language, children become versed in listening, speaking, and understanding language—the foundation for language and literacy skills. Children should be read to at least 15 minutes daily and given a variety of materials to encourage writing. Practitioners are to instill letter, word, and print knowledge in daily activities that are incorporated into the natural environment (signs and rules) and into planned activities (making invitations for mother’s day breakfast).

**Ensuring Children are Prepared for Kindergarten**

Being prepared for kindergarten could be interpreted in numerous ways. In a focus interview study by Lara-Cinisomo et al. (2008), the researchers examined what children need to know as they enter kindergarten from a kindergarten teacher’s perspective. They found that public school teachers felt basic skills like letter and numbers were helpful; however, they rated high social skills as more important for school success. According to Stipek (2006), the skills a child needs to achieve academic success are found in nonacademic functioning. Nonacademic functioning can include an abundance of skills such as empathy, respect, helpfulness, perseverance, self-control, and the ability to engage with positive social interactions. Moreover,
children need social skills and positive learning attitudes to be able to succeed in school (Stipek, 2006). As stated earlier, being “ready for school” can hold multiple meanings and is a challenge to define.

**Ensuring Voluntary Prekindergarten Performance Standards Are the Foundation for Strengthening the Progress of Children**

According to the Florida Partnership for School Readiness (2003), preschool programs funded by the state are required to link lesson plans to academic standards and benchmarks. The Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standards for Four-Year-Olds (Florida Department of Education, 2011) are the most current version of the Voluntary Prekindergarten performance standards. Performance standards are designated skills that a Standards Panel of Experts Committee agreed to be what children should achieve at the end of the prekindergarten year (Florida House of Representatives, 2011). Five developmental domains are encompassed in the performance standards: Physical Development, Approaches to Learning, Social and Emotional Development, Language, Communication, and Emergent Literacy, and Cognitive Development and General Knowledge. Details of the domains and their skills are included in Table 1.

**Physical Development**

Physical development can be described in four categories; health/wellness, self-help, gross motor, and fine motor development. Health/wellness can be referred to as both physical and mental state including vision, hearing, and dental. A young child experiences the most physical changes to the body in the first five years. Therefore, experiences that encourage body movements, coordination, and physical fitness are important for healthy development.

According to Becker, McClelland, Loprinzi, and Trost (2014), their path analysis study indicated
that children faired higher on self-regulation skills and math and reading assessments when exposed to active play.

**Approaches to Learning**

An approach to learning is a domain in development that can be a challenge teachers to assess because it is about how children learn (Florida Department of Education, 2009). The categories included in the domain include: eagerness and curiosity, persistence, creativity, planning and reflection. In a longitudinal study conducted by Ziv (2013) data were collected on 198 children were from child interview, teacher reports, and child assessment. The study was to gain information on the correlation between social competence and school readiness. The results indicated a positive relationship to social skill and school readiness (Ziv, 2013). Another study conducted by Sawyer, Chittleborough, Mittinty, and Lynch (2013) shared that children who displayed low attention spans and emotion regulation had lower school performance and school readiness skills. They concluded that both attention and emotional regulation were linked to higher school performance (Sawyer et. al., 2013).

**Social and Emotional Development**

According to the Florida Department of Education (2014), social and emotional development is a child’s ability to develop a healthy relationship with others and then believe in their own skills. Social and development includes self-regulation, relationships, and social problem solving. In a study conducted by Becker, Miao, Duncan, and McClelland (2014) a sample group of 127 children in prekindergarten and kindergarten were examined to explore the effects between behavioral self-regulation and executive function. The effects were measure both directly and interactively. The executive function tasks were inhibitory control and working memory with a measure of fine motor function regarding visuomotor skills. They found that both
behavioral self-regulation and executive function skills were significantly related to achievement outcomes in math, literacy, and vocabulary.

Table 1.

*Five Developmental Domains and the Skills Included.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Development</th>
<th>Approaches to Learning</th>
<th>Social and Emotional Development</th>
<th>Language, Communication and Emergent Literacy</th>
<th>Cognitive Development and General Knowledge</th>
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<td>Health and Wellness</td>
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<td>Vocabulary</td>
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<td>Fine Motor Development</td>
<td>Planning and Reflection</td>
<td>Sentence and Structure</td>
<td>Creative Expression Through the Arts</td>
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Language, Communication and Emergent Literacy

The developmental domain that contains language, communication, and emergent literacy is a broad category. This includes the child’s ability to verbally engage with other along with the ability to communicate with the written language. According to the Early Learning standards, the domain is broad and covers listening, understanding, speaking, vocabulary, sentence structure, conversation, and emergent reading (Florida Department of Education, 2011).

Cognitive Development and General Knowledge

According to Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standards for Four-Year Olds (Florida Department of Education, 2011), the Cognitive and General Knowledge domain entails multiple skills. In mathematical, the domain includes mathematical thinking, scientific, social studies, and creative expression. These are the main categories in primary education. The major differences are the suggestions on how to teach the skills. For example, the standards suggest teaching children in ways where they can lead and be decision makers as a way to study civic ideas and practices (Florida Department of Education, 2011).

The five domains have been designed to incorporate the whole child when considering teaching and moving the child forward. There have been multiple studies that suggest when teacher’s concentrate on certain outcomes there are advantages to children. However, it is simple to find contradicting findings when seeking an answer to what part of development should be focused on more than others.

Goldstein, Warde, and Peluso (2013), conducted a study by paring sample t tests to examine gains in three areas of development; cognitive, communication, and social/learning in 132 at risk three year olds and typical four year olds. They found gains that community based pre-kindergarten programs increased skills in receptive vocabulary, cognitive, and social-
emotional development (Goldstein, Warde, & Peluso, 2013). The authors concurred that the gains were not the same for the at risk 3 year olds. This study lacked a control group and the study did not allow for differences in socio economic status and length of day.

In a larger study conducted by Johnson, Martin, and Brooks-Gunn (2013), data was examined form the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort. The purpose of this study was to examine correlations with children who were funded from subsidized monies and school readiness outcomes. The authors suggest no direct linkages to subsidized care to social and emotional skills or reading achievement (Johnson et al., 2013). The study should not link associations with subsidies because the type of funding was not made known to the researchers.

Over three years, Ma et al., (2013), used a growth method approach to examine if school readiness could be associated how providers perform on the Quality Improvement System. They found that increased sound fluency in young children for control sites. The study failed to include cross analysis, which could seek commonalities in the three years. This study indicates a probability that funded preschool may increase quality with ratings systems that is connected to quality (Ma et al., 2013).

The performance standards include recommendations for practitioners on how to use the standards, how to integrate standards with diverse learners, and how to set up the environment. According to the Florida Department of Education Office of Early Learning, the mission states,

Every four-year old child in Florida shall be provided by the State a high quality pre-kindergarten learning opportunity in the form of an early childhood development and education program which shall be voluntary, high quality, free, and delivered according to professionally accepted standards. (State Constitution, Section 1b, Art. IX)
The mission statement is an indicator that the quality of the program is just as valuable as the end result. The intent of Voluntary Prekindergarten is not to change the beliefs of practitioners in a direction that would move away from quality practices but to prepare children in environments that can meet and exceed their developmental capabilities.

**Ensuring Children Enter Kindergarten Able to Pass the Statewide Kindergarten Screening**

The screening is conducted during the first 30 days of kindergarten (Florida House of Representatives, 2011). If a program does not meet the readiness rate, the program is placed on probation. The ramifications of probation include informing all families in the program, creating an improvement plan, and attending additional professional trainings from the Early Learning Coalition—the local agency responsible for the day-to-day implementation of Voluntary Prekindergarten under the Department of Education. If a program remains unsuccessful the following year, the program is required to implement an approved curriculum. If the program continues not to meet the requirement, they are subject to lose Voluntary Prekindergarten approval (Florida House of Representatives, 2012). According to Perez and Dagan (2009) school readiness is associated and defined on testing outcomes that conform children to be able to answer a preset of prescriptive questions.

The Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener includes two tools, The Early Childhood Observation System and The Florida Assessment for Instruction in Reading-Kindergarten. The former is an instrument to evaluate the whole child with questions pertaining to all the development domains. The latter is a broad screening/progress-monitoring tool to screen language and literacy skills. These skills include letter naming, phonemic awareness, listening comprehension, and vocabulary (Florida House of Representatives, 2011).
Historically, children entering kindergarten were assessed with screening tools (e.g., School Readiness Uniform Screening System, the Early Screening Inventory-Kindergarten, Work Sampling System, Ready-for-School Behavior Screener and the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills in Letter Naming Fluency, and Initial Sound Fluency instruments; Florida House of Representatives, 2011). These tools were used to determine if the child was “school ready” and these tools were also used for appropriate placement in school. They were not used to measure the effectiveness of a preschool program.

According to Section 1002.69(1), (F.S.), all children will be screened within the first 30 days of beginning public school (Florida House of Representatives, 2011). The only exceptions are children who have been placed in a system where they require an Individualized Education Plan. According to the Administration Manual, the Florida Assessment for Instruction in Reading—the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener may be an inappropriate screening tool for English-language learners and for some children with disabilities (Florida House of Representatives, 2011). However, all children are included in the assessment, unless they have lived in the United States less than thirty days, have significant deficits, or the examiner determines it is not reasonable to administer the tool.

The Early Childhood Observation System was designed to screen children during typical school activities, such as story time, music, or other classroom activities. The examiner rates the child’s skills when the child’s behavior is observed one time. The Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener is the instrument used to examine letter and phoneme knowledge (Florida House of Representatives, 2011).

Formal assessments are snapshots of abilities and when they are used as a tool to improve instruction, they can be valuable assets to any program. However, according to Gilliam and
Zigler (2001, 2004), there were numerous weaknesses, causing shortcomings with understanding the results of state evaluations of preschool programs. One concern with single outcome accountability was the challenge with young children being recalcitrant during the assessment process (Frede, Gilliam, & Schweinhart, 2008). Additionally, these authors state what is actually measured drives what occurs in the early childhood classroom. The goal to ensure every child is “ready for kindergarten” may restructure preschool classrooms to mimic grade school classrooms, ultimately having a negative effect on children. Kowalski, Brown, and Pretti-Frontcza (2005) conducted a study to examine if formal assessment instruments would alter preschool teachers’ beliefs and practices. The researchers found preschool teachers who began working with formal assessment viewed the items on the assessment as critical skills for children to learn.

In an analysis study conducted by DellaMattera (2010), four New England preschools were evaluated on how accountability affects programs. She found policies for early childhood programs focus on specific academic abilities, and, in return, the educators spend more time in teacher-directed activities focused on cognitive skills. Graue and Johnson (2011) conducted a three-year qualitative case study in 500 Wisconsin schools to examine accountability in educational programs. Their results indicated teachers feel standardized tests drive instructional practices. When assessments are used for actions such as improving student outcomes or teaching methods they guide instruction. Their results suggested accountability could be beneficial when it is used to improve student achievement.

Early childhood is an intricate, complex profession. Accountability through a variety of methods can assist in building and developing programs that can heighten quality. Systems of accountability do not have to be unpleasant even though the popular description of accountability
is high-stakes assessment (Graue & Johnson, 2011). Programs working with children especially should have a structure in place to meet or maintain standards and excellence. Instead of paving a one-way road leading to a pass or fail end, all aspects of the program should be evaluated (teaching practices, environment, child outcomes, etc). According to Copple and Bredekamp (2009), when accountability in early childhood programs guide lessons, identify interventions for children, and assist programs in dealing with children, families, and practitioners the outcomes lead to developmentally appropriate practices and positive outcomes.

Almon and Miller (2011) state, “The desire for a fast track to success, coupled with a push for tough standards and test-based accountability has built a new superhighway without speed limits or guardrails; a disastrous place for children” (p. 2-3). How practitioners in a program on probation describe and explain this evolution of prekindergarten may assist in understanding the true outcomes to children in Voluntary Prekindergarten. By illuminating the perceptions of providers, a better understanding can be gained on the reality of Voluntary Prekindergarten. Understanding can lead to support in training, to successful practices, or to prevent an inappropriate change in instruction and curriculum.

**Provider on Probation**

The Florida Statues in pursuant to Title 1002.67(3)(c)2, providers may use plan developed for Voluntary Prekindergarten Providers on Probation to assist in meeting the requirements of probation. The Florida Department of Education requires that each center director, Voluntary Prekindergarten teacher and assistant must take four trainings and providence evidence by the documentation by the Department of Children and Families transcript before the beginning of the program year. The required trainings included; 1) Standards for Four-Year-Olds, 2) How to Administer the Florida VPK Assessment, 3) Emergent Literacy for VPK
instructors, and 4) Language and Vocabulary in the VPK Classroom. The first two trainings listed are offered as instructor led courses while the last two could be completed online. The plan stated that if new staff begins in the Voluntary Prekindergarten classroom, these trainings must be completed within one month of hire. In addition, two other trainings must be completed by the required staff with in the first half of the school year. They include Integrating the Standards: Phonological Awareness and VPK Assessment Instructional Implications for Providers on Probation.

Programs on probation were also required to have a copy of the Florida standards for Four-Year-Olds. The Standards required are one of the three benchmarks that Florida meets on the NIEER State of Preschool report card. They can be printed or purchased on the Florida Voluntary Prekindergarten’s website. An additional requirement is the school have the language and phonological awareness sample lesson plans from the website available for staff. The supervisor is also required to observe required staff biweekly to ensure proper implementation of plans with specific attention to language and phonological awareness activities. The staff are required to meet monthly. Finally, the providers on probation must also assess the children in the Voluntary Prekindergarten classroom times during the program versus two times if they were not on probation. The assessment is provided by the Florida Department of Education and is known by providers as AP1, AP2, and AP3.

**Starfall Curriculum**

According to Starfall (2014), June 2013 marked the distribution of the Starfall Pre-K Curriculum. The website for Starfall stated, “Our methodology motivates children in an atmosphere of imagination and play” (Starfall, 2014). The website shared that the curriculum is a complete curriculum for prekindergarten. In addition, the curriculum integrated academics,
physical movement, creative arts, and social-emotional development (Starfall, 2014). According to the site, in 2002 the Polis-Schutz created the program by providing free resources to teachers and parents to teach reading and phonics to children. Included on the site was an evaluation conducted from Metis Associates that indicated that children in kindergarten had a significant higher proficiency than children not exposed to Starfall. In addition, the site included the curriculum was field tested, research based, and was created to be linked to the Common Core Standards that has been predicted to be implemented for pre-k.

**Conclusion**

The School Board of Education annually calculates the acceptable readiness rate for Voluntary Prekindergarten programs. This readiness rate is the provider’s scores figured after the children are assessed in kindergarten. Since the implementation of Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V, how practitioners in Voluntary Prekindergarten programs on probation respond when they are unsuccessful at reaching the readiness requirement is a missing piece in the literature.

Stakeholders in the early childhood profession have long advocated the importance of childhood as the opportunity to provide the foundation for educational success. Research supporting the need for young children to have quality experiences created a reason to teach children more at younger ages. That information, along with major studies indicating preschool programs preparing children for academic success and societal benefits, has given reason for politicians to support prekindergarten education. The challenge is within Florida’s vision if an accountability system is not well suited for children. This review includes limited successful studies indicating positive outcomes to one-dimensional assessments that hold programs accountable. Goldstein and McCoach (2011) stated there is inadequate research on how practitioners can improve the results of high stakes assessment within developmentally
appropriate practices. What children need to succeed in school and in life is broad, and how practitioners teach skills to become successful is even less defined in the literature (Watson, 2011). The following chapter describes the research design of the present study and the frame used to understand how practitioners in one program on probation attempt to meet the accountability requirements.
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a social constructivist lens to explore the beliefs and perspectives of practitioners in a program experiencing the same common experience of inadequate readiness scores in an approved Voluntary Prekindergarten program. The topic of preschool accountability holds an interest in the field of early childhood. The Florida VPK mandate was implemented in 2005; however, 2007 was the first year scores had a negative impact on VPK centers. During the first two years, providers were not held accountable for their students’ scores (Florida House of Representative, 2011). Given the recent implementation of consequences for centers failing to meet established benchmarks, it is important to explore the effect on a program that was struggling to meet the readiness score. The information can assist by adding to the literature on preschool accountability and learning how the Voluntary Prekindergarten mandate has influenced practices in early childhood settings.

The purpose of this study was to describe and explain the perceptions and practices that selected practitioners have about prekindergarten in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program unable to meet minimal accountability requirements.

The exploratory questions that guided my study were:

1. Among practitioners in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program on probation, what are their beliefs and perceptions about effective and appropriate early childhood education?
2. In what ways does probation influence practitioners’ perceptions and beliefs about early childhood education?

This chapter details the framework for this qualitative interview case study. I provide the framework by segmenting critical components of the research design to further elaborate on each subject. I begin by clarifying my rationale and then proceed to illustrate my role as the researcher. In addition, I describe and explain my procedures regarding the methods for gathering, interpreting, and analyzing data among the data sources; interview transcriptions, Voluntary Prekindergarten scores, program improvement scores, researcher reflective journal, and résumés. Additionally, I provide more detail regarding the pilot study. I continue by presenting possible ethical concerns, my assumptions as a researcher, and my anticipated timeline. Finally, I summarize the chapter by uniting the details of the plan and reviewing the big picture for the research design.

Rationale for Research Design

Qualitative research is an umbrella descriptor for multiple methods of inquiry used by researchers in order to come to understand the questions posed (Piantanida & Garman, 2009). Qualitative research is necessary when the purpose and questions of a study require the personal experiences of the participants from their point of view (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research is a holistic way to listen and document the participants’ experiences and stories. According to Janesick (2011), qualitative research possesses attributes such as being: (1) holistic; (2) concerned with a system; and having (3) personal connections to the participants in face to face interactions; (4) the researcher as a research instrument; (5) sensitivity to the case and to ethical issues in the fieldwork. I believe the phenomenon of the accountability conflict new to preschool programs requires the people who are experiencing a challenge with meeting the school
readiness rate should have their views heard. This will add a broader depiction of the Voluntary Prekindergarten Program centers. The current description is their low readiness score.

My choice of conducting qualitative interviews is grounded in social-constructivist theory and my passion for this complex and dynamic profession. To my knowledge, the reality of working in a preschool program unable to meet an accountability mandate is not in the research literature. By interviewing multiple participants in one program on probation, I may come to bridge their realities and their words. To interpret the perceptions within the social construct framework, I believe the way to understand is to participate in conversations with others and to reflect. I believe each participant in the study had a unique account of the Voluntary Prekindergarten program, and I was intrigued to discover the commonalities and differences within their stories. My social-constructivist lens aligns with qualitative interview research, as I desired to listen to and to share the experiences of five Volunteer Prekindergarten practitioners in conflict.

In this study, I described and explained the perceptions of an owner (from the pilot study), a director, and three practitioners working in a Voluntary Prekindergarten center that had not met accountability requirements. The participants described how Voluntary Prekindergarten was implemented, practiced, and interpreted. According to Merriam (2009), the essence of qualitative research is to describe, understand, and interpret complex realities. The most appropriate path for this social-constructivism study was for me to take the role of a responsive interviewer as a primary way of collecting data. My analysis created an understanding of the influences and rationale of the participants’ Voluntary Prekindergarten experiences. This process allowed me to gather rich, in-depth data for me to understand the participants’ changing reality of preschool.
Pilot Study

As mentioned in Chapter One, an assignment in a doctoral course led me to this study. The course was instrumental in teaching me interviewing skills as an introduction to qualitative research. During that assignment, I practiced semi-structured interviewing with a director of a Voluntary Prekindergarten program. I was able to audio record two interviews with the Zoom H1 Handy Recorder, each one hour. For both interviews, I personally transcribed the interview. Then, I asked the interviewee to member check my writings for accuracy. Through commonalities and coding, I discovered the responses from the first interview enabled me to form the second set of questions. I found that I did not use all of the questions I had prepared, because I created new questions, as her answers made me probe about other aspects of her center.

The purpose of the assignment was to introduce me to qualitative interview. The purpose of the interview was to discuss how the owner felt about why her school scored a low readiness rate. The findings of the pilot study indicated a need for the program to align professional development practices with student and teacher outcomes. The director had genuine concerns for the limited financial support in the field and the Voluntary Prekindergarten program provided extra financial support. In my analysis, I placed programs into two categories; the have’s and the have-not’s. I was able to resonate with her financial concerns (the school is located in a low-income area) and there was a need for more professional development for providers. I concluded there was a strong push for practitioners to make sure children can pass the kindergarten readiness screener. This assignment provided me experience and strengthened my role as a researcher. I learned how to transcribe, code, construct questions, and analyze data. I felt
confident in this study from the practice I had in the course and from taking other qualitative courses at the University.

Site Selection

My first choice was to expand on the pilot study. If for any unforeseen reason the site could not participate, I would need to recruit other programs, using The Department of Education as a resource. The Department of Education site has access for the public to view Voluntary Prekindergarten scores for any program in the state of Florida. Using the site, I created a list of providers who had not been able to meet the required score placing the program on probation. The site needed to be an approved Voluntary Prekindergarten provider. The program also needed to have staff willing to participate in the study.

The site was located in a high-poverty area that has a diversified population of Caucasians, Hispanics, and African Americans. The site was licensed with the local counties health department and had a capacity of 109. It was open from 6:30 am to 6:00 pm. The school accepted from infants to school age children but typically took children until kindergarten. The owner shared that she set up the school to be licensed for before and after care, so as to assist staff with their own children.

The center held a current accreditation with the Florida Association for Child Care Management, also known as the Accredited Professional Preschool Learning Environment (APPLE). This accreditation was part of Florida’s Gold Seal Program. Centers who are part of the Gold Seal Program could receive additional reimbursement for subsidized care, ad valorem tax relief, and a sales tax exemption on items for the center (Florida Association for Child Care Management, 2012).
Participant Selection

The participants in the study were staff members at a Voluntary Prekindergarten program in West Central Florida. The director and lead practitioner had at least eight years of experience and worked in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program on probation. Three other participants were included in the study. I required additional participants to either work in a Voluntary Prekindergarten classroom, or to have felt an effect from the Voluntary Prekindergarten mandate. Other criteria included:

1. Participants had to be willing to be in the study and to sign a consent form;
2. Participants had to be willing to spend three one-hour increments with me for Interviews;
3. Participants had to be willing for the interviews to be recorded with the Zoom H1 Handy Recorder.

I chose to approach the owner from my pilot study because I was aware that she struggled with her center maintaining the Voluntary Prekindergarten readiness scores. The pilot study indicated her passion and her commitment to raising quality in preschools. With her permission, I individually approached her three Voluntary Prekindergarten practitioners and her director and explained the procedures of the study. I gave each of them a copy of the informed consent form and requested that each read it carefully (See Appendix C). I collected their contact information and returned to the center later in the week. I spent more time reviewing the consent form with each participant to answer any questions and to describe verbally the intent and the criteria of the study.

After each had signed the consent, I was able to plan where and when each participant preferred to be interviewed and spent one-on-one time learning about their backgrounds and
connecting to their personas. Each participant consented to describe and explain the Voluntary Prekindergarten program in extended recorded conversations. I sought to empower the participants to be conversational partners, as recommended by Rubin and Rubin (2012). Each participant’s confidentiality was maintained by creating a pseudonym. I could not prevent participants’ knowing who at the school was involved in the study because the interviews took place on site at a time that was the participant’s choice. I only shared transcripts with the participants interviewed. Transcripts were kept in a locked file and were approved by each participant after the transcriptions were completed. The participants were able to send me their suggestions after I completed the case study to ensure accurate interpretation.

**Data Collection**

According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), when the research requires understanding and conceptualizing other people’s experiences, naturalistic research tools are appropriate. My primary methods of data collection were responsive interviewing and my researcher reflective journal. I collected documents, including the program’s scores from the Department of Education, the program’s improvement plan, and the participants’ résumés to assist in gathering as much as information as possible.

When I compared the data sources, I found similarities and differences between the participants and found connections among the documents, such as the educational level and program, interest in the field, and future goals. I chose to group the practitioners and the administrators separately because their challenges were unique compared to the practitioners. By combining interviews with the other data sources, I created a rich data trail.
**Interviews**

During interviews, there is a social opportunity to discover individual perspectives of the event. As a constructivist, I believe socialization is crucial in learning. Understanding the topic of accountability based on a high-stakes assessment from a social context is a new reality to early childhood professionals. The interviews broadened the depth of knowledge of their reality, regarding transitions that occurred in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program failing to meet accountability requirements. Interviews provided data that allowed me to explore the participants’ perspectives.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) describe in-depth interviewing as a valuable tool in qualitative research. They recommend including three characteristics important to the interview: (1) Asking questions that seek stories or narratives that will encourage more than a one-word response; (2) Forming open-ended question leading to further elaboration or new issues; (3) Remaining flexible with the questions and taking advantage of moments when questions can be added or removed. I followed their river-and-channel approach to interviewing, which enabled me to explore the Voluntary Prekindergarten issue in depth; by creating opportunity to follow the lead the interviewee took from the questions. Probing questions permitted me to respond with new questions to delve deeper into the participants’ responses. Appendix D contains a sample of the questions I asked.

The protocols for this study were semi-structured to allow for flexibility. The questions were topical and explored who, what, where, when, why, and how (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The responsive interviews were coded and compared; however, I did not judge or view one as correct or misguided, following the suggestions from Rubin and Rubin. Similarly, I followed their seven steps in responsive interview analysis to review, organize, and understand the excerpts.
I conducted three interviews per participant. The first interview served for me to gain an understanding of each participant’s history in preschool. This assisted me to gain knowledge of their background in the early childhood profession, how they entered the field, what kept them in the classroom, and what they believed the field should be like. The second interview centered on Voluntary Prekindergarten issues and effective practices. The third interview provided an opportunity to reflect on the first two interviews and gave space for expansion or corrections. The goal of the three interviews was to reach saturation.

Each interview took approximately an hour and took place in a location and time convenient to the practitioners (Janesick, 2011). The Zoom H1 Handy Recorder device recorded the interviews to assist me in capturing every detail. Recording also provided me opportunity to reflect and expand my thoughts, rather than attempting to write everything down during the interviews (Janesick, 2011).

**Voluntary Prekindergarten Scores**

After securing the location of the center for my study, my first goal was to investigate the Voluntary Prekindergarten reading readiness scores from the center. The Department of Education and the Early Learning Coalitions post Voluntary Prekindergarten providers’ scores on their websites. I obtained the scores before the interviews. I found them easy to locate and simple to understand. The site provided me options to select the year, the county, and the center (See Appendix E, readiness rate for center). It also allowed me to view how many children participated in the Voluntary Prekindergarten program and separated the school year score from the summer time score. The scores were used as a conversational tool to infer more details about their perceptions of why their program had not meet the requirement and how they would meet it the following year. The scores also served as a discussion point in my findings.
My curiosity drew me to learn about how the state of Florida was fairing with the readiness rate. At the time of this study, there were 6,776 (2012-2013) approved Voluntary Prekindergarten programs in the State of Florida, down from 6,807 in the 2011-2012 school year. According to the Department of Education website (2012), during the 2012-2013 year (including summer) 1,352 or 20% of providers were placed on probation. That was a decrease from the previous year of 1,709 programs. Out of the 1,352 programs on probation, 1,197 or 88% were on probation from the school year scores, while 155 or 11% were on probation from summer time scores. A total of 4,764 or 70% programs were able to meet the readiness rate (Voluntary Prekindergarten, 2014). Table 2 summarizes the data findings on state Voluntary Prekindergarten scores.

Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Participating Sites</th>
<th>Not Graded</th>
<th>Successful</th>
<th>Probation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>School-Year</td>
<td>Summer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>6,807</td>
<td>1,709/25%</td>
<td>1,554/90%</td>
<td>155/10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>6,776</td>
<td>1,352/20%</td>
<td>1,197/88%</td>
<td>155/11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the county where this study took place, there were 302 approved programs during the 2012-2013 year (including summer). Twenty-one programs or 7% were placed on probation, 25 or 8% were not graded, and 256 or 85% were successful (Voluntary Prekindergarten, 2014). The previous year, 2011-2012, there were 313 providers in the county. Thirty-eight providers or 12% were placed on probation, 27 or 8% were not graded, and 248 or 79% were successful (Voluntary Prekindergarten, 2013). Providers did not earn a readiness score or were not graded if fewer than four children from that program were screened upon kindergarten entry or if less than four children met substantial completion of the program (Voluntary Prekindergarten, 2014).
I continued to explore the site by comparing counties that were similar in the numbers of children participating in the program for the county in the study. Table 3 and Table 4 are comparisons of Voluntary Prekindergarten readiness rates for similar counties for the school year 2011-2012 and 2012-2013. The Voluntary Prekindergarten Programs in the county of this study were more successful than other counties in the state. There was no public information available regarding how the programs increased their scores.

Table 3.

**Comparisons of Voluntary Prekindergarten Readiness Rates for Similar Counties for 2011/2012.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>2011/2012 Total Participating Sites</th>
<th>Not Graded</th>
<th>Successful</th>
<th>Probation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>School-Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*A</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>27/8%</td>
<td>248/79%</td>
<td>38/12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>48/10%</td>
<td>299/64%</td>
<td>118/25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>443</td>
<td>53/12%</td>
<td>252/57%</td>
<td>138/31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>33/8%</td>
<td>238/63%</td>
<td>104/27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>21/9%</td>
<td>152/68%</td>
<td>48/21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.

**Comparisons of Voluntary Prekindergarten Readiness Rates for Similar Counties for 2012/2013.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>2012/2013 Total Participating Sites</th>
<th>Not Graded</th>
<th>Successful</th>
<th>Probation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>School-Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*A</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>25/8%</td>
<td>256/85%</td>
<td>21/7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>34/7%</td>
<td>346/73%</td>
<td>90/19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>446</td>
<td>52/11%</td>
<td>291/65%</td>
<td>103/23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>34/9%</td>
<td>256/68%</td>
<td>83/22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>21/9%</td>
<td>138/60%</td>
<td>68/30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The program in this study started implementing Voluntary Prekindergarten the first year it began 2005. Between the years 2005 and 2008 the minimum readiness rate increased from a score of 201 to 214. During these years the rate was derived from the scores taken from the Early Childhood Observation System (ECHOS) and two measurements from the Dynamic Indicators.
of Emerging Literacy (DIBELS®) including Letter Naming Fluency and Initial Sound Fluency for the kindergarten readiness assessment.

Beginning in 2008, the DIBELS® was replaced with the Florida Assessment for Instruction in Reading (FAIR). This assessment also included letter naming and phonemic awareness tasks. Again in the 2010-2011 school year the assessment changed to include the ECHOS and the FAIR. The changes in the minimum rate can be accounted for the effort to improve quality (raising the scores slightly will encourage higher performance) or a change in the assessments administered. (The Florida Office of Early Learning, 2013).

The provider in this study was considered a low performing provider in the 2009-2010 school year, and in the summers of 2009-2010, 2010-2011, and 2011-2012. Table 5, Readiness rates of the program in the study, indicates the year, the program type, how many children were served, how many children met substantial completion, how many children were calculated in the readiness rate, and if the provider was consider low performing. The table indicates that in the summer time enrollment in Voluntary Prekindergarten was significantly reduced.

Not all of the children were calculated in the readiness rate. Those include the children who did not attend the program for 70% of the hours and the children who did not take the kindergarten assessment. According to The Florida Office of Early Learning (2013), children must have attended 378 hours of the school year program and 210 hours of the summer program.

The Voluntary Prekindergarten scores informed me on how the program in the study faiured to other State programs and to counties with similar characteristics. The scores also informed on the programs progress since it became an approved provider. The scores were used as a source of dialogue in the interviews and as a point of discussion in my findings.
Table 5.

*Readiness Rates of the Program in the Study.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Children Served</th>
<th>Children meeting substantial completion</th>
<th>Children in readiness calculation</th>
<th>Low Performing Provider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005-2006 School year</td>
<td>219 Min rate 201</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2006 Summer</td>
<td>275 Min rate 201</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2007 School year</td>
<td>265 Min rate 211</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2007 Summer</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-2008 School year</td>
<td>249 Min rate 214</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-2008 Summer</td>
<td>243 Min rate 214</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2009 School year</td>
<td>166 Min rate 138</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2009 Summer</td>
<td>140 Min rate 138</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010 School year</td>
<td>179 Min rate 140</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010 Summer</td>
<td>116 Min rate 140</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2011 School Year</td>
<td>65 Min rate 70</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2011 Summer</td>
<td>60 Min rate 70</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012 School Year</td>
<td>91 Min rate 70</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012 Summer</td>
<td>67 Min rate 70</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013 School Year</td>
<td>79 Min rate 70</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013 Summer</td>
<td>Could not be calculated due to fewer than 4 children screened</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Program Improvement Plan

The programs placed on probation are required to submit an improvement plan to their local Early Learning Coalition. The coalition is responsible for ensuring the plan is acceptable and followed. The Early Learning Coalition should provide guidance to programs to assist them in maintaining the plan. The program improvement plan contains a summary of staff’s required educational level and training and a self-checklist of the developmental screenings, environmental assessment, children’s attendance, and family involvement. (See Appendix F) The plan with their verbal accounts would provide me the details and explanations I sought. I requested the plan from the director directly after the proposal was approved, and she agreed to participate in the study.

Participants’ Résumés

The résumés informed me more about the participants’ background, education, and experience in preschool. This again assisted me in developing questions for the interview. The résumés also allowed me to make the most of my time during the interviews. I requested the résumés as soon as the participants agreed to the study. Only two of the participants had a completed up-to-date résumé. Three participants did not provide the résumé. To compensate, I provided additional time to the first interview so I could obtain the background information.

Reflective Researcher Journal

To ensure clarity of the information, to check for understanding, and to collect a written account of my thoughts, I kept a reflective researcher journal. I began my journal entries upon approval of the proposal of the research and added to it before and after I spent time in the field (See Appendix G for the reflective journal entry before the interview). I found that I began to carry my journal with me most of the time and began to rely on it for notes, thoughts, and
inquires. Janesick (2004) recommends qualitative researchers keep up with regular journal entries. Before the interviews I would take some time and think about the upcoming interview. I would reread the prior transcription and would make notes of significant topics that I wanted to know more about. During the interview, I wrote notes about the nuances of the interview (e.g., facial expressions and gestures) and the environment. After each interview, I returned to the journal to reflect on the outcomes and my personal thoughts about what transpired.

After I transcribed the interviews, I continued my journal entries noting when I provided the participants with the copy and how each responded to the transcriptions and interpretations. The journal enabled me to bracket, so I could step into my role of researcher. The journal allowed me to internally dialogue and it provided me a venue for me to reflect on my thoughts. The journal included my preconceived ideas on Voluntary Prekindergarten, my expectations of the interviews, non-verbal cues of the participants, a description of the physical setting, and my thoughts prior and directly after the interviews. The journal and the transcriptions allowed me to gain the participants’ perspectives, and then return to probe more about a key topic or event they were speaking of in the first or second interview. Figure 2 is a visual representation of my entries in my reflective journal.

**Write in Detail and Summarize Each Interview**

The reflective journal is where most of the details were added to the interviews. I also printed the interviews and wrote down my thoughts on the actual transcriptions. I compared both sets of notes to create a summary of the interview written in the journal. I completed this within three days of finishing each interview transcription. After the third interview, I created a general summary and a summary per interview based on the three themes: (1) Understanding of
Figure 2: A visual representation of my entries in my reflective journal.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

1. Write in detail and summarize each interview
2. Define, seek, and highlight the text relevant subjects
3. Use the interviews to find themes with matching codes
4. Categorize and catalog to clarify then sum up results
5. Consider and combine data in groups and subgroups
6. Amalgamate themes associated with theory
7. Generalize results without simplifying

Figure 3. Rubin and Rubin’s seven suggestions for responsive analysis
teaching practices; (2) Perceptions of working in a school on probation; and (3) Assessment and accountability. This assisted in keeping my data organized and relevant.

Define, Seek, and Highlight the Text Relevant Subjects

The transcriptions of the interviews were created immediately after each interview and were provided for the participants to read within seven days after our meetings. I had planned to use Express Scribe Pro to transcribe the data. However, after I completed the first interview, I realized that the recorder only had about five minutes of data. I wrote the interviews from my notes and gave them to the participant within two days. I was able to fix the challenge with the recorder but I realized the need for me to transcribe the interview myself because the time spent in that process held value in my notes and organization. It was a technical glitch that I was able to recover from; yet, it gave me a sense of responsibility to keep writing and transcribing myself. This practice allowed me to delimit the text, to revisit misconceptions, to find pertinent topics, and to highlight relevant information. Appendix H is an example of a transcript with notes.

Gather and Examine the Data

As I found commonalities, I would highlight the text. I found this a challenge at first because I often would return to the transcripts and look for subjects. To decrease the time spent in searching for topics of interest, I created a system that I could easily understand when I wanted to compare and contrast or when I just wanted to revisit a subject. The letters described to me where to find what the participant said in the transcription. The first number told me what interview it was. The P followed by the number informed me what participant made the statement. Appendix I shows an example of my coding technique.
Use the Interviews to Find Themes with Matching Codes

I color-coded themes, highlighted, and underlined repetitions. I organized the themes according to my questions of inquiry and then color-categorized them by participant and by topic. The key topics were the reliance on the curriculum, the amount of time spent in the program, the disconnection between training and practice, stress on the participants, and stress on children. In addition, the participants all welcomed accountability, but disagreed with the system created in the mandate. I continued to code and dissect the data numerous times. According to Saldana (2009), data must be coded multiple times. I coded each transcription at least three times.

Categorize and Catalog to Clarify Then Sum Up the Results

I believe that because I chose to transcribe the interviews myself I was more aware of potential categories in the data. The summary was accomplished at the end of each transcription and each set of interviews. After I separated the summaries by themes, I categorized the themes by key topics. I then pre-coded by underlining, circling, and highlighting with colors that I had assigned per topic. During this process, I dissected the topics into parts that I cataloged them for extensive examination. This ultimately made it possible for me to compare and contrast. Here I created primary, secondary, and tertiary codes. This assisted me in grouping and sub-grouping the data.

Consider and Combine the Data in Groups and Subgroups

As I combined the data and created relevant codes, I continued to reflect in my researcher journal. I was able to revisit the provider improvement plan, the résumés, and the reflective journal as I gathered the information in groups and subgroups. This practice led to saturation of
the information gathered as I reflected then combined the materials. During this time, I deleted material that was not related to the themes.

**Amalgamate Themes Associated with Theory**

Keeping with Dewey and his view of progressive versus traditional education, I took the topics in the themes and segregated them into characteristics of progressive or traditional methods. The progressive approach is closely aligned with developmentally appropriate practices. Because of the complexity of the field, I used my experience and my education to determine which practices aligned with the approach. In addition, my peer reviewer agreed with how I associated the themes to the theory.

**Generalize Results without Simplifying**

I choose to implement pattern coding to foster findings of critical themes and to facilitate data categorization. Member check assisted participants in feeling comfortable and assisted me with accuracy. I used the transcripts to seek verifiable patterns and to describe and explain their perceptions of Voluntary Prekindergarten. Finally, I conjoined the results of the data and reframed from over generalizing in my impressions. This multi-case study was about one center and conclusions cannot be created; however, recommendations for practice are offered.

Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) analysis for responsive interviews guided me to ensure rigor analysis in a systematical manner. Interpretation and analysis were continuous throughout the study and began as I collected readiness scores and résumés. The pilot study led me to my inquiry questions. As I conducted the study, I carefully respected my ethical considerations, my credibility, my assumptions, and my substantial conclusions.
Ethical Considerations

I had a current certificate for IRB ethical training for human subjects at the time of the study. In addition, I earned IRB approval before research began. According to Piantanida and Garmin (2009), there are ethical responsibilities above and beyond the IRB approval. I was respectful of the participants’ perspectives and I remained sensitive to their words. In addition to the recommendations offered by Piantanida and Garman (2009), I used pseudonyms for the program and for the participants for confidentiality purposes. As I coded the data, the names were also coded, as an intentional mask for the participants. The participants signed an informed consent and were informed of the purpose of the study. The consent form included the option of the participant withdrawing from the study at any time.

I understood that the providers in the program willing to participate were familiar with my work as trainer and training coordinator. I spent individual time with each one prior to agreeing to share my role and the intentions of my work. Janesick (2011) recommends making personal connections known if the researcher knows the participants.

There was a risk that the participants viewed me as a person with power, due to my responsibility as a training coordinator. My position at the time was to organize foundational trainings and examinations for the Department of Children and Families. Many directors and practitioners used me as a resource for the required trainings and exams. In order to create a balance, I took special precautions to make the participants feel safe. I believed that by allowing the participants to decide the time and location of the interview and the assurance of total confidentiality, the participants felt free to speak about their experiences. The member checks also assisted in conveying to the participants that my representations of their comments were true and accurate.
Every effort took place to prevent any ethical issues from harming the participants. Additionally, I also chose a peer who was familiar with early-education research to review the transcripts, the codes, the themes, and the analysis. I met with the peer reviewer a minimum of four times to evaluate and reflect if the data and findings were plausible (Merriam, 2009).

**Credibility**

The program I selected needed to include participants who were capable of expressing, without fabrication, their perspectives of Voluntary Prekindergarten. To ensure accuracy, I used an audio recorder during the interviews. In order to conduct a credible and reliable study, I created an audit trail and followed the suggestions from Pianitanida & Garman (2009). Throughout the study, I kept a reflective journal with copious notes. Periodically, I referred back to the notes and practiced member checking to ensure accuracy in my results.

**Assumptions of the Researcher**

I had assumptions about this study. I worked as an early childhood professional for over twenty years. I trained early childhood practitioners, observed them, and evaluated them, in both adult-learning environments and in preschool classrooms. My experience influenced my research because it was my reality. The design of this qualitative study allowed me to air my assumptions in my research journal and make my assumptions known.

**Substantiated Conclusions**

The conclusions of the study were drawn from the qualitative data collected; the interviews, the scores, the improvement plan, and the reflective researcher journal. By seeking patterns and commonalities, I was able to maintain the focus, yet be flexible in the findings. This resulted in a rich foundation of data that contained the voice and perceptions of the participating educators.
Role of the Researcher

Social constructivism embeds the importance of those who experience phenomena (Merriam, 2009). This study interlinks both social constructivism and appropriate preschool practices to accentuate social learning and community building. Researchers recommend social learning and community building as primary methods of learning (Almon & Miller, 2011; Spodek & Saracho, 2014). Control such as accountability is based on one single outcome, which could influence teachers to educate with traditional methods outside of the social and community continuum. The need to move to traditional methods might come from the fear of failure or decreased admiration from peers and from standards set by the government. Traditional methods are practices such as the teacher presenting knowledge with a goal for children to memorize the material. Traditional methods are absent of techniques that encourage active learning, inquiry, and reflection.

In Florida, early-childhood educators are taught developmentally appropriate practices in the majority of professional-development programs within a progressive frame. I was curious if the program had shifted towards traditional methods from a need to improve Voluntary Prekindergarten scores. I believe in educational freedom, progressive education, social learning, and reflection. These beliefs were also taught to the participants in this study. How the participants reacted to the need to improve scores was a phenomenon worthy of study. Learning why they changed from a critical perspective might tell an unexpected result of the high-stakes accountability that factored in on their decisions.

As a researcher, I can relate to Rubin and Rubin (2012) when they state people have many realities that may change with experience. I planned to seek the answers to my questions by, first, hearing their experiences, then, forming questions to assist me in assimilating their
stories from responsive interviews. I gathered vivid details from the responsive interviews and the data sources. I had predicted the participants in my study would be fearful. However, as I had an opportunity to listen to how they described and explained their complex phenomena, I was able to make their reality known.

As I sought to understand the practitioners’ perspectives (Pianitanida & Garman, 2009) in a less authoritative constructivist manner, I served as an observer and interpreter of their world. The participants were chosen on their ability to meet my requirements, creating boundaries in the study. The requirements included signing a study release form (Janesick, 2011), one director and one lead practitioner working in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program with at least eight years’ experience, other participants interested in sharing their reality of Voluntary Prekindergarten (e.g., the assistant director or the classroom assistant). The participants were also required to consent to at least three face-to-face interviews. The interviews allowed me to enter their world and unravel how they formed knowledge through training, how they practiced what they learned, and how it affected (from their perspective) children’s achievement. The interviews provided saturation of their perceptions regarding voluntary prekindergarten.

I positioned myself as a tool in the research as I stood back many times to reflect on their words. I admit to a personal bias, as I expected to hear conflict. I could not predict what the experiences were, or if they would describe their reality in a similar fashion. I predicted that change occurred and teaching practices were affected. That responsibility required me to reflect and to write in my journal as I entered the proposal stage of this study and continue to write prior and concluding each interview. In addition, I added to my journal as I transcribed their words in the interview and throughout as I reflected on this journey. The journal was essential to the
credibility and rigor of my findings. According to Janesick (2011), the journal would enhance my research skills, such as writing and communicating.

I chose qualitative interviews because I predicted the perspectives the participants shared would assist me in understanding their issues. The composition of the interviews derived from the works of Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin (2012). I created a list of questions before each interview to assist me in remaining close to my exploratory questions. The questions were used as a tool to extend the conversation to build relationships, trust, and gather detailed data. I choose Rubin and Rubin’s methods to implement the interviews in order to understand how accountability affects a Voluntary Prekindergarten program on probation, through in-depth interviews to describe and explain their experience. This required me to listen and to interpret the realities of the owner, the director, and the practitioners in a program labeled unsuccessful by the boundaries the Florida mandate.

My research questions led me to choose interviewing as a data-gathering tool for this naturalistic qualitative study. I collected documents, such as the Voluntary Prekindergarten scores published on the Department of Education’s website and the program’s improvement plan. The scores assisted me in ascertaining data, such as how many children in the program were able to pass and not pass the kindergarten assessment. I expected the improvement plan to provide me with how the director of the program intended to meet the accountability requirement. Moreover, the documents guided me in forming the interview questions.

This study would have a minimum of two participants and a maximum of five participants. Since attrition is high in early childhood programs, I would not include the data from a participant if any of the interviews were incomplete. This was the reason why I required a minimum of two participants. I required that either the director or the lead Voluntary
Prekindergarten practitioner have eight years’ experience, in order to better understand the transition from privately funded prekindergarten to universal prekindergarten. In a three-month period, I conducted three interviews. I believed one month per interview would allow me enough time to transcribe and to reflect.

Constructivism is a view that values reality as meaningful and constructed in the context of social interactions and real experiences. I followed Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) recommendations for analysis of responsive interviews. I used their assumptions to collect data, listen to each practitioner, interpret, and evaluate in an open-ended naturalistic manner. I hoped policy makers and local agencies would hear their voices and make appropriate decisions from their experiences. Therefore, my background and my philosophy drew me to the nature and purpose of my research questions and guided me to a qualitative interview study. The following table (Table 6) describes my process for site selection, participant selection, data collection, data analysis, and writing, concluding with the completion of my doctoral dissertation requirements.

Table 6.

*Timeline for the Study and Dissertation Completion.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Inquiry</th>
<th>Time of Completion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-proposal Defense</td>
<td>April 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposal Defense</td>
<td>May 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>Summer &amp; Fall 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis &amp; Writing</td>
<td>Spring 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense</td>
<td>Fall 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation</td>
<td>Fall 2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I described my research design and explained my rationale for choosing the social constructivism framework to complete a qualitative study. My role as a researcher was critical to the success of this study. A variety of methods were needed for interviewing, coding,
and analyzing. My choice of methodology, along with a rationale was provided. The qualitative study took a generous amount of time. Each phase of the study was planned, implemented, reflected, and analyzed. For the data to be copious and valid, I spent equal amount of time in the field in my role of researcher (Janesick, 2011). Equally important to my design were my ethical considerations and my anticipated timeline. Chapter Four contains my data, the common themes, and my findings connected to the research questions for the study.
CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION OF DATA

The purpose of this multi-case study was to describe and explain the perspectives and beliefs that chosen practitioners have about prekindergarten in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program unable to meet minimal accountability requirements. I investigated what they knew about developmentally appropriate practices and how they believed early childhood education should be implemented. The study concentrated on what the practitioners and the administrators did to improve the readiness scores of the children in their program.

The exploratory questions that guided my study were:

1. Among practitioners in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program on probation, what are their beliefs and perceptions about effective and appropriate early childhood education?

2. In what ways does probation influence practitioners’ perceptions and beliefs about early childhood education?

In Chapter Three, I described how I collected the data along with the techniques and my rationale. The data included were the three semi-structured interviews from five participants, the Voluntary Prekindergarten scores, the program improvement plan, my researcher reflective journal, and the participants’ résumés. I integrated the data by finding themes through the participants’ common dialogue with reoccurring subject matters in the interviews and discovering connections among data sources.
Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I describe each case separately to expose the data from the interviews to reveal and understand their personal dilemma related to the Voluntary Prekindergarten low scores. As Stake (2006) suggests, I categorized themes by examining the data that were common and connected to the exploratory questions. Each case included the data from the transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews as the core component. Therefore, this chapter includes how I presented the data, the cases, and a summary.

I begin each case with the history of the participant such as the length of time in the field and at the center. I also provide a synopsis of why each participant chose to work in the early childhood profession and how she earned her education. In addition, I include how the participants described Voluntary Prekindergarten and their beliefs and perceptions of what it takes to teach young children effectively. I gathered their descriptions of how each participant reacted to probation on how she has altered or has not altered teaching or administrative practices due to the desire to improve readiness scores. I include a reflective summary at the end of each case and conclude the chapter with a synopsis of how the cases intertwine.

I illuminate each of the participants account by individually organizing their perspectives by overarching themes. The themes common to all were the reliance on a prescribed curriculum, the deviation from teachings from professional development, the stress placed on teachers/administrators, and the stress placed on children. The descriptions of the participants described a change in teaching practices and administrative practices as the participants strived to make children ready for kindergarten according to the Florida Voluntary Prekindergarten mandate. Tables 7 outlines the organization of how I present the data collected from the
practitioners, while Table 8 outlines the organization of how I present the data collected for the administrators.

All of the participants were given a pseudonym. I chose to use flower names as my pseudonyms for the participants. Many use the analogy that teachers plant the seeds for children to grow. I chose to assign each the name of a flower because teaching is often referred to as planting a seed. I think of teaching as a skill and a gift. If we plant the seed in the correct soil, attend to the basic needs of water and sunlight, and protect it from weeds and insects, the roots grow to be strong and firm. With healthy roots, many hazards can come into contact with the stem, leaves, and the flower itself but it will have the ability to re-grow because of a strong root. I believe early childhood is the root of our lives and how we care for that root makes all of the difference. Since I wanted to capture their growth as teachers in a Voluntary Prekindergarten Program, flowers were fitting to symbolize their role and their personalities. Table 9 describes the flowers that were assigned for the pseudonyms of the participants. The pseudonyms were assigned to protect the identity of the participants.

Participants

Chapter Three described how the participants were selected. The primary requirement was to work in a center that was approved to teach Voluntary Prekindergarten and was currently on probation for not meeting minimal school readiness requirements. The other criteria included the following:

1. Participants had to be willing to be in the study and to sign a consent form;
2. Participants had to be willing to spend three one-hour increments with me for Interviews;
3. Participants had to be willing for the interviews to be recorded with the Zoom H1
Table 7.

*Organization of the Data Presented by the Practitioners.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Descriptive Data</td>
<td>Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Time in field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Time at center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reason for Entering Field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory question - Beliefs and perspectives on effective and appropriate teaching.</td>
<td>Disconnect with Training to Practice</td>
<td>Working with a struggling child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Challenges with child assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dealing with challenging behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reduction of play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Description of stress on children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory question - Perceptions and beliefs about the influences of being a provider on probation in Voluntary Prekindergarten.</td>
<td>Stress as a practitioner</td>
<td>Homework in prekindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Enrollment practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kindergarten assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Voluntary Prekindergarten accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughts on kindergarten assessment and accountability.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>Summary of Data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Handy Recorder**

Table 10 is a summary of each participant including the time in the field, time at that center, type of education, and reasons for entering the field. The table is provided to organize the participants with their background and experience. This is relevant to reveal the participants as individuals through shared data.
Table 8.

*Organization of the Data Presented by the Administrators.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Descriptive Data</td>
<td>Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Time in field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Time at center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reason for Entering Field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory question - Beliefs and perspectives on effective and appropriate teaching.</td>
<td>Disconnect with Training to Practice</td>
<td>Multiple regulators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory question - Perceptions and beliefs about the influences of being a provider on probation in Voluntary Prekindergarten.</td>
<td>Stress as a director</td>
<td>Attrition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Children with behavior challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Challenges in administrative practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching to the next level or teaching to the next age group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Homework in prekindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment Practices</td>
<td>Description of stress on children</td>
<td>Effect on classroom and teaching practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughts on kindergarten assessment and accountability.</td>
<td>Kindergarten assessment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Voluntary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prekindergarten accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>Summary of Data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9.

*Description of the Flowers for the Pseudonyms of the Participants.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Photo</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deborah Dogwood</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Photo" /></td>
<td>The Dogwood flower typically grows underneath trees. The flowers can be white, pink or light red. Blossoms have 4 leaves. Will not tolerate environments that are too hot or salty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally Shyflower</td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Photo" /></td>
<td>The Shyflower leaves will react to stimuli by closing. The flowers can be pink or purple. The seeds are hard and sometimes prevent reproduction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassie Carnation</td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Photo" /></td>
<td>Carnations can be traced back to the time Jesus was placed on the cross. The flowers can be white, pink, or purple. The flower has endured time and climate change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacy Lotus</td>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Photo" /></td>
<td>The Lotus is a flower in Buddhism that can represent achievement. The flower has shades of white and pink. The flower grows in mud and blossoms on top of water.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isay Iris</td>
<td><img src="image5.png" alt="Photo" /></td>
<td>The Iris represents wisdom and faith. The flowers can be pink, orange, white, purple, blue, and multicolored. The flowers attracted hummingbirds and butterflies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 10.

Summary of Participants’ Descriptive Data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>VPK 1 Deborah Dogwood</th>
<th>VPK 2 Sally Shyflower</th>
<th>VPK 3 Cassie Carnation</th>
<th>School Director Lacy Lotus</th>
<th>Owner Isay Iris</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time in Field</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>24 years</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>35 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time at Center</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>12 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>CDA-Technical</td>
<td>CDA-Technical</td>
<td>BA-College ECE</td>
<td>CDA-Technical</td>
<td>CDA-Technical/AA in ECE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason for Entering</td>
<td>To find care for her children</td>
<td>To find care for her children</td>
<td>Inspired by teachers</td>
<td>To find care for her children</td>
<td>To find care for her children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each participant was female and had worked in a licensed preschool center for at least seven years. Both Deborah Dogwood and Sally Shyflower began teaching at the center after the program was placed on probation. Lacy Lotus began the first year Voluntary Prekindergarten was implemented at the site. Cassie Carnation and Isay Iris had the longest history at the site and in the field.

The selection criteria included that either the director or the lead Voluntary Prekindergarten practitioner had eight years’ experience. Cassie Carnation was the lead Voluntary Prekindergarten practitioner with 24 years experience and the owner Isay Iris had 35 years experience meeting that selection criterion. Three one-hour interviews were conducted over several months. The requirements for additional participants were they either worked in a Voluntary Prekindergarten classroom or were connected to the implementation of the Voluntary Prekindergarten program. Both Deborah Dogwood and Sally Shyflower worked in the Voluntary Prekindergarten classroom and Lacy Lotus served as the Director of the center overseeing the program.
Deborah Dogwood, Sally Shyflower, Lacy Lotus, and Isay Iris earned the Child Development Associates Equivalency. Isay Iris continued her education to earn an Associate’s Degree in Early Childhood Education. Cassie Carnation earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Education for age three to grade three. See Figure 4 for a visual representation.

**Figure 4. A visual schematic of the accepted Florida credentials in the early childhood education (ECE) professional beginning with the minimal qualifications**

The interviews with the practitioners and the school director were conducted at the site. I gave each participant the option of where they wanted the interviews to take place. They all opted to be interviewed at the center with the exception of the owner. The owner was interviewed once on site and twice at nearby restaurants. She did not remark to why she chose off location interviews but I assumed it was so we could talk more freely without disruption. I collected written permission from the owners (a change in ownership occurred during the development of the study) to conduct the interviews on their property.
I began the first interviews with questions that would allow me to get to know the participants and allow them to see me as a student of early childhood versus a person of authority. Each participant knew me in my professional role. It was important to me to build a bond with each so they could tell me the real story not just what they thought I would want to hear. To reassure the participants that I was there in the context of a study, I spoke with each one on one before the first interview occurred. I spoke to them about my concern about providers who were on probation and how I felt an importance to understand if any changes occurred as a result of being on probation. I shared with them my interest in if they felt stress or changed any teaching methods to increase the scores of children who attended the program. This strategy allowed me to tell them my story of interest as a scholar versus a training coordinator. In addition, I informed the participants that they would see the transcript from our interviews and would have an opportunity to correct any misunderstanding I had if any in the transcription.

Before I began my study, I visited the center to discuss the research with the owner. During the visit, she gave me time to speak with each possible participant. This time allowed me to describe my goal and gauge their interests. I gathered information from each participant and provided the consent form so they could take it home and read it thoroughly.

The center had nine classrooms and was licensed for 109 children from two months to school age. They do not offer school-age care but included that age group in the license for teachers’ children who may need to come in before or after school or when the primary schools are closed. The owner employed eighteen staff members and one director. The center had two infant rooms, one toddler room, two classrooms for two-year olds, one three-year-old classroom, one four-year-old classroom, and two pre-kindergarten classrooms. The practitioners in this study led the two pre-kindergarten classrooms.
The center owner and teachers created learning areas in each classroom. The materials were placed within reach for children to manipulate or to play. The school followed thematic units to teach during the year. The Voluntary Prekindergarten class had begun implementing a prescribed curriculum since probation. A prescribed curriculum involves classroom experiences prepared for teachers that include written lesson plans, letter of the week, specific questions to ask, and what activities to prepare. The owner had chosen the “Starfall” curriculum. It was one I was unfamiliar with before this study. I would like to note that I used the adjective prescribed to describe the curriculum. I chose this adjective to paint the picture of providing all that a teacher needs for the school year without thought given to individual children. A good teacher can take a curriculum and change it to make it become individualized for children. If teachers do not make adjustments, this cannot be construed as the fault of the curriculum creator(s).

**Voluntary Prekindergarten Participant 1: Deborah Dogwood**

Deborah Dogwood appeared prepared for the first interview as she welcomed me into the Voluntary Prekindergarten classroom with an “I am open for anything” attitude. She revealed that she had nothing to hide and said that she was happy to help. She had a positive attitude each time as she continually welcomed me with a smile and a warm greeting for each of the three interviews.

All of the interviews with Deborah occurred in her classroom during naptime. We sat at the same table where children have their meals and where they meet for small group activity. Each interview occurred when children were resting on cots so we tried to whisper during the interviews. In this classroom the chairs were stacked, the floor was swept, and the tables were freshly wiped. The children lay on their cots throughout the classroom.
Deborah shared her classroom with her co-teacher Sally Shyflower. The classroom was licensed for thirty-five children. Voluntary Prekindergarten requirements only permitted twenty-two children to be with two teachers so they never reached full capacity during the Voluntary Prekindergarten hours. The classroom was divided into learning centers that had a variety of material some new and some worn. I noticed the block area was especially small and the carpet was stained. The books in the library area were disorganized and some were bent and torn. The manipulatives were placed in labeled bins on a shelf at the child’s level. It was not a perfect classroom, yet it had a homely feeling because there was a sense of comfort and peace. The room had a clean scent and the bulletin boards were welcoming with parent information and children’s artwork. Deborah and I sat at a child’s sized table. Sometimes during the interview we would need to stop so she could speak with a child. This was mostly due to a child needing to use the restroom during naptime or because Deborah corrected a child’s behavior.

I chose Deborah Dogwood as her pseudonym because the Dogwood flower can grow abundantly if the climate is right. The flower does not tolerate environments that are too hot or salty. Deborah resembles this characteristic, as I believe she will only reach her potential when she enters into her right situation; moreover, when she begins the profession of her dreams. This center was good for her and allowed her to expand and grow. But the early childhood profession was not her field of interest. Deborah was taking classes in the medical field to one day join the profession she had originally desired. This was inconspicuous to the parents and many peers at the center. She was developing more skills similar to how the dogwood grows more underneath the soil.
Getting to Know Deborah

Deborah Dogwood was in her early thirties. She enjoyed line dancing and spending time with her family. Deborah spoke of her children during each of the interviews with a smile. I learned she led a hectic life taking her children to cheerleading and baseball, then enforcing that all of their schoolwork was completed promptly.

During each interview, I felt the sense of both pride and doubt. Deborah would often look down when she was talking to me and was distracted easily with some event in the classroom. Deborah was not confident in all of her responses, as she would sometimes ask, “Did I get that one right?” I also realized that she constantly fidgeted during the interviews. She would bounce her knee up and down, bang her fingers on the table, or take her long hair out of a ponytail to put it back up again. I did not take notice of these sporadic movements at first. Yet, when I was listening to the initial recordings, I kept hearing a knocking noise. During the second interview, I recognized the knocking as her knee bouncing and I accepted them as a nervous response. Deborah was friendly and I felt as if she answered truthfully.

Deborah was currently attending school to become an ophthalmological technician. She entered the early childhood field because she was pregnant and she needed care for her children. The hours and pay were not conducive for her to continue in that profession. She had two children of her own and two children from her husband’s previous marriage. It was a challenge to work and pay for childcare, too.

Deborah’s circumstances brought her to early childhood. Although she had no intention on remaining in the field, she continued her on-going early childhood educational requirements. She felt that her job was important and took pride in teaching the children what she felt they needed to learn. Because of not wanting to be in early childhood for long, she had no ambition to
Deborah went into an assistant director’s or director’s position. She began teaching in the two-year-old room and had moved to the threes.

Deborah worked at the center for three years and was at another center for four years. At one point, she had an opportunity to return to ophthalmology while at the present site. At this time she was working in the three-year-old classroom. She decided to take it and turned in her notice to the director. Unfortunately, at the same time her husband began a new job and his position took him out of town too much to allow her to change careers. When she asked to remain at the center; however, her position had been replaced and the only current opening was the Voluntary Prekindergarten teacher.

I can teach it because I did the trainings for it and the computer and all that. I was thrown into it at the last minute due to that's the only place they needed me. It was kind of like teaching the older 3’s younger 4’s. I just had to step it up a notch.

Deborah found herself in the Voluntary Prekindergarten classroom because she had taken the required trainings. I noted in my researcher journal that this was an interesting response. I would have expected other explanations such as she always wanted to work with older children. Even though teaching children was not Deborah’s first career option, she had a positive outlook on her class and shared how she enjoyed watching children grow and learn.

**Deborah’s Beliefs and Perspectives on Effective and Appropriate Teaching**

Deborah earned her Child Development Associate Equivalency certificate, also known as a Staff Credential, from the local vocational training center. This is a common way of earning an early childhood teaching credential as practitioners can complete the course in less than thirty weeks. I discovered that four out of five participants in this study earned the Staff Credential in that same program.
Deborah believed children needed to learn all of the letters in the alphabet and numbers up to twenty to be ready for kindergarten. I noted in my researcher journal that she spoke of preparing children for kindergarten seriously. I also noted that as she corrected the children at naptime her stern voice reminded me of a no-nonsense tone one may hear from a strict teacher. Her serious attitude and her tone gave me the impression of her sense of duty to teach. Additionally, her words conveyed that teaching would be easier for her if children entered her classroom already familiar with certain concepts.

By the time they get here they should already know their colors and shapes. They should be able to recognize their name and at least spell their first name that would take a load off. I have got a little girl that’s been in my room half of VPK last year and in [the four-year-olds teacher’s] room and [that teacher] did the whole recognizing name and everything and she still can’t do it she’s … there is no lick … nothing upstairs.

She wished she had more time to teach new concepts. She continued,

Not that I wouldn’t want to teach it because they don’t need to know it. But if we could spend more time on their opposites and positional words and compound words and knock out colors and shapes because to me they start that when they are two they should already know by the time they come here. I shouldn’t have to repeat it. I shouldn’t have to do it.

Deborah’s description of the child who had “nothing upstairs” is an example of her lack of understanding of individual readiness. Individual readiness is connected to my description of the prescribed curriculum and how it is designed for a whole group instead of meeting each child where he/she is developmentally. Deborah’s concern that children should enter her classroom
educated on colors and shapes is an example of how the core expectations are being placed on children at younger and younger ages. I noted in my journal that her desire for children to come to her classroom with experience and knowledge of colors and shapes describes her perceptions and belief of what is effective teaching for young children. Both of these examples, combined with my notes in my reflective journal attributed to my assumption that Deborah does not have a good understanding of developmentally appropriate practices.

**Disconnect with Training to Practice**

When Deborah was enrolled in the early education course, her instructor required her to create activities and plans for the age group she was working with at the time, two-year-olds. Deborah was taught to build plans from themes and individual needs and interests. The curriculum that Deborah followed in Voluntary Prekindergarten can be described as prescribed. Deborah believed that the curriculum implemented was both effective and appropriate.

No it is self-explanatory. It is like Lacy [the director] says it is idiot proof because it will tell us what to ask and what to say. It is pretty much set up so I follow teaching to their standards. They ask the questions that need to be asked.

Deborah felt her professional development did not prepare her for working in a Voluntary Prekindergarten classroom. Some of her main challenges were naming phonemes, compound words, and assessment. Deborah shared how she thought she should have been trained.

Even if we shadowed a kindergarten teacher to look at what they expect just to kind of get an inside as to what they need from the kids when they come in so we can have their foot in their door. That would be a head start of what is expected when they first start school.
Deborah described shadowing a kindergarten teacher so she could see what children were working on in kindergarten. I noted in my journal that I felt she wanted to do this so could also work with children on the same concepts as in kindergarten. When I reviewed the transcriptions I also noted she spoke a great deal about academics and only about play when I asked. At one point, when I questioned her if she believed children learn through play and active involvement she did not know how to respond.

Deborah explained to me that children should learn letter recognition and sounds before they enter kindergarten. She described that in her professional development program letter recognition and sounds were not emphasized as much. She justified the change by explaining she was now working with pre-kindergarten children and they needed to be ready for school.

**Deborah’s Perceptions and Beliefs about the Influences of Being a Provider on Probation in Voluntary Prekindergarten**

Deborah was trained to work with young children. As she entered Voluntary Prekindergarten she was faced for the first time with accountability. However, it appeared that she viewed the changed caused by teaching an older age group rather than a change caused by an accountability movement. Deborah described her stressors as a practitioner, her perceptions of stressors to children, her beliefs on assessment and accountability, and her beliefs and perspectives of enrollment practices. These four themes were common throughout the interviews transcriptions and my reflective journal with all of the participants.

**Deborah’s Stress as a Practitioner**

Deborah was not shy about expressing her stress regarding her classroom. She made a few jests during the interviews that she needed a flask in her truck. Deborah stated this to me jokingly. It was obvious she struggled with daily stressors. “I am not going to lie it does stress
me out. There are times where there are days where I just can’t.” Deborah’s stressors were founded on her belief and perspective regarding the importance of children learning all of the expected concepts. I noted in my researcher journal that I felt that she was fearful of failing because it was her responsibility to make sure children could pass the kindergarten assessment. The stressors she described as a practitioner included: working with a struggling child, constraining amounts of time, assessing children, and challenging behavior from children.

**Working with a struggling child.** Deborah expressed tension when a child was not able to keep up with the curriculum. Deborah relied on the lesson plans in the curriculum to choose activities for the children. I noted in my journal that I sensed a conflict between the activities and what some children would be ready to for developmentally. Deborah would often express frustration from working with a child that was not progressing in alignment to the curriculum or to what was expected.

Some don’t know how to spell them; I had some … like there is a little girl in VPK I felt so bad for her … she’s lost I mean you can only do so much. Mom was no help. She can’t spell her name and then what stinks is that VPK ended and she has no school all summer, she’s going to lose everything we taught her.

Deborah described her disappointed with a child leaving her program without knowing how to spell her name. I noted there was a void in her description of what skills the children had gained from the program. She described working with children who were struggling to keep up with the class numerous times throughout the interviews. Deborah’s description that the “mom was no help” contributed to her stress but also displayed her lack of knowledge or ability to engage the mother to assist the child in learning the skill.
**Lack of time.** Deborah displayed a concern that there was not enough time in the schedule to teach the concepts that are expected. Deborah felt she needed more than three hours per day with the children and care needed to continue until kindergarten began. She felt children would forget the information from the lack of practice during the three months of summer and they would not be prepared for the kindergarten assessment.

Well when VPK is in session, for instance those three hours is nothing but work.

Breakfast is 8:30-8:45 then 8:45-9:00 (VPK began at her school at 9:00 am) is circle and then they only get a half hour outside and then we come back inside we are doing another circle, we doing small groups are pulling kids constantly. If I am working with five kids and they go back into centers they have only got ten to fifteen minutes to play in the center. This is because they do have all of these expectations of what they need to know before they get into kindergarten and then they test them within the first 30 days. I wish VPK ran through the summer honestly with the same kids. I am a firm believer and always have that if you don’t use it, you lose it.

In another statement, she added,

We don’t have a chance and nothing to breathe between all of the testing to what the book is requiring us to do in small groups or the art activity for that day. They got it pretty much like a set schedule day for them for four hours in that book.

Deborah worried about needing to spend more time with children. Time was a factor in the stress that Deborah experienced. I noted in my journal that this schedule was something new to Deborah because she was now teaching Voluntary Prekindergarten. Deborah made it clear she felt more was needed. I noted my own tension with wanting to advocate for her to have
more time to reduce her stress to knowing if the time allotted was not quality time children still would not benefit.

**Challenges with child assessment.** Deborah described particular stressors as they connected to assessing children throughout the year. As part of probation, the Voluntary Prekindergarten practitioners at the school were required to assess children three times a year with the assessment kit provided by the Early Learning Coalition. During one interview, Deborah allowed me to view the assessment kit. There were three different assessments to use throughout the year, Assessment Period (AP) 1, AP 2, and AP 3. I noted in my researcher journal how the kit was similar to the tools used by agencies when a child is referred for a developmental delay. Deborah believed that assessment of children was useful, but it was also stressful. Her stress was caused by distractions in her classrooms while administering the assessments, by a lack of knowledge on how to administer assessment, and by the need to assess children three times a year.

Deborah had to find ways to keep children focused on the assessment while children continued the regular classroom routine. She shared when she first began teaching Voluntary Prekindergarten each assessment took her 45 minutes per child. She shared how frustrated she would get because as she was testing a child other children would require her attention. She stated these interruptions would often delay the test even longer.

It doesn’t help when we are testing them in a class of 22 kids it’s not a quiet setting-they are getting distracted. I have got other kids coming up to me. Sally will try to help with when she knows that I am testing them to not have them come over to me but you have still got the people coming in and out of the doors, you still got parents
walking in, you’ve got the noise of the classroom, and they are not focusing fully on what it is that we are trying to do.

Deborah described tension with administering the assessment in the classroom. She painted a picture of herself and a child sitting at a table with the kit at her side. As she asked the child questions other children would come up to her to talk to her or to do tattle on other children. I noted that as she described this she seemed overwhelmed.

In addition, Deborah shared she was not trained on how to use the assessment kit. She stated there was a DVD included; however, she really did not view the video. She shared that in her professional development training she learned to assess by creating a portfolio for each child. Portfolio documentation is an ongoing assessment process that is continuous and recommended in developmentally appropriate practices. Deborah shared that she discontinued portfolio assessment because the three Voluntary Prekindergarten required assessments were enough to evaluate how the child progressed.

Finally, as Deborah described that her lack of time with children was due to the requirement of administering the assessment three times during the Voluntary Prekindergarten fall program. She felt if she had more time this stress would be reduced. Although, she described stress, she also described positives from child assessments.

When we did the second we could compare it to the first and show the parents this is where they were at then and this is where they are at now this is how much they have grown type thing to keep it going. Deborah looked forward to seeing the results of the assessments. I noted that she used the assessments learn how the child was progressing. I also noted how she moved away from
portfolio assessment completely even though that was how she was trained. She did not provide an explanation on why she did not continue with both sources of assessment.

Deborah shared that her ability to administer child assessment has strengthened since she first began teaching Voluntary Prekindergarten. The first attempts at assessment took her forty-five minutes for each child. Currently the process takes her fifteen minutes per child. Deborah stated “I don’t have to look at it is word for word I have that kind of memorized now” to describe that she has come more versed on what to say during the assessments. As she worked through her struggles with child assessment she also dealt with children displaying undesirable behaviors during Voluntary Prekindergarten.

**Dealing with challenging behavior.** It is not uncommon for practitioners working with young children to experience challenging behavior in children. During the interviews, there were multiple times when children would need Deborah’s assistance. It was naptime and Deborah and I were breaking a cardinal naptime rule—no talking. From my experience, children often take advantage of these moments and would wiggle more, whisper more, or need to use the facilities more when a caregiver was distracted. I witnessed Deborah’s approach to these incidents and her tone and her reactions were firm and direct. She described to me her feelings about these challenges.

I had to get used to this class because they tattle forever and a day about everything. I liked it when my two’s were quiet I can handle them crying but here every five minutes I have someone poking me she’s not my best friend I can’t go to her birthday party and I am just like uhhh and then I go home to my own three.

Deborah expected children to listen to her and act appropriately. She continued.
They are stubborn at this age and they talk back and give attitude. The parents will pick them up and they are the same way with the parents too.

Deborah felt that the one child with challenging behaviors would affect her whole classroom and her day, “It is that one behavior that you know can throw my whole day off.” She also felt that the stress from working with difficult children would make her short tempered with her own children. Deborah shared she did not have to expel any child in Voluntary Prekindergarten; however, she shared the challenging children are placed in Cassie Carnation’s room because she had less children. I noted in my journal that she was matter of fact with children, direct, and to the point. She described more stress to herself than she described to children.

**Deborah’s Description of Stress on Children**

Deborah explained some events that I as a researcher considered to be stressed on children. The stressors included a reduction of play for children and an emphasis on homework in the Voluntary Prekindergarten Program. I noted that she did not describe this as a tension to children. This description could assist me in seeking to answer her beliefs and perspectives about effective practices. However, I chose to use it to describe her responses connected to a program on probation because these practices were implemented since the center did not meet the readiness rate.

**Reduction of play.** Deborah was consistent in her description of the amount of time that children were allowed to play since she began teaching in preschool. When pressed she stated children did not play enough and when they did play small group or assessment usually interrupted play. Deborah felt time was the challenge and if more time was spent in Voluntary Prekindergarten that would prevent them from “just sitting and learning all day.” To assist in
children in practicing what was taught in school and assisting children who fell behind in the
curriculum she provided homework.

**Homework in prekindergarten.** Deborah would give children homework during the
week. Deborah did not have a concern about offering homework to young children. She believed
it supported learning at school and stated she would expect it of her child’s Voluntary
Prekindergarten teacher. She encouraged children to complete homework by giving stickers or
stamps to those who returned it completed; however, she would not punish children who forgot. I
noted in my research journal that many kindergarten teachers hold children accountable when
they fail to complete homework. I wondered if this could confuse a child when they transitioned
to kindergarten they may be punished for not completing their homework. I shared my thoughts
with Deborah and she replied,

Yes, I think it will confuse them. In fact like you said there is no ramifications here
but then there is there but they might question that they didn’t get in trouble.

Deborah shared she did not learn to give children homework in her professional
development courses. She stated, “I never really questioned it. I just figured it was for the child’s
benefit. I knew that (the homework) was they were learning that week.” Deborah justified the
practice because it will help children form a habit because they “have to for the next 12 to 13
years”. Deborah displayed a commitment to prepare each child for kindergarten even if the
practice did not align with what she was taught in professional development.

**Enrollment practices.** I approach the topic of the practice of enrollment because this
can be a direct reaction from accountability based on my experience in the field and speaking to
providers, not from research. I chose to inquire about this during the interviews to all of the
participants. As Deborah described behavior challenges she believed that the center was not selective when enrolling children into the center.

No they take anybody and everybody here. Even if the kids have been kicked out of six other centers they try to work with them. If it comes an issue for us then they will at least well then there they will go again.

Deborah felt that neither because the school was a Voluntary Prekindergarten Program nor because it was a provider on probation that any selective practices were occurring during enrollment. She felt the school had a positive reputation for accepting all children. Deborah stated this confidently and with pride. She was not as confident when discussing kindergarten assessment and accountability.

**Deborah’s Thoughts on Kindergarten Assessment and Accountability**

Deborah believed that kindergarten assessment and Voluntary Prekindergarten accountability places unnecessary stressors on children and Voluntary Prekindergarten practitioners. She had concerns that children did not have enough time to adjust to kindergarten before the assessment and that the system of accountability did not lead to better prepare the children for kindergarten. She would like to see changes in how both are implemented.

**Kindergarten assessment.** Deborah blamed her strict Voluntary Prekindergarten schedule on the high expectations of the kindergarten assessment. She stated she conducted three circle-times each day and reduced center time play to ten to fifteen minutes because of the assessment. She was passionate when she explained her feelings.

It is crazy because not every kid knows it or some kids are getting used to kindergarten. They should at least be in it [kindergarten] for a couple of months. Let the kindergarten teachers teach them because they teach them the same things we do;
their letters, their shapes, their colors, and they don’t even start to teach them sight words until halfway through the year.

Deborah spent the entire year preparing the children in her care for the assessment the children would experience during the first thirty days of primary school. This was Deborah’s first full year of Voluntary Prekindergarten and she expressed personal stress about this responsibility. I noted in my journal her lack of concern about being on probation. I questioned if this was because she had not been graded since she was still new in Voluntary Prekindergarten and to accountability.

**Voluntary prekindergarten accountability.** During Deborah’s final interview, she shared the change she would like to see in Voluntary Prekindergarten. She was supportive of accountability and of kindergarten assessment. Deborah just wanted to know what was going to be assessed so she could prepare the children.

I mean there were questions in the training or in the assessments that we don’t go over. Like one, is a skeleton made of bones? Are bones hard or soft? So we are asking questions that the kids either have heard from somewhere or know you know. She continued,

This is a key, what is it made for? They had to come up with both lock or unlock and it could be a door to a house or car. If they said one I couldn’t give them the points.

They had to say both.

Deborah felt if she knew what was going to be the kindergarten assessment she would teach the concepts to children. She wanted to know what letters and numbers skills to practice. She also felt strongly that a longer Voluntary Prekindergarten Program would assist in preparing the
children for kindergarten. Deborah was consistent in her descriptions of how the program may better serve children.

**Summary of Deborah Dogwood**

The influence of being a Voluntary Prekindergarten Program created changes to Deborah’s teaching methods and caused her personal tension. She described a stress of the Voluntary Prekindergarten program with a disconnection of probation as she described her need to “step it up notch”. She was most concerned with children’s behavior and with preparing children for kindergarten. She never intended to be a preschool teacher and in fact left the center before the end of this study.

Deborah’s last interview was completed without time for planning. The morning of her interview, the director had sent me a message that it was Deborah’s last day. Deborah accepted a job as an ophthalmological technician where she could gain experience in her desired profession. I was able to contact Deborah and make an appointment for that afternoon. From the beginning of the study, Deborah had made it known that the early childhood profession was not her dream. I was happy to see her working towards her goals.

Deborah’s words and mannerisms expressed to me that she had not encapsulated the philosophy taught to her in professional development. I mentioned previously that I have rich knowledge of what was taught in her certification course because I taught the program myself and assisted in the design and curriculum. She believed in play but it was in direct contrast to her view on the importance of educating the children, especially by offering them homework. She trusted the Starfall Curriculum as the tool to teach the children to be ready for kindergarten.

Deborah felt tension with administering assessment, constraining amounts of time, and challenging behaviors. Her stressors appeared to be more connected with common expectations
in the profession as a Voluntary Prekindergarten teacher rather than being a provider on probation. Additionally, Deborah lacked a connection to the theories and practice of early childhood from a developmentally appropriate perspective. Table 11 indicates key findings for Deborah Dogwood.

Table 11.

*Key Findings for Deborah Dogwood.*

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<tr>
<th>Effective and Appropriate Teachings</th>
<th>Little understanding of developmental appropriate practices</th>
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<td>Followed prescribed curriculum—did not deviate</td>
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<td>Disconnect with training to practice</td>
<td>Was not trained on the use of prescribed curriculum, naming of phonemes, compound words, formal assessment</td>
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<td>Felt children should play more</td>
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<td>No longer used portfolio assessment</td>
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<td>Wanted children to have less time restraints</td>
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<td>Traditional Practices</td>
<td>Shared connections with the children (emotionally attached)</td>
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**Voluntary Prekindergarten Participant 2: Sally Shyflower**

Sally Shyflower welcomed me with a soft smile and a warm handshake. She was casually dressed in a t-shirt and shorts. Sally did not ask many questions nor did she display curiosity about this project. When I first met her, I felt this as a communication barrier. I realized later her demeanor was out of respect.
The first and the final interview occurred in a two-year classroom during naptime, while the second interview took place in the director’s office. Sally was in the two-year-old classroom to cover breaks. It was typical for her to spend the Voluntary Prekindergarten hours 9:00–12:00 in that classroom and then assist with coverage and breaks around the school. During the first interview, the majority of children were already sleeping when I arrived and the room was dark and quiet. I noted that once during an interview a little girl had whimpered on her cot and Sally quickly stood up and walked to her and gently patted her back until she stopped.

Sally spoke about herself confidently and provided explanations. However, when Sally spoke of her classroom she spoke apprehensively in a soft voice and answered many questions with guarded short responses. A few times during our interviews, I asked her if she was telling what had happened or what she thought I wanted to hear. During the first two interviews, her words seemed protective, as she wanted to portray her center as perfect. I believed this indicated a loyalty and pride that was unique compared to the other participants. I chose the pseudonym of Sally Shyflower because this is a flower that has foliage that will often open up and then close back again. I felt this response from Sally throughout the interviews.

Getting to Know Sally

Sally Shyflower was in her late twenties. She had a son in elementary school. She did not share much about her personal life. One story that she did share with me was that a few years earlier Sally had taken a chance with a friend and opened a preschool. The explained that the preschool was small and she was not able to maintain enrollment enough to pay the bills. She was ambitious and wanted very much to try again but wanted to gain experience first.

Sally shared she had wanted to be a doctor. When she was young, she watched her friend fight cancer and sadly her friend did not survive. Her experience made her feel helpless and she
wanted to learn how to help others. She was initially drawn to the medical field and then to children with special needs. Like Deborah, Sally entered into the profession when she wanted to place her young son in care and accepted a position at a center. She quickly wanted to learn the profession and began school at the local vocational center.

Sally had seven years’ experience in the field and at this center since December 2012. Sally earned her Child Development Associate Equivalency and the Director’s Credential. The Director’s Credential is the certificate that is needed to be a director in a licensed center. Sally was flexible and willing to work in any classroom. Sally was the co-teacher with Deborah Dogwood. They shared lesson planning and other work responsibilities until Deborah left. Sally viewed Deborah more as the leader since she had spent more time in the Voluntary Prekindergarten classroom and possibly because Deborah was in the room before Sally.

**Sally’s Beliefs and Perspectives on Effective and Appropriate Teaching**

Sally’s goals for her children were “to get them ready for kindergarten.” Getting them ready for kindergarten was a challenge for Sally to describe, but she used the prescribed curriculum as her clutch. Sally shared she felt comfortable using the curriculum because it was simple to implement with the children. She believed if she read from the script children would prepare for kindergarten.

… that is good part about it is pretty self-explanatory to use. If you do it this way, you know you can add your two cents and different art but it is really a good curriculum.

It is a way for 4 year olds to understand.

In my researcher journal, I noted how I did not expect practitioners to become so attached to a curriculum. I was curious as to why Sally and others spoke so highly of this tool. Sally was content with teaching letters and numbers using the guidelines of the tool. She stated, “It lays it
out like you are going to work on shapes this time and this is the story- you can pick your own but they do have one main story.” Her words described a low level of creativity in teaching and a high level of dependency on the curriculum.

At times Sally indicated a need for children to learn through play. She explained that the children like to pretend and provided opportunity for them to role play taking restaurant orders, playing with play dough, or creating art. I noted excitement in her voice as she described play.

I will open my art center and maybe it would be just cutting today. If they go into art I would go over there and say let’s see if we can cut out some shapes and then if you cut them out we can even glue them on paper and it can be whatever paper you want and they are actually still learning.

Sally spoke of play with confidence, yet her descriptions lacked a description of true play and play that was child led. By limiting her art center to be just cutting she does not promote multiple choices and opportunities to explore the materials together. Her view of allowing children to cut whatever they want linked to creative learning. I noted I felt she did not grasp the idea of learning through real life experience. She felt practice held more value than a degree when she stated,

You have to be able to get down to a four-year-old level because someone with a Bachelor’s degree can go you are smart you know everything but if you can’t get it sunk into their head you are not teaching them.

It appeared that Sally felt that professional development did not prepare her as a Voluntary Prekindergarten teacher. I noted that her words, “sunk into their head” described her desire to teach facts. Sally did not link her professional development with her classroom practices.
**Disconnect with Training to Practice**

Sally described some inconsistencies from the way she was instructed in her professional development to her practice today. Sally shared that her in the Child Development Associative Equivalency Program (CDA) she learned how to work with children at their level. She said the teachers taught her not to emphasize numbers and letters. She believed her professional development taught more about understanding children versus teaching children.

My CDA to me it was more learning how to work with children on their level. It really wasn’t a learning thing until I got in the VPK. I was in the VPK the first year it started so I seen where it was at in the beginning and they really didn’t have it. I can tell it has grown.

Sally shared stories of practices that were not aligned to developmentally appropriate implementation. This included why she sends homework home with children, “Well we did homework, but we really are not supposed to say ‘homework.’” Another disconnected practice was how she set up art projects. Sally described a scenario when her words may not have aligned with her knowledge of creative freedom in art.

We traced the bats. The kids cut out the bats. I have no problem with them coloring that bat whatever color they want. We did have an example of a regular black bat but if you color it purple I won’t say no no bats are not that color. I am not going to do that but I am going to let them know from my bat they do know what a bat looks like.

Sally defended these practices even though she admitted they were not taught in her formal professional development. Sally’s description of this underlying tension of allowing them to be creative but assuring that she corrected the child was common throughout the study. It seemed she unconsciously struggled with what she learned and how to place the knowledge
into practice when she had to meet assessment scores. “I feel like I have got to show them what it really is because it is VPK when they go to kindergarten they need not to say bats are purple.”

Sally believed children should learn basics like letter recognition, shapes, and numbers. She continued by saying that children will learn social skills as they spend time with other in the classroom. Sally also described a stress that her professional development program did not teach her how to teach phonemes and language and literacy. “You learn a little bit but it was really something that just kind of came to me (she snapped her fingers). I don’t know I just had it because I picked it up on my own.”

She stated in an interview that her co-worker (Deborah spoke with a country accent) and herself (African American) would say some phonemes differently. The differences were in their speech and she was concerned if she was teaching the children correctly. She wanted children to sound it out correctly when they entered kindergarten.

**Sally’s Perceptions and Beliefs about the Influences of Being a Provider on Probation in Voluntary Prekindergarten**

Sally had only been at the center for less than six months before I began the study. This limited her experience regarding being a practitioner working in a center not meeting the readiness score. Sally was not concerned about the school because it was placed on probation. I found this a common theme with the Deborah and Sally, the two practitioners who did not teach Voluntary Prekindergarten in the summer.

Before it was an all day thing not a four-hour thing where we would have to squeeze everything in. Before I was able to go over this in the morning and we could pick it up in the afternoon because maybe we didn’t do this in the morning, so let’s do it in
the afternoon. Now I got to get all of those kids involved because some are only VPK (meaning they leave at noon). That is the hard part.

Sally’s story told more about the changes because of probation but she associated it with Voluntary Prekindergarten much like Deborah. Multiple times she described the stress of Voluntary Prekindergarten with no mention of probation. Her words “have to squeeze everything in” describe just one of her stressors, time. Sally did experience other tensions as a practitioner.

**Sally’s Stress as a Practitioner**

Sally had a relaxed persona. She described only a few stressors as a Voluntary Prekindergarten practitioner. I noted in my journal that I sensed Sally did not want me to see or hear any negatives at first but opened up as she grew to know me more. According to Sally, Voluntary Prekindergarten teachers encounter more anxiety than other preschool practitioners because of the scores.

… no one is graded but VPK of course. If I was in a four-year-old classroom or a three-year-old classroom I would work off of the same basis because I want my kids to know things; that is just me personally. It is what I do. But I am not graded so if Johnny doesn’t know it, I tried. But if Johnny doesn’t know it in VPK, I got to keep going. Come on Johnny, come on Johnny, you got to learn it so of course. Sally understood the importance of a child learning; however, she felt it was more important in Voluntary Prekindergarten because of the score. I noted in my journal that she often referred to accountability as the “score”. Sally described many tensions with the score and some when she worked with a child not keeping up with the group.

**Working with a struggling child.** Sally spoke with passion as she described to me what it was like working with a struggling child in Voluntary Prekindergarten. She shared that a
consequence to children not progressing with the curriculum in her classroom was to spend less time engaged in play. Sally would use children’s playtime for additional small group experiences. In addition, Sally gave struggling children more homework. Her account to how to assist a child having a challenge learning new concepts was similar to Deborah’s account; however, she described her perspectives with conflict.

During the third interview, Sally began to share more about the stress for her in the classroom. She wanted to avoid the pressure of teaching letters but was fearful if a child struggled with letter knowledge he would not have school success. “Teaching letters. Why am I doing it and I really hate to try to make them because you haven’t even started school yet and I make you hate it.” Sally’s persistence on practicing letters with children indicated her desire for her classroom children to succeed or for her vision of being ready for kindergarten. She was aware of the challenges with struggling children and felt pressured to move forward with the curriculum.

It’s just me in the back of my head. I was ready to move on but now I know I still have a few that’s not ready yet. So you know how it is I really can’t hold everybody else back for two or three.

She was concerned more about children who were behind in the summertime.

... like I said the summer time kids are much different than the fall kids. Most likely the fall kids are being helped at home or maybe they came from another school or maybe they were already involved in some kind of day care program that helped them to learn.

Sally felt that children struggled more from lack of help from home. Sally and Deborah had similar feelings towards children entering the program with this knowledge of basic concepts
such as colors. “The summer time you get more that don’t have a foundation or never heard of it and if they don’t understand colors by three or four that is going to be hard too.” Sally believed children struggled more because they did not have this foundation.

Sally was not a summer time Voluntary Prekindergarten practitioner. She did however implement the same curriculum for the children who entered her class in the summer as the children enrolled in the Voluntary Prekindergarten program during the school year. They had the same schedule, they had the same small groups, and they had the same homework. They did not have the same assessments or same staff-child ratio and the school would not be held accountable for the children’s “test” scores. Sally continued her effort because she felt that children needed to learn all of the concepts taught in the Starfall curriculum to succeed in kindergarten.

**Lack of time.** Like Deborah, Sally was concerned about the gap of time that children experienced between the time children leave the program to when children begin kindergarten and the pressure to earn a high enough score. Sally felt that if children did not practice the academics in the three months during the summer they would not remember it for the Kindergarten assessment. She believed in practice and continual experiences.

Even if that mom just puts out some kind of book- even the dollar store has little books and coloring books with number and shapes in it. If they don’t put it out I really do think it will affect their score. If you don’t keep reading it doesn’t matter who you are you are going to lose it.

Sally created a plan for the end of the present school year for children to be sent home with items to help them continue to learn and practice over the summer. She was going to cut
the letters of each child’s name and place them in a zip-lock bag as a summertime home-school linkage. She learned the progress of each student through child assessment.

**Challenges with child assessment.** Sally voiced both positives and negatives with the assessments she was required to administer in the classroom. She was challenged with the length of time it took and was unsure how to assist a low performing child. Sally shared that each assessment could take up to an hour for each child; however, it depended on the interruptions she and the child experienced during the assessment.

… you need to keep them focused on it. You have the children who come up to you and ask questions and then you have to get them back on track. I feel that it is pretty good. The first time we know what they knew. The second time it lets you know if your teaching strategies are working or maybe with that child you need to do something different. It lets you know if you need to stop and go back or if we ready to go. It is just different children are completely different so there are many different challenges but I really like it but I think that is my biggest challenge my main thing is like lets see what they are learning.

Sally described child assessment both with tension and excitement. She had a challenge with keeping the children’s attention on the assessment. However, she felt pride when she witnessed their progress. “I really feel like they need to be assessed. When they get into kindergarten they are assessed two times a year to pass.” Sally assessed each child during the time usually spent in small group while the other children were in centers. Sally liked the simplicity of assessment and believed assessment was positive because they had to experience it in kindergarten. “To test them and to see that. I can’t believe what they learned what they
remembered it- they are ready.” Sally described assessment as the best thing about teaching Voluntary Prekindergarten.

Sally expressed a joy in the excitement she felt when children made progress. She believed the challenge was not if they had learned, it was how much they had learned. Sally was trained to authentically assess in her credential program by tracking child’s progress in a portfolio and saving samples of their work. She was concerned with training as she stated, “they are throwing more at us than they are teaching us.” She continued by sharing she received minimal training on the Voluntary Prekindergarten assessment.

**Dealing with challenging behavior.** Sally’s challenges with behavior were minimal. Lacy Lotus, her director, praised how Sally handled the children. She was positive when describing her interactions with children. “I tell them you know we are friends and when something is happening to you and you don’t like it you know and it works.” Sally viewed preschool as a “safe” place for children because when some children are at home they do not receive the same level of care.

Sometimes it is the best place for them like they are doing all that cussing but they know now okay I am at school and they can’t do that. That is probably the best part of their day is to come to school.

There was one story that Sally told of a challenging child with a positive outcome.

When I began he would never sit with the class by the end I had him sitting with us, raising his hand, and answering questions. It was like he used to just take it all in and then when you catch him playing he will say everything you said in circle time. You know he was learning and I was like I got to get him to come and make him want to come. So I just started with having him sit down and told him not to worry about
sitting over there because you can sit right next to me. It ended up…that really just amazed me because he ended sitting the whole time putting his hands up, answering questions; he was in.

Sally described in this statement a description of a child learning from a desire versus a force. This is a connection to social constructivist theory- a link to developmentally appropriate practices. Sally believed with time and positive reinforcement children will learn socially. “I can’t force them to sit down for 15 minutes because that is not going to happen you might get one out of twenty. So you have to go with what they like.” I noted in my researcher journal that she had a great deal of potential in the field.

Sally spoke minimally about challenging behavior with children. I noted in September in my research journal that I was unsure if this was because she wanted me to view the center as a positive place or if she was one of the rare teachers that did not view behavior as a negative part of her work. She repeated this as she described stressors to children.

**Sally’s Description of Stress on Children**

Sally described a minimal negative influence to children. She shared that children did not receive enough opportunity to play. She believed activities centered on letter and number knowledge instead of play. She also conceded replacing play was necessary because children needed to enter school ready. She shared that children would have higher achievement in kindergarten if they spent more time on activities such teacher-directed activities and homework.

**Reduction of play.** Sally was aware that children spent less time in play than before Voluntary Prekindergarten. In the first interview, summertime had just begun. She described children engaged in play for about an hour of the time spent in Voluntary Prekindergarten. In the final interview, it was the beginning of the new school year. She explained children might only
engage in play for thirty minutes and the amount of time depended on what was written in the curriculum for that day. Sally’s rationale for the decreased time in play was that they needed to learn for kindergarten and felt if a child was behind in kindergarten, they would not catch up with their peers.

Because of VPK implementation. Yes we have because if you think about it back then [agency] didn’t want you to pick up a crayon, they just want you to play, play, play. So now it is kind of like, now we have to put this play into work.

Sally described teacher-led play and recognized that the children had less opportunity to be creative. She viewed the Voluntary Prekindergarten mandate as the main cause of the decrease in play. She shared “before there was way more play” and now it was time to teach.

**Homework in prekindergarten.** Because Sally felt the goal of Voluntary Prekindergarten was to make children “ready for kindergarten,” she used homework as a tool to practice the skills she taught and because it was expected in kindergarten. Sally admitted to me that homework was not part of her professional development and was taught that it was not appropriate. She felt it was necessary for children to become accustomed to turning homework because they would have to in kindergarten. Additionally, Sally defended the practice of homework and admitted to increasing the amount of homework for children struggling with a concept. Sally noticed that children who completed homework had less challenges with concepts.

I can tell the difference in the kids with the kids that do their homework and from the kids who just get it here with the four hours and then they are gone and they don’t think about it no more that day.

The homework that Sally gave children consisted of dittos and worksheets. She was trying to deviate from them when she led the class when Deborah resigned. She had an activity
prepared for children to bring in something from home that began with the letter “T.” She was excited to share that with me on my last visit to the school.

**Enrollment practices.** Sally maintained her positivity with behavior challenges as she shared enrollment practices. She had no response to questions about choosing children and stated, “all children deserve a chance.” Sally believed that it was easier to be successful when children came into the program already knowing colors and shapes and more importantly already knowing how to behave. Sally believed that all programs would not give children the chance they deserved because of the importance of the group. “Because if you don’t have a good group. If you think about it when we talked about should we pick the kids as they walk through the door?” Sally mentioned the potential of choosing particular children to be accepted at the center as a protection to assuring classrooms had groups of children who followed directions and had experience in group settings.

Sally’s first interview was different from her last. In the beginning, she was protective of her answers and portrayed the school and the Voluntary Prekindergarten as almost perfect. Her guard was lowered by the concluding interview and she shared her challenges with teaching along with the stress she and the children experienced.

**Sally’s Thoughts on Kindergarten Assessment and Accountability**

According to Sally, the assessment administered to children when they enter kindergarten was positive for children because scores could be used to improve prekindergarten practices. She shared that using the score for accountability purposes was positive, but did not agree that it should punish Voluntary Prekindergarten providers.

**Kindergarten assessment.** Sally stated that the kindergarten assessment was used to grade preschool teachers. She did not view the kindergarten assessment as a tool for teachers to
learn about where the children were developmentally. She questioned the process. “Why would you test the baby in kindergarten?” She also believed that the kindergarten assessment caused more stress for Voluntary Prekindergarten practitioners because they needed to concentrate too much on letters and numbers when the child might not be interested in learning them. “Why tire them out before first grade? They ain’t going to make it to the fifth grade and they are going to hate school.” She was concerned that this push prevented children from making choices. She added that for some children this push made children not like school before they even began.

**Voluntary Prekindergarten accountability.** Sally was confident that she taught her children. There was evidence from the required assessments she administered three times a year. When asked about the biggest challenge of teaching Voluntary Prekindergarten, she stated it was being able to meet what was expected in kindergarten. Sally welcomed monitoring but did not agree how Voluntary Prekindergarten teachers were held accountable. Sally worried about how to assist children in reaching a certain level when they entered her care with such vast abilities.

The biggest challenge is when they go to kindergarten and making sure we reach the right goal. Sometimes you get ten kids that have never been in school, the mom kept them home all the time or grandma kept them. Sometimes then you have kids when they got that one on one they were learning then you have others that never learned. Sally agreed with assessing children but did not agree with how centers were held accountable.

I don’t really agree with the grading and failing from the teachers part and taking it away or we are not doing the right thing. I really don’t agree with that because every child is different and teachers do make big differences in a child’s life.

She continued, “I think it is more of us being VPK teachers and the stress of them getting tested. We want to see…we just want to get in it in there. Anyway we can possible.”
Sally emphasized the words “Any way we can possible.” Sally felt that Voluntary Prekindergarten teachers experienced more stress than other practitioners. Sally believed that some of the stress was brought on from the fear of accountability.

**Summary of Sally Shyflower**

Sally Shyflower entered the early childhood field as many of her peers did at the center, as a mother looking for a place to stimulate and teach her child. Sally graduated high school with a desire to become a pediatrician or to work with children with special needs. As she struggled to seek her professional goals, she was drawn to the early childhood profession by chance. She had experience with all age groups and as a director. Life challenges brought her to this center where she felt valued. She was the only practitioner in the study that was motivated to move to higher administrative positions in the field. She trusted the curriculum and followed it.

During the interviews, she would sometimes contradict herself. I believe this was from a wall that surrounded her at first until I had earned her trust. Sally described a strong emphasis on preparing children for kindergarten. She described herself teaching with many teacher-led activities and less description on how to incorporate achieving standards by intentionally creating play situations so children learned the skills. I felt as if Sally was able to verbalize some developmentally appropriate activities and stated she felt children learned through play. However, when it came to following that practice, she placed trust in the Starfall Curriculum versus learning by doing. She admitted that children needed less academics and more play but would contradict herself by stating that academics were strongly needed to be successful when the children entered kindergarten.
Sally’s demeanor was significantly different in the third interview. Deborah, her co-teacher, had resigned about three weeks prior and Sally was leading the classroom. She had more confidence during that final interview and a stronger voice. She was less hesitant with her replies and displayed more passion when speaking of being held accountable in the manner the mandate required. I noted in my research journal her change. I mentioned to Lacy Lotus that I believed Sally was a strong asset to the center. Table 12 indicates key findings for Sally Sunflower.

**Voluntary Prekindergarten Participant 3: Cassie Carnation.**

Cassie Carnation was different from the other participants. She was prepared for the interview and she shared with me she was looking forward to us talking about her Voluntary Prekindergarten experience. Out of all my participants, Cassie Carnation was the one who had the most in-depth story to share. She had been in the field for twenty-five years and also experienced Voluntary Prekindergarten as a teacher in Georgia. She was open to my questions and willing to describe her experience in detail. Often times she repeated that she hoped this study would help teachers like her.

Cassie greeted me with a serious expression. She was on her break and wanted to step away from the classroom. The initial and final interviews took place in the director’s office, while the second interview was held in a teacher’s area outside. That interview was extremely uncomfortable for me because I was professionally dressed and it was about 93 degrees outside. I was also fearful a summer storm would form at any moment. The weather did not appear to affect Cassie. Each interview she dressed in shorts and a casual shirt with sneakers. I am sure that helped in making the heat more bearable.
Table 12.

**Key Findings for Sally Shyflower.**

| Effective and Appropriate Teachings | Able to verbalized developmental  
|                                   | Believed children learn through play  
|                                   | Followed prescribed curriculum-said she was able to deviate  
|                                   | Felt professional development taught her to understand children  
|                                   | Was not trained on the use of prescribed curriculum, naming of phonemes, compound words, formal assessment  
| Disconnect with training to practice | Felt children should play more  
|                                   | Felt professional development did not teach her how to teach children  
| Influences from Probation | Little effect from probation  
|                                   | Use of prescribed curriculum  
|                                   | Lack of Time  
| Conflicts and Stressors | Pressure to teach children  
|                                   | Fear of accountability  
|                                   | Lack of play  
|                                   | Homework  
| Traditional Practices | Reward with Candy  
|                                   | Use of only formal assessment  
|                                   | Positive reinforcement  
| Progressive Practices | Believed in offering children choices  
|                                   | Home-school connections  

I chose the Carnation as the pseudonym for Cassie because it is believed that carnations can be traced back to the time when Jesus was placed on the cross (Green, 2012). The carnation has lasted through time as it endures harsh environments and climate changes. This flower is similar to Cassie. She has spent more time in the field, longer than any of the participants. She understands developmentally appropriate practices and tries to stay true to her education.

**Getting to Know Cassie**

Cassie was in her late forties and was open and direct as she answered my questions and told her story. Cassie had realized in middle school that she wanted to be a teacher. She had a few teachers who inspired her, and she wanted to be like them when she grew up. Cassie had
taught for almost 25 years for prekindergarten. She earned a Bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood from birth to age eight. Cassie had no interest in career advancement. She turned down an opportunity to become the assistant director when the owner was searching for one a couple years earlier.

Cassie’s classroom was located in a different building from the other pre-kindergarten rooms. It was small but cozy. She had organized areas of the room into centers. She had a display board reserved for family pictures and had rules with photos beside them. Cassie did not work with an assistant and appeared to be reclusive from the other practitioners. I had the impression that the other practitioners did not connect with her personality. I never felt it was due to the school being on probation.

Cassie was the only summer Voluntary Prekindergarten teacher because she was the only one qualified with a four-year degree. She had a tremendous amount of anxiety as she felt a burden on her shoulders when the school did not earn a passing score in the summer for three consecutive years. Cassie expressed her stress within the first few minutes of the first interview. She felt Voluntary Prekindergarten should not be taught in the summer.

I am so stressed with it right now. Because I have nine children and I need to get a 75% or higher. Out of the nine, five of them have never ever been in school ever. They have been home all that time. What I don’t understand if you are at home what do you do with your children? It seems like they don’t know anything.

The smaller the center the more challenges programs have to meet the readiness requirement. This center had only one summer class and Cassie endured the additional responsibilities that derived from that strain. “I personally feel that there should never be a summer VPK because there is just not enough time in that short period of time to teach the
children the things that they should know.” This statement was strong as it portrayed her fear of the children coming to her with very little experience. This aligns with the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability Report that suggests when programs serve large percentages of children who begin Voluntary Prekindergarten already behind their peers, the program is more likely to become a low performing provider (April, 2008).

**Cassie’s Beliefs and Perspectives on Effective and Appropriate Teaching**

Cassie described her teaching practices closer to developmentally appropriate practices than the other two practitioners. She understood and could explain the importance of play and held concerns about children learning concepts before they were ready. Her ideal classroom consisted of multiple dramatic play and creative activities without being rushed. Cassie felt learning through play was important and wanted children to learn to write through play. She felt a need to deviate from true play but encouraged children to learn through fun activities. “We do a lot of play dough letters. I get the play dough out ... for the summer VPK.” She continued, “Because we failed I had to take this class that focused on writing and letters so I have been trying to correspond that with the Starfall and they use a lot of play dough.”

This is an example of a calamity between play that is child driven and play that is teacher driven. Cassie was aware of the challenge; however, she was pressured to decrease play led by children. Children practiced concepts such as letters and numbers with Bingo games. The children who were behind in some concepts would play Bingo with her more often.

**Disconnect with Training to Practice**

Cassie’s stated her Bachelors program did not prepare her for Voluntary Prekindergarten. She had attended a college over twenty years earlier; however, she continued with her yearly professional development requirements. Currently, the requirement was twenty-four hours of
yearly training when a school was gold star accredited. Cassie seemed at a crossroads about what she learned in professional development and what the curriculum instructed for the day.

When I went to college and became a teacher they did not stress on stuff (academics, homework) like that. They stressed on teaching the kids how to play and socialize.

That is basically what they did. That is what they told you play is very important. The curriculum she followed had a letter of the week, something that was not encouraged in her early childhood education programs. “… That is something I learned from Starfall. It is not something I learned from professional development.”

Cassie stated she was required to assess children differently from how she was taught. In her professional development, she was taught portfolio assessment similar to what Deborah described. Portfolio assessment is a collection of a child’s work and documentation of skills throughout the year. This assessment process provides a well-rounded scope of a child’s progress throughout the year and is considered a developmentally appropriate approach. Cassie described portfolio assessment as something that she found challenging but effective.

You have to have pictures and examples of what the kids are saying and doing and all of that good stuff. I didn’t do that because I had VPK and I guess VPK doesn’t have to do all of that stuff. I did one child because that child was not VPK and let me tell you it was a pain in the butt. I did not like it at all.

Cassie continued the practice of portfolio assessment when Voluntary Prekindergarten first started. As she became accustomed to the new assessment process, she discontinued the practice as in depth as she learned in professional development. She only recently realized her practice of portfolio assessment gave the local Early Learning Coalition enough evidence of the children’s growth that the school was granted a good cause exemption (explained Isay Iris).
Cassie’s Perceptions and Beliefs about the Influences of Being a Provider on Probation in Voluntary Prekindergarten

When Cassie spoke of being on probation, she displayed signs of anxiety. I noted in my researcher journal when Cassie spoke of probation she looked down at the table and I could see tears in her eyes. She obviously took this concern to heart.

I felt really upset. I feel upset whenever I fail. I feel like I am trying my best and I am doing what I can but you are not giving me enough time to do it. I would tell Isay (the owner), here is the progress they made look they went from a 2 to a 5 in a short period of time. To me that is a big jump to the State it means you know you really are not teaching them anything.

In the previous section, I explained how Cassie felt that children should learn some concepts at a later age. Ironically, she positively described the curriculum and the emphasis of phonological awareness, the very same concept she believed to be above age level. She was never trained on how to teach phonemes.

Oh yeah, it has all of that but the main content is phonological awareness. Right now we are talking about patterns, we are talking about sequencing, we are talking about different sizes. But we are also focusing on certain letters and letter sounds like the letter “P” and the sound that the “P” makes words that begin with “P” so it is all corresponded in there.

The curriculum was the most significant change in her practice since being placed on probation. Before, she would create her lesson plans and circle time. Currently, she took the plans from the curriculum and had the text opened on her lap when executing circle time. She also began to use flashcards during circle as a result of probation. Cassie’s goal was to “get them
prepared for kindergarten.” Although she described this as a tension, she also described her love for the curriculum.

**Cassie’s Stress as a Practitioner**

The participants all agreed that Cassie was challenged with more stress than the other practitioners. Cassie described multiple stressors such as low scores, children in prekindergarten for the first time, children with disabilities, and children with behavior challenges. When Cassie first began teaching at the center, Voluntary Prekindergarten had not been implemented. Cassie had less stress before the program existed.

It was less stressful because back when I first started VPK we only had to focus on the kids knowing their letters, their numbers their colors, their shapes. We didn’t have to focus on letter sounds writing their name that wasn’t a priority back then.

One of the most contentious stressors on Cassie was the low scores during the summer. She was also the only teacher in the school with the educational requirement to teach summer Voluntary Prekindergarten. “… you can’t teach the summer unless you have the four year degree. Which it puts a lot of pressure on me because it really does.” It was important for Cassie to tell me that Voluntary Prekindergarten changed how she taught and what was taught. As she described this, her eyes filled with tears. She wanted someone to hear her and know that there are challenges for children and practitioners with the program.

There is a really big difference you know from when it was just pre-k to now when it is VPK. It wasn’t as stressful. I felt stressed because of the low scores. That made me even push harder and I don’t like pushing my kids to where they get stressed out and I get stressed out it just isn’t worth it. They are only four and five.
Cassie shared she enjoyed teaching more when accountability was not so high. She did not feel the impact until her readiness rate was below what was required. Before she believed the children would learn what they should through play and how she taught and planned in her trainings.

**Working with a struggling child.** Cassie felt that each child should make progress. Progress would indicate she taught them something. This was a challenge for her since all children did not understand the concepts or skills as she taught them in her plans. She believed some skills were more appropriate to be taught to kindergarteners or first graders.

I think that is too difficult for them. They will ask if you have the word sidewalk and you take away the word side what’s left, distinguishing between the two of those are really difficult for 4 and 5 year olds.

Cassie worked with children more individually with children who could not keep up with the class. This time benefitted the child because it allowed the child to practice and repeat the new concepts. She admitted that the extra time was helpful; however, the extra time also took children away from play.

Right now I have two little girls that are just not getting the concept of the sounds of letters. They know their letters but they are not getting the sounds. So I have been working more with those two particular children right now.

Cassie believed that summer could not provide struggling children with the time needed to develop the skills needed to be “ready for kindergarten” because they would often enter the center without recognition of basic colors and shapes. Every now and then she worked with a child who she knew could not pass the assessment (David is a pseudonym).
I will never forget this one. His name was David and this was VPK and he was autistic. The first day of school he ran out of the classroom I had to literally scream for help because I had my other kids I couldn’t run out after him. He had to go home before I went home every day because when I left he freaked out.

When it came time for him to enter kindergarten the child was not meeting enough state standards. “He made progress but it is that he did not make enough progress to where the State thinks it is ok.”

Cassie desperately wanted to help each child. She looked for progress in each child. She tracked, assessed, and planned. She was aware that sometimes that was not enough according to the requirements.

**Lack of time.** Cassie was concerned about the amount of hours she spent with children in the fall compared to the time she spent with children in the summer. In the fall, she had children for three hours for a total of 540 hours. In the summer, she had children for eight hours for a total of 300 hours. Children who attended Voluntary Prekindergarten in the summer were expected to reach the same testing rates as children who attended in the fall even though practitioners had them for fewer hours. Because she spent less time with her summer children, Cassie felt she could not provide as many problem-solving experiences or play activities. For example, Cassie believed in family style dining where children serve themselves and pass the food to others. The schedule for Voluntary Prekindergarten would not allow her to continue that practice during the summer.

I just don’t have time to sit down because I have to get the cots down and I have to get them ready for their nap. When it was pre-k I would be like I will get the cots in a
little while I would sit down eat lunch with the kids and talk to them about what we are eating and who like what and all that good stuff. I like that a lot and I miss that.

Cassie’s words described a scenario where she could not practice what she believed to be what was appropriate for children. Pinata et al. (2007) state that when teachers learn that consequences will come from the score of their students taking test, teachers would adjust practices even if their beliefs and education do not agree with the approach.

Cassie compared Florida to Georgia’s Voluntary Prekindergarten. In Georgia she had the children full days and they would follow the public school calendar during the school year. At her current center during the fall, she taught Voluntary Prekindergarten for three hours a day; however, in the summer the time increased to eight hours a day. She also had time for reflection and to create lesson plans in Georgia. She shared that this was a practice she missed. “We don’t have time to do lesson plans. We do them on our lunch break but kids are here from 8:30 to 4:30 or 8:30 to 11:30 whichever one it is.” Cassie felt these negatively impacted children by rushing children. She believed that children should have a relaxed environment and felt that it was not possible to always offer that option. “Well lunch is rushed. I feel bad for these kids because with these kids in VPK they have to be done…I don’t even get to sit with the kids at lunchtime with VPK.”

Cassie could not fix the rushing of children and felt a loss of control. She had been in the field for many years and had the ability to make changes in her schedule to fit the needs of her class. The stress to the children was visible to her and she knew how to correct it but could not because of the restraints of the program.

**Challenges with child assessment.** Similar to Sally, Cassie appreciated assessment but not without trials. She did not agree with how some questions were graded and also felt some
questions were not appropriate for the geographic region. Cassie was trained in a two-hour session with a trainer from the company who sold the curriculum. Cassie had that advantage over the other practitioners because she had been teaching for the Voluntary Prekindergarten Program much longer than them. She was well versed in the questions and how children should answer but did not agree with what she could mark as correct and incorrect.

One of the questions is this is a key, what is it for? A lot of my kids will say for the car. Then you would have to say can you tell me more? For a door that is exactly what a key is used for a car or a door but they have to specify unlock or lock the door and lock the key or unlock the car.

Cassie was aware that there were times the children would answer correctly based on their experience. This is a common concern with assessments that are used in large areas that could be significantly different in weather, land, etc.

They show you a picture of a desert how many four and five year olds actually know what a desert is? I mean I am sorry but that is … They know that there is no water and that it is just sand because that is what the picture shows but they are not going to know they always tell me beach …

Cassie could not tell children if they had the question right or wrong which is common in an assessment. Cassie also took the assessments home to grade them to avoid children even worrying about a score. Because of probation, the center was required to administer three assessments in the fall and summer. Summer was limited to ten weeks and Cassie stated that the first week was for the children to become accustomed to the classroom. Cassie took between twenty and thirty minutes to assess each child and she sometimes struggled with children wanting to play instead sitting for the assessment.
But it does take a good twenty to thirty minutes. A lot of kids have trouble sitting there that long too. You know it is like I want to go play. I am like I promise you can go play and you can do whatever you want as soon as we are done here.

Cassie would not admit to teaching to a test. However, when Cassie knew the vocabulary and concepts that children were expected to know for the assessment, she was more particular about teaching the skills.

I try to because I know that is a question. The other question is this is a man’s shadow what made a shadow. Most of the kids don’t know. Well then now when we go outside I tell them look the sun made your shadow isn’t that wonderful. The sun made your shadow because of the sun. Now they know the sun made their shadow.

Researchers indicate when practitioners are aware of skills or questions that will be on a test that determines their credibility practitioners will focus more on the items on the test versus the individual needs of the child (Pinata et al, 2007).

Cassie used the results to know which children to work with more in small group. She viewed assessment as helpful and important. “It helps because when you first evaluate them you know where they are at and you know where they need to improve. It is working out really good.”

Dealing with challenging behavior. Behavior challenges can occur from a variety of causes. Practitioners should be trained to predict or learn the possible causes to prevent the behavior. Cassie could not make adjustments for some situations because of the Voluntary Prekindergarten rules.

I have this little boy last week whose mom said he only got a couple of hours of sleep because they were rushing around because of things they need to do, he wanted
to stay sleeping so I still had to get him off his bed and gave him a snack, then I let him go lay down a little bit in the quiet area.

Cassie wanted the child to remain on the cot and take the extra time he needed. According to the requirements of the program, children cannot sleep during Voluntary Prekindergarten time. If Cassie allowed the child to sleep longer, the program would not be able to report that time to the Early Learning Collation for reimbursement. She also knew that children need positive guidance and someone who is flexible but consistent and would do their best to prevent distress. “Now with VPK they have to be up and off their beds by a certain time.”

Cassie stated that before Voluntary Prekindergarten she was able to allow children to sleep longer if needed. She said if she was monitored and the child was still resting after the schedule time the school would not receive funding for that day. “I have kids hitting, spitting, throwing you know and it takes time to teach them this is what we do if they don’t have the words I give them the words.”

Cassie had a small classroom compared to the other Voluntary Prekindergarten classroom at the center. Cassie designed a corner of her room to be a place children could go to be alone. This was different from time-out because it was safe place versus a punishment. There were times that her efforts were still not enough to meet the child’s needs.

We just had to expel a little boy just this past week just because he was in [another teacher’s] room and he was out of control and I’m like let me try because I have a little corner if you get upset you can go in there. You can kick, scream, holler, whatever makes you happy to get you calmed down.

The other participants and Cassie knew that Cassie’s room was designated for the children with special behavior challenges. The environment was contained and the teacher-child
ratio was low. Cassie shared that one reason her scores were low was because the administrators at the center placed children with challenges in her class, “…because normally I get the children that have a lot of anger issues and a lot of issues with just dealing with life in general.” Cassie voiced confidence when speaking of guiding children’s behavior. She described practices aligned with developmentally appropriate practices and what aligned to teaching in professional development.

**Cassie’s Description of Stress on Children**

Cassie felt that children were rushed in Voluntary Prekindergarten. She felt there was over emphasis to conform to the schedule to ensure payment from the Early Learning Coalition. Cassie believed that children had limited time to socialize and that was a direct response to Voluntary Prekindergarten.

The kids weren’t rush but we have to follow a schedule now that we are VPK. At this time we need to do this and at this time we need to do this. Like right now for the summer I have to have them have lunch and then be on their beds by 11:30. They get lunch at 11:00 and then on their beds at 11:30. They have to be up and the cots have to be put away by 1:00. When it was just pre-k we would eat lunch at 11:30 and nap would be at 12:00, if they got done at 12:15 it was not a big deal.

Cassie was concerned about how the children reacted to what she referred to as stress in the summer. She stated she was rarely out and would not use any vacation time during the summer. She would also make it a point to return from lunch or break by a certain time so they would not worry that she would not return. It was important to her for children to have one consistent provider. “When I get back I can get my kids up and then they will see me and they are familiar with me because my summer kids have a lot of anxiety.”
Cassie increased the amount of one on one time and the amount of small group games. She practiced this and offered homework to give children more opportunity to learn the concepts. “They didn’t have a lot of socialization when we were on probation because I was so stressed trying to get them to learn their letters, their colors, their numbers, and their shapes.” She did not agree with these practices but found it more important for high scores. Cassie shared she desired to have a good group of children and wished she did not always receive the children with the most challenges.

**Reduction of social play.** Cassie shared stories of experiences she had as a little girl engaged in play with her friends. It was a special time when she said she learned and connected with others. She wished the children in her class had similar experiences. Cassie wanted time to sit with the children and assist in expanding their play as she did before the school was on probation.

They get their center time in but during center time I also have to try to fit in small group time. Which means I don’t get time to sit down and play like with the blocks and build with them because I have to work with certain children that are behind. So I got to sit down and work with these children trying to get the concept. We had more time to be more social. They got to play more and I got to play more with them. Where now its like VPK now if it is a 6 hour class it is from 8:30 to 4:30 but you have to all this extra stuff added in there so I really don’t get to sit down much with the kids and go into housekeeping and pretend we are cooking dinner or read a story to a small group of children because I am always busy trying to help the ones that don’t know their letters and letter sounds.
She would continue to follow practices as it was structured and organized in the curriculum. Cassie administered these practices because she believed the lessons would prepare the children to pass the kindergarten assessment even though they are against developmentally appropriate practices. When the outcome was a score she felt she must deviate from her beliefs and trainings. She would defend in her words, “It does get the kids ready for kindergarten but there is not a lot of socialization there.”

**Homework in prekindergarten.** Cassie had never assigned homework before Voluntary Prekindergarten and did not begin the practice until after the readiness scores were too low. Cassie did not believe that homework assisted in academic gains with children unless they completed it with a parent's assistance. “It doesn’t matter it is not a mandatory thing. It is something that I want the parents working on- last year many of them did not bring any of them back and that is ok.”

Someone who came in to monitor from the Early Learning Coalition told Cassie that Voluntary Prekindergarten teachers should offer homework. She admitted it was not mandatory but felt the recommendation was all she needed for implementation. Cassie followed appropriate practices by avoiding material awards to children who completed homework and did not punish the children who did not turn in their homework. “If someone did turn in their homework I didn’t give them a prize or anything I would just say great job and give them thumbs up – we do a lot of thumbs up.” Cassie implemented homework without feeling confident in the benefits to children.

Well I don’t know if it even helpful personally I really don’t because like I said with me even if they don’t return it, it doesn’t you know they are not going to get in trouble for not returning their homework because I feel they are four years old five.
Cassie again would stray from her knowledge of developmentally appropriate practices and her own learning by creating homework with little problem solving or creativity for children to reinforce concepts the child may or may not understand. Cassie supported worksheets for extra help to the children not able to keep up with the curricula. Cassie applied homework to her practice because “that is what I am supposed to do but like I said I have kids that get really upset.” She admitted this may not be the best teaching method but she followed instructions and would comply with the rules of the center.

**Enrollment practices.** Cassie’s classroom varied in enrollment throughout the year. It was not uncommon for children to come and go so new enrollees could enter at any time of the year. Cassie viewed a difference in how Lacy (the director) and Isay (the owner) enrolled children. She felt that Lacy would place any child into her classroom, even if the child had been expelled from another center. She shared that Isay was more cognizant of Cassie’s stressors and more thoughtful of the stressors that Cassie had to deal with on a daily basis. Cassie wanted every child to have a chance, but felt she was given too many children with severe challenges. She shared that she could not take all children to the expected standards if she was spending time redirecting and correcting unwanted behaviors. “I know when Isay was here in the summer time she would look at the children and see (pause) my challenges before she would actually enroll them.” Both Lacy and Isay would put children with potential behavior problems in Cassie’s class opposed to the larger classroom where there were more children and two teachers.

**Cassie’s Thoughts on Kindergarten Assessment and Accountability**

Cassie felt that both assessment and accountability were important. She wished assessment benefited children and programs. She also believed that providers should be
expected to improve children’s outcomes but the stakes are high when all children are expected to be at the same level at the same time.

**Kindergarten assessment.** Cassie relied on the assessments as an indicator of how prepared the children were for kindergarten. She hoped if the child did well on the assessment for her the child would pass the kindergarten assessment. She felt powerless against the children who were assessed who she knew were bilingual, disabled, or counted even if they moved out of state. Cassie felt these were automatic deficits for the center. Cassie described her summer Voluntary Prekindergarten classroom.

I have nine this summer, last year I had seven. Out of the seven, two of those went to private school and one left the state. I only had six counted and out of those six, two of them had learning disabilities. Well one was autistic and the other one had the learning disability.

Cassie explained that she knew the child was autistic because his parents shared that information. She described with pride how she positively impacted that child’s progress. She felt all of the children showed growth while in her classroom. The example of the autistic child was one where Cassie was concerned that he will not be able to pass the kindergarten assessment even though he had made marked improvements while in her class. She felt that children with some challenges such as autism should not be “graded” the same as a child without challenges.

**Voluntary Prekindergarten accountability.** Cassie shared that it was reasonable for the growth to be equal for all children. She stated accountability was needed but it needed to be more reasonable and more appropriate. Cassie experienced more tension than the other practitioners and maybe more than administrators. She struggled with not knowing when the
scores were publicized along with which children did not score well and what were the concepts the children were struggling with most.

Wherever my weaknesses was I would improve on myself where as I don’t know what my weaknesses are. It could be in math because I am not doing enough math or it could be in phonological awareness I am not doing enough of that. I wish I knew where. Do you know what I am saying I don’t know that [meaning what the children are scoring low on].

Cassie agreed that preschool administrators and teachers should be held accountable for the success of children. She believed when accountability was measured through one test versus a child’s progress accountability became unfair. She shared that success and ability should be rated on how much the child improved.

I think the way that accountability is, is through the testing. You see a child that is at a two and they have made no progress by at the end of the year they are still at a two they may be something that the teachers are not doing. If they start at a two and make a progress to five I would think that would be okay. Because they have made some kind of progress. The state doesn’t see it that way.

Cassie’s belief that accountability was important but should be based on developmental growth is in agreement with research. According to Stipek (2006), accountability should be written into mandates that measure gains to prevent teachers from being tempted to teach isolated skills.

**Summary of Cassie Carnation**

Cassie experienced a different view of probation from the other practitioners. Cassie felt guilt and failure because she was the only one in the school to teach Voluntary Prekindergarten
in the summer. The other practitioners were not aware that practices changed because of probation; moreover, they did not experience the negative emotional impact nor the higher levels of stress Cassie described.

Cassie stated that her professional development did not prepare her for Voluntary Prekindergarten. She felt unprepared for the concentration on phonemes and the emphasis on letters. She was at a crossroads between what she knew was correct, such as guiding children to learn more through play, to what she believed would give the children the skills needed for the Kindergarten test. She felt that some of the skills she taught the children they were not ready to learn. In addition, Cassie feared children were missing opportunities to learn critical skills to succeed socially in kindergarten. Researchers agree with Cassie’s concerns. According to Zigler et al. (2011),

a child who begins kindergarten knowing letter and sounds may be cognitively prepared, but if he or she does not understand how to listen, share, take turns, and get along with teachers and classmates, this lack of socialization will hinder further learning. (p. 87)

Cassie abandoned many of the practices taught to her in her education program. She based her decisions on her need to increase the readiness score for her school. As she began to rely more on the curriculum and single method of assessment, she strayed from creating her own lessons and portfolio assessments. The irony was she had continued saving children’s work not unlike portfolio assessment and because of her initiative to do so the center earned the good cause exemption. The good cause exemption is an option for providers who disagree with the results of the kindergarten assessment (See Appendix J for the good cause exemption rule). It can be filed after the center receives the scores. The center did this the third year they did not
meet the readiness rate. The center earned the exemption based on the documentation that the school provided from the children served during the summer two years prior. The owner stated the exemption was the first and only one in the county. See Table 13 for the key findings for Cassie Carnation.

Table 13.

Key Findings for Cassie Carnation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective and Appropriate Teachings</th>
<th>Good understanding of developmental appropriate practices</th>
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<td>Children learn through play</td>
<td>Followed prescribed curriculum</td>
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<td>Intentional teaching</td>
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<td>Authentic Assessment Guides</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disconnect with training to practice</td>
<td>Was not trained on the use of prescribed curriculum, naming phonemes, compound words, formal assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional development stressed social skills</td>
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<td>Changed to prescribed curriculum</td>
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<td>Use of only formal assessment</td>
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<td>Use of flashcards</td>
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<td>More small group</td>
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<td>Less child directed play</td>
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<td>High stress</td>
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<td>Low scores in summertime</td>
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<td>Lack of Time/Rushed</td>
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<td>Conflicts and Stressors</td>
<td>Lack of play</td>
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<td>Children’s behavior</td>
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<td>Traditional Practices</td>
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<td>Progressive Practices</td>
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<td>Respect for child</td>
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Center Director Participant 4: Lacy Lotus

Lacy Lotus was the center director. She had been at the center from the conception of Voluntary Prekindergarten. The center was part of the pilot sites for the program in the county. She had been the assistant director for two years and the director for less than a year. She stepped up when the owner wanted to hire a supervisor for the school.

The interviews all transpired in the center’s office. The office was small with two desks, each one facing adjacent walls. One desk was for the owner and the other was for the director. I sat in a chair next to the director’s desk and Sally sat in the director’s chair. It was not a fancy chair like most directors have, just a regular chair that looked like it would not be comfortable to sit in for long periods of time. There were many stacks of paper on the table and a new curriculum still in the shipping boxes on the floor.

Lacy has a very petite figure and a happy-go-lucky attitude. She walked in and voiced a concern that the school had a microwave in the two-year-olds’ room for years and that day it was a problem. I noted in my researcher journal that the owner and the director had administrative stressors unknown to other staff. I thought of how many different agencies must come in and make requests that do not align with others. During that first interview I saw representatives from three different agencies at the site.

I chose the pseudonym Lacy Lotus because the Lotus is a flower that in Buddhism represents achieved enlightenment (Shiva, 2013). Lacy would often connect her experience with a popular saying or a quote from a book she had read. She was willing to learn new methods to become better for her profession. Lacy had a true passion for the field and a positive approach to turmoil.
Getting to Know Lacy Lotus

Lacy was in her early thirties and had three young girls. She had been in the field for almost seven years. Lacy began as a two year old assistant and an afternoon floater. A floater is a person who goes to all the classrooms to assist with breaks and lunches. Lacy too came into the field because of her children. She stated she stayed at home but wanted her oldest to have more interaction with other children. When she enrolled her daughter she got to know Isay (owner) more. It was not long after that Isay was impressed and asked Lacy if she was looking for employment. Lacy had dreamed of working with children and had previously begun an education in the field by taking a few courses at the local college.

I wanted my degree. When I came here I was already in school enrolled at [school name] taking college classes for early childhood. They say that teachers are usually born, made, or taught. I believe I was a combination of all three. When I was young I used to make my brother and sister play school with me and my mom was the principal and if they didn’t listen to me I would send them to my mom’s office.

Lacy had worked with all age groups but never taught Voluntary Prekindergarten. She admitted to having little classroom experience because the float position took her everywhere without a dedication to one age group. She earned her Child Development Associate Degree Equivalency and the Directors Credential from the local vocational school. She attended the local college to earn her Associates Degree but found the stressors of parenting and going to school too much. She hoped to attend again soon in the future.

Lacy was happy with her job and looked for extra trainings to do her best. However, Lacy was not confident that she would stay in the field. The main reasons for wanting to change careers were stress and pay.
… the pay. And it’s ever changing it’s really hard to keep up with and it’s a lot of pressure and you can’t have an off day- coming in I knew this is what I wanted to do- you know as an assistant.

Lacy expanded that the assistant director position was easy compared to the director’s position. I noted in my researcher journal that I felt she wished she had remained the assistant director.

**Lacy’s Beliefs and Perspectives on Effective and Appropriate Teaching**

Lacy had the knowledge from professional development but did not have deep experience with lesson planning or assessment except for a short period of time teaching four-year-olds. As the assistant director and director her role was more of an observer and evaluator. She spent more time overseeing and guiding as an administrator.

Lacy’s described an ideal classroom as one that was full of materials and opportunities for children to choose to work in social situations or independently. She felt an importance for children to play and have choices. Lacy’s goals for the center were broad and predictable.

A good school- we want a learning base, a safe environment, a nurturing environment where our children are going to grow and prosper. It is our job to teach them because they didn’t come to us knowing we don’t expect them we don’t watch them we don’t babysit them it is our job to teach them.

Lacy did not have an assistant director but did have a staff member in charge in the morning and the afternoon. Numerous times during the interviews Lacy described practices aligned to what is known as developmentally appropriate. She believed in the curriculum and also protected it by saying teachers still had choices and creative opportunities. She wanted them to adjust the schedule to the needs of the children such as allowing them to stay outside longer if they were involved in play. She approached discipline with positive guidance and supported her
staff with professional development opportunities. The staff and herself were currently in a year program designed to increase positive guidance throughout the school. The program required visit from coaches, continuous training, and homework.

**Disconnect with training to practice.** Lacy was aware her Voluntary Prekindergarten practitioners were not always practicing what was recommended. She had watched her teachers move from play orientated teaching to direct instruction. They now taught with flashcards and homework. Lacy knew that if an agency monitored, specifically the Early Learning Coalition, they might be marked down because of those activities. “They probably wouldn’t like it. I don’t think they would disqualify us. It would be written into that thing that they use flashcards and it is not best practices.” Lacy admitted to practices that her teachers administered that were not developmentally appropriate.

Sending home the dittos. Hello. The flashcards we use in circle. But how else I mean I don’t want to say how else because yes I can think of a million other ways to teach a child how to write their letters then to send home dittos.

Lacy also had the same concern as Sally and Debbie with the phonemes. She described only learning to make the “X” sound recently. “I didn’t learn what the letter X sounded like until like two years ago, I promise you. But I am supposed to teach them. So this lays it out so that there room for teacher error.” Lacy and her staff did not look into the variety of methods teachers can apply to teach letters and numbers. They depended on the curriculum as their source for planning and implementation.
Lacy’s Perceptions and Beliefs about the Influences of Being a Provider on Probation in Voluntary Prekindergarten

Lacy was influenced by the stigma of being a provider on probation. She felt a responsibility to protect her staff from any negativity; however, was vocal about the stress her Voluntary Prekindergarten practitioners experienced, especially the summer teacher, Cassie Carnation. The influences that had the largest impact on the center were the stress she felt as a director, the impact on children, assessment and accountability.

Lacy’s Stress as a Director

“Nothing bad can ever happen on a Friday that’s the rule.” As the school director Lacy was challenged with different stressors from her responsibilities. Some of them included enrollment, finances, staff, reporting assessments, and maintaining compliance with agencies.

Ultimately anything they do falls on me. It is my responsibility. It is like they don’t get every parent to sign the VPK book. When they do not get it signed and that parent is just gone well if you haven’t had them sign it for a month or even two, I don’t get paid.

Lacy realized that she needed to do her best not to make errors because they might affect the entire center. She had to make sure she understood the rules of various agencies and then ensured her staff both understood and followed them. Agencies such as the local licensing board had fines connected to non-compliance. Agencies such as the Early Learning Coalition (ELC) could withhold payments. Either scenario added to the negative consequences of monitoring.

My mistakes cost money and the ELC is quick to take the money- very quick to take back your money. And now it is an adjustment they have to take it back and it’s like
in the business where they are pinching pennies but I hate to say pinching pennies but when you have a tight budget. Anyway it’s hard.

Lacy’s concerns only began at fines and loss of income as she had multiple rules to follow and enforce, as she felt obligated to stay positive for staff. “If one day I am tired and I am not feeling it you can totally feel it here. I can’t afford to have an off day. There are too many people that depend on me.”

Voluntary Prekindergarten offers additional dollars for programs. Lacy understood the seriousness of spending and was challenged by unexpected events. “This I don’t like to go into things unprepared. However, I can’t plan for tomorrow in this job. Boundaries are put into place for the good of each child: safety, health, and development.” The stressors of Lacy’s responsibilities, the probable financial impact her errors could cost the site along with attrition and the inability to predict what may happen next were challenges Lacy faced daily.

**Multiple regulators.** As the school director, Lacy was held responsible for any violations. When I began the first interview Lacy voiced a concern about needing to move the microwave. The microwave had been in the same place for seven years and it was never a concern and on this visit with this evaluator it was now a problem. Lacy shared the microwave was used by the staff and was not used to prepare food for children. She would either have to move the microwave out of the room or install another sink. The odds were that moving the microwave would be the solution and it would inconvenience the staff. The deviations in how regulations were interpreted added to the stress factors. There was a chance that another regulator could come in and not agree with the microwave’s new location.

Another challenge with multiple regulators was that inside each agency rules changed to move forward with quality or to adjust to the unknown factors. Rule adjustments could occur
throughout the year. It was Lacy’s obligation to make sure staff was trained on the new guidelines and that the guidelines were executed appropriately.

Together the varying regulations and the new requirements created additional stressors to the tasks of managing a preschool. These stressors were not only a challenge to administrator but also to practitioners. Early Childhood Education is a field where good staff are hard to find and more of a challenge to keep.

**Attrition.** Hiring and retaining qualified staff is a challenge for preschool administration. The more standards and regulations that are placed on centers exuberate the stressors of staff attainment. Lacy recruited practitioners who had experience and had self-motivation skills.

I want to hire competent people who can do their job and yes I am going to watch, I am going to manage, I am going to lead you and help you make the right choices that fit into the school but when I interview and meet you I am going to make sure we are on the same page and have a similar philosophy.

Lacy expressed a common concern from school directors. The educational requirements were progressively increasing; however, there was little means to increase salary. The few practitioners who earned a degree did not desire to stay in the private sector when the public school sector could offer the higher pay, benefits, and retirement. “I have 3 degreed teachers and like my one is leaving today is her last day. I can’t blame her. She is about to go into a teaching position making more than I do.”

Lacy struggled with attrition. The owner of the center offered vacation to the employees and a competitive salary. However, she could not compete with an agency as large as Head Start or the public school system. Lacy described this as just common stress that came with the preschool dilemma.
**Children with behavior challenges.** According to Lacy, every child deserved a chance. She had no hesitation with making sure all children were welcomed during the fall. She wanted to take in all children no matter their history in other centers and no matter their lack of preschool experience. She understood that children would display unwanted behaviors. According to Lacy, the center had a reputation among the community that they would accept the children expelled from other centers.

Lacy described her views against expelling children or not enrolling challenged children and not creating a barrier for her practitioners. She felt children with behavior challenges sometimes prevented her from moving forward with the curriculum. Lacy was also unsure herself how to deal with all behaviors especially when positive guidance strategies were ineffective.

Your job is stressful enough without the kid who is going to come in and cuss you out or smack you or throw something at you and they don’t tell you what to do in the books when a child tells you to “f” off. And it happens more than you would think.

Lacy described a difference in children with behavior challenges and developmental delays. The child with a disability Lacy was more apathetic for children with a disability.

The child with a developmental delay you want to genuinely help them. A child who tells you to “f” off and throws a cot at you and then their mom comes in and then you meet mom and you are like it make sense- you are a little less likely to put up with everything.

As the school director Lacy had to make decisions that impacted the school as a whole. They affected children, families, and staff. When it came to deciding if a child could enroll or be expelled that decision potentially had an impact on many layers of a program. Children who
misbehaved might take too much attention from practitioner. “You know in circle having those power struggles or having to take time away from learning and instructional time to deal with the behavioral issues as much.”

Lacy believed that administrators needed to remove a child from the program “for the greater good sometimes,” meaning that at times children were expelled from the program to protect the safety of the child, other children, and to reduce the stress on staff.

**Changes in administration practices.** According to Lacy, the center had two options when the program was on probation. The center could purchase a curriculum or the center could create a staff development and improvement plan. Either option resulted in an increase in observation, documentation, and training.

   It’s basically doing what you should be doing but way more documentation and a way more frequently basis and a lot of classes- my biggest thing is the classes you have to take are additional classes and I am all for training.

There was nothing formal about the staff development plan. Lacy was required to observe Cassie every other week “because she was the provider on probation.” This was written on a monthly calendar in a casual manner. Her perspective on the extra observations was positive, “Because we had to do the plan I cannot remember the name of it but because we had to do a plan we were checking on our teachers more. That is not necessarily a bad thing at all.” She continued,

I lost old staff and some staff didn’t make it a passed the 90 days it was a lot, that was hard. Here I have new staff and you don’t have training in [name of county] but there is a training in [name of county] well her car isn’t going to make it to [name of
county]. She only makes ten dollars an hour. And we don’t pay poorly than other people.

One consequence was the educational staff were required to attend specified trainings created to assist in success. Lacy looked forward to professional development trainings. However, she struggled when attrition placed additional challenges with meeting the requirement of all staff needing the trainings in a specific time period and offering low but competitive wages for the profession.

**Lacy’s Description of Stress on Children**

Lacy believed that since the Voluntary Prekindergarten program was on probation children spent more time in small group experiences and less time in play in the prekindergarten classrooms. Lacy sympathized with the need for children to play and have free time. She described the effect on children.

My thing is when they are in play they are pulling them to do small groups. It is constant because they pulling them to do small groups. Unfortunately we try to do one on one individual but more realistically it is small groups. Like I said earlier we are not giving them so much of a chance and we are not being fair to them not giving them that opportunity to be kids.

Lacy reasoned that Voluntary Prekindergarten should not experience the same learning as other age group. They would increase “formal instruction because the children enjoy it more.” Lacy justified a decline in playtime when it came to the Voluntary Prekindergarten program because they needed to be “ready for kindergarten.”

**Teaching to the next level or teaching to the next age group.**  It was evident that Lacy believed when it came to Volunteer Prekindergarten the objective was to prepare them for
kindergarten. However, the other classrooms objective was to work on the current stage of
development. This was another tension at the center. The practitioners that Lacy described in the
other classrooms wanted to begin teaching what prekindergarten teachers taught, “They want to
start using the Starfall curriculum; they want to get them ready for it.” Here she would not allow
them to implement the Starfall curriculum because she felt there was no need to prepare them
early. “Stages of development are done in stages- if they don’t reach this stage they can’t get to
this stage. They have got to be kids, they have got to be babies, they got to be at this point.” She
adamantly defended not pushing down academics onto younger children, “Because if you are
always worried about getting the child ready for the next stage you are going to miss the stage
that they are in and the stages have to be met.”

I noted in the research journal that Lacy conveyed this particular topic with passion and
force in her voice. Lacy did not realize that she placed this same stressor on children in
prekindergarten because they were now expected to complete activities that were once common
in kindergarten. There was a clear goal to prepare them for kindergarten and the way to get them
there was to begin primary school practices.

**Homework in prekindergarten.** Lacy saw positive outcomes when sending homework
to prekindergarten children to prepare them for homework in kindergarten. Homework is not an
exercise promoted in developmentally appropriate practices and one not taught in the
professional development programs any of the Voluntary Prekindergarten practitioners at the
center attended. It seemed odd to me how Lacy viewed this as an important piece to preparing
the child for kindergarten. She did not feel similar to doing this in other age groups.
I won’t let my four year olds do homework. They want to. They do they say I want to get them ready for VPK. No we are going to just let them be in the stage that they are in, we are not getting them ready.

Lacy felt because homework was not mandatory and that it reinforced concepts taught in the program it was beneficial to children. Lacy thought that children enjoyed practicing schoolwork at home. She believed homework made them feel older like “big kids.” She also felt that candy is an incentive for children to complete their homework. “How simple it is to do just say if you turn in your homework folder you are going to get a lollipop. That child is going to nag the parent until they bring it back because they want that lollipop.”

It was apparent to me that Lacy did not see the contradictions from training to practice. She could state the importance of homework without a concern with the disconnection of training to practice. Lacy believed like Debra and Sally that homework gave children extra practice on academic skills and that parents wanted their child to have homework because it made preschool more like “school.”

**Effect on classroom and teaching practices.** Another enormous change to the practices was how classroom activities moved from practitioner created to following Starfall. The curriculum they had purchased had dramatically changed the approach to teaching new concepts. Lacy repeated the same level of excitement as the practitioners did with the prescribed curriculum.

This is it – it is basically for your experience or inexperienced teachers so it is going to lay out exactly what to teach them because yes you took your CDA but for VPK you are getting a three hour course to tell you how and what to teach these children.
Lacy shared they used Starfall because of probation. Lacy believed that the curriculum was so simple to implement that the level of education of the practitioner was not a factor and because they followed it the “scores are way better now.”

The way Lacy described the curriculum anyone could apply no matter the level of experience or the type of education. She was hesitant in changing the curriculum when her staff were comfortable and successful. A new mandate would require the school to use a Voluntary Prekindergarten approved curriculum and Starfall was not on the list. Due to the new rule, the owner purchased a curriculum; however, she was unaware if the curriculum was on the approved list. The curriculum was what lay in unopened boxes on the office floor.

Yeah so the 2013 list just came out like last week so we bought this not even a year ago. There is no guarantee that that curriculum that you just bought was going to be on that 2013 list. So you may have to buy a whole new curriculum and who has four or five thousand dollars to just throw?

I later learned Isay the owner was proactive by ordering the curriculum to comply with the new mandate. However, this was a stress on both administrators because the approved list was not publicized until after summer began. The ramification left little time for providers on probation to purchase a new curriculum. The fact that the curriculum was on the floor of the office was evidence that more is needed than just a mandate requiring a center to purchase a curriculum.

**Enrollment practices.** Earlier I wrote that Lacy boasted about the center’s positive reputation for accepting all children. When children were expelled from another center it was not uncommon for parents to be given information about their center.
There was a time a couple of years ago if a child got kicked out they would say go to [school name] and I would see them and think they will come here with a clean slate and I don’t want to hear their issues. We don’t want to hear their issues. Let’s give them a fair chance. My teachers are not looking for that.

Unfortunately, Lacy could not state that she accepted any child all year long. Lacy shared in the final interview that in the summer time Lacy shifted her perspective. Because of probation and the low summer time scores, she was concerned that allowing any child to enter the center at any time might reduce summertime kindergarten readiness scores.

We don’t do that- not here I can’t imagine that. With the summer VPK yes because the number is so low other than that there is 22 kids if 2…of course I want all children to make gains of course but if five kids don’t pass?

I noted in my research journal how when Lacy shared this with me her voice lowered. She knew it was not best practices but she also had a responsibility to maintain the readiness rate. She described this change as a direct reaction to not only being placed on probation but remaining on probation. “I hate to really say it but I was more selective on who I let in the center and that is not us.” She continued, “Yeah that is I would do a screening process. I would go over with them what were his issues, what are his strengths, what are the areas of concerns.”

Lacy shared that the highest pressure is on the summer Voluntary Prekindergarten teacher; however, stress was felt throughout the school. Lacy displayed a defensive reaction when she spoke of the curriculum, homework, and her staff in general. During the summer the program enrolled eleven or less children. When all children were counted no matter if they moved or had a disability that left little room for a child to not reach the readiness rate. In the
fall, the program enrolled approximately 22 children. The pressure for all children to succeed was not as intense.

**Lacy’s Thoughts on Kindergarten Assessment and Accountability**

Similar to the other participants, Lacy perceived both assessment and accountability as positive. According to Lacy, the practitioners learned more about the child and the child learned more concepts because of assessment. Moreover, Lacy described an importance to being monitored. She felt everyone no matter what profession should be accountable for their responsibilities.

**Kindergarten assessment.** Lacy’s responsibility with assessment was primarily at the end of the process when she inputted the scores into the system that reports the results to the Department of Education. The center was not monitored by the Early Learning Coalition on any of the five requirements in the mandate. The center was monitored and trained on assessments, “their biggest concerns were the assessments.” Lacy viewed this monitoring as necessary and appropriate and wanted assessment to improve children’s outcome and improve preschools across the state.

Instead of doing this coming out and monitoring our classrooms they sent out somebody to teach us how to do the assessments correctly…I have thirty-three assessments that we turned in. She went over all of the assessments brought them to me and told me where my teachers had made mistakes on scoring the assessments.

Lacy continued by adding that the Voluntary Prekindergarten program at the center was monitored when the Early Learning Coalition approved the application before a center became an approved provided. She shared that practitioners must complete required trainings before administrators sent the application to the Coalition. Lacy stated that after the application
process, monitoring was minimal and was limited to the assessment requirement of the agreement.

**Voluntary Prekindergarten accountability.** Lacy described the Voluntary Prekindergarten program as a positive experience for children. However, Lacy did not agree with the entire accountability process.

The children really do walk away learning. I want to say having accountability is a good thing to a certain extent. I feel there is too much accountability but holding people to a certain set of standards is a good thing.

Lacy had witnessed the change that had taken place in teaching practices since the increase of accountability. “It is just it’s a lot. I it makes you teach to the test and you not supposed to teach to the test but we do.”

Lacy felt that it was difficult if not impossible to have all children meet developmental milestones at the same time. There are too many factors that influence learning, many of those beyond the practitioner’s control.

We are measured by a standard to see if every child fits and is ready for kindergarten. Not every child in the universe is able to be ready for kindergarten just because they are five years old by their standards. Do you know what I mean? So I feel like we should be measured by gains.

Lacy welcomed monitoring; however, hoped for change in how centers were held accountable.

I would honestly say my biggest thing is the assessments. It should not be that pass or fail. There should be a gray area on learning gains. Some children are not mentally able to be at that level; however, we still help them to make gains and that should count. I think everybody in any position in anything you have to have
something to monitor and people have to be held accountable for their reasons because there are people who are not going to do what they should be doing. But children are not black or white. It shouldn’t be so black and white in this grading area. There is a gray area and I feel like we should measure their gains and not by plain numbers.

Lacy’s shared that it had been years since practitioners and the Early Learning Coalition officially monitored classrooms. Lacy was confident that how the school was held accountable was not a true picture of the school or her teachers’ capabilities. Monitoring could assist in providing an accurate representation of the center. She welcomed monitoring because she felt that having an agency examine the program they could improve quality and correct any misguided practices.

**Summary of Lacy Lotus**

Lacy believed teaching to the test was not appropriate; however, amended her beliefs when teaching to the test met the school readiness criteria. She repeated this perspective reversal when discussing preparing children too early for the next level, selective enrollment, and expulsion. She believed that children needed to experience activities that were age appropriate, that all children should be accepted at preschool, and that early childhood professionals needed to explore every avenue before removing a child from a center. Simultaneously, she would explain that these practices were not always what was followed at the center. Lacy expressed minimum concern that her school was considered a provider on probation. This was an example of her positive outlook. “One score does not define us as far as a center. We know what we do and we know that we help children we know that we have helped them make gains and we are doing what we can.”
Lacy was stressed and was looking for methods to cope. From what I saw, stress was her biggest struggle. “I am good right now but I could always be better. Like my ceilings are always glass like anything in life. My ceiling is glass.” After she said the previous statement, I inquired about what she meant by the ceiling is always glass. She said that nothing could hold her back. She was protected by the weather and shielded from harm under the glass but she could always break through.

Lacy hoped one-day changes would be made to Voluntary Prekindergarten and to the field in general. She wanted to see accountability through the individual gains children make, “… to be more monitored through the individual gains that children make. Isn’t that what matters? Isn’t every child different?”

When I sent Lacy the final transcripts, she told me she had handed her resignation to the new owner. Lacy stated it was time for her to have a change. Lacy had accepted a position as a center director at a center that was not too far away. I assume the change she described had something to do with the new owner or perhaps the new staff. I was not surprised that she resigned from the center. I was surprised that she remained in the field. See Table 14 for the key findings on Lacy Lotus.

**Center Owner Participant 5: Isay Iris**

Isay Iris was the owner of the center. She had owned the center for 17 years. Isay was a member of numerous committees throughout the county that supported early childhood education. I had known Isay for over fifteen years through those committees. She was the subject in the pilot study, and when I shared with her my vision for this study she volunteered.
Table 14.

*Key Findings for Lacy Lotus.*

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<th>Effective and Appropriate Teachings</th>
<th>Moderate understanding of developmental appropriate practices</th>
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<td>Encouraged following of prescribed curriculum</td>
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<td>Children learn through socialization</td>
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<td>Important for children to have choices</td>
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<td>Children needed play</td>
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<td>Disconnect with training to practice</td>
<td>Was not trained on the use of prescribed curriculum, naming</td>
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<td>of phonemes, compound words, formal assessment</td>
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<td>Felt children should play more</td>
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<td>Felt an effect from probation</td>
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<td>Prescribed curriculum</td>
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<td>Influences from Probation</td>
<td>Increase of observation</td>
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<td>Careful enrollment</td>
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<td>Scores in summertime</td>
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<td>Regulations</td>
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<td>Teacher turnover</td>
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<td>Children’s behaviors</td>
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<td>Lack of play</td>
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<td>Conflicts and Stressors</td>
<td>Homework</td>
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<td>No longer encourages portfolio assessment</td>
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<td>Increased formal instruction</td>
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<td>Decrease play</td>
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<td>Value of child</td>
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<td>Accepting of all children</td>
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<td>Support for Professional Development</td>
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Isay was not seeing the change she would hope to see in the field. Her willingness to participate did not surprise me, as she had always been the one to step up. She wanted Voluntary Prekindergarten because she wanted an increase in the level of professionalism. She felt that Voluntary Prekindergarten would bring more professional development opportunities, more monitoring, and more accountability. I felt she had a desire for society as a whole to view early childhood educators as professionals versus babysitters. She had a goal for people to think of
preschool practitioners as teachers instead of someone who just watches children all day long. It was significant for her to guide others to see an importance to spending time with young children and teaching children social, emotional, cognitive, language, and math and science skills.

The first interview took place at the center in her office while the last two took place in small local restaurants. I felt she was open and honest during each interview. For unknown reasons two of her interviews did not record properly (the first and the last). I quickly wrote up the interview from what I had on recording and my notes and sent them to Isay. She added and corrected information to those two and returned the transcripts. This reassured me I had accurate data.

I chose the pseudonym of Isay Iris because, according to Green (2012), the Iris is a flower that represents wisdom and faith. Isay represents both of these characteristics. Throughout the interviews, she displayed both confidence and doubt. I noted a feeling of hopelessness in my researcher journal.

**Getting to Know Isay Iris**

Isay was in her early fifties. She had a small build and a different hairstyle each interview. She wore jeans and a dressy shirt and dressed for the casual atmosphere. She was easy to talk to and would pause before she answered questions as if she was choosing her words thoughtfully.

Isay entered the field after she had her three children. Isay wanted to be close to her children much like Sally and Lacy. She wanted them to be in a setting that would allow for socialization and to prepare them for school. She earned her Child Development Associates Equivalency like the others, at the vocational school as her first step to certification and later
completed both the Directors Credential at the vocational center and her Associates degree at the local college.

Isay began the field as an assistant and eventually purchased a center on her own. Throughout the interviews, Isay described a change from being able to teach and positively affect a family to a lack of motivation. She believed that today’s children are not allowed to be children. She entered the field in a time where the practitioners were facilitators and children could lead their activities. Isay saw the learning that took place from that structure. She also saw how others perceived it as merely playing without a connection to education. She chose to be a Voluntary Prekindergarten provider because she wanted to see positive changes.

I think we needed it. I thought it would bring the professional level up. We need to change what people think of the preschool environment and all the challenges. I was an advocate. I didn’t think it like it was now.

Isay counted on the agencies to assist in the process. At the time there were concerns that the mandate would change preschool into kindergarten classrooms. Isay believed the early childhood community was strong enough not to allow that to happen.

I thought the powers that be would help us. I thought they would give us the basics and then lead us to a higher level over the years. But they didn’t. First grade is being pushed down to kindergarten; kindergarten is being pushed down to preschool. It’s hard for them and for us.

Isay conveyed that one change she did not foresee was the change the program would have on other classrooms. She said that not only did the curriculum from kindergarten get pushed down to prekindergarten the prekindergarten curriculum was now pushed down to the three-year-old classrooms.
My three year olds are now doing what my preschool children were doing. They have only been on this earth for thirty-six months that is not enough time for them to grasp the environment not to even mention math skills. They need time to just be children.

Isay had different expectations than what the program had delivered. She wanted to professionalize the field. She wanted to make known the importance of early childhood. She wanted a connection to the primary schools. Isay did not feel that she was getting what she had hoped for from the program.

**Isay’s Beliefs and Perspectives on Effective and Appropriate Teaching**

Isay believed that teaching was an art. “It takes a special person to learn how to plan, set up an appropriate environment, and to format concepts with intention.” She believed in developmentally appropriate practices and understood them well. She was the local former president of the association in the area representing the National Association for the Education of Young Children. She felt that children needed to be in environments that supported relationships and with practitioners responsive and nurturing to children as individuals. Isay felt that children should learn their A, B, C’s and 1, 2, 3’s but it was more important to learn social skills.

The firm foundation they need is the social skills and the developmentally skills so they are able to take care of their own needs and to tell people when they need something. Not learning A, B, C’s and 1, 2, 3’s.

She felt if children could not collaborate with others they would have a challenging time succeeding in school.

Isay also believed that in order to learn the profession, one should be working beside someone who was both knowledgeable and experienced. It was a challenge to learn what you
needed to know in an adult classroom—she felt new practitioners needed time to apply the new information.

There needs to be that hands on with this field. Nothing can prepare you for a child throwing shoes at you except a child throwing shoes at you <laughter>. And that is just fact: there is nothing in the textbook that tells you what to do <laughter>.

One of the most positive reactions that occurred at Isay’s center from Voluntary Prekindergarten was the improvement to ratios. The Voluntary Prekindergarten ratio was one to 11 but in the two’s it was 1:10, three’s 1:15 and the four’s 1:20. She was able to reduce the ratio in all of the age groups because she had Voluntary Prekindergarten. The program helped with funding and she found it beneficial to the children and practitioners. This was another connection to how Isay described what was best for children by following appropriate practices.

I would say the ratio piece of it has filtered down. Like in my three year olds I never really have more than 12 or 13 where I used to have 15 all of the time. In my two’s I had the ten but I have an extra person to help them.

Isay’s conflict with the Voluntary Prekindergarten program was how they were held accountable. The tension was taking the joy from the practice by making the professionals in the field adjust to methods they were accustomed to in the public school system but against what they understood to be what is best for children.

**Disconnect with training to practice.** Isay was trained like the others within the guidelines of developmentally appropriate practices. Currently, her staff implemented practices that did not agree with how she was trained. The major discrepancies were with assessment, direct instruction, and homework.
Isay was trained to maintain a portfolio in the same manner that the other participants were trained. Teachers could keep a collection of the child’s work as evidence of progress and to show where improvement might be needed. She was not trained to assess like they are required to assess in Voluntary Prekindergarten.

I don’t think I was ever trained to do an assessment in the CDA program or my college classes. I had one class that talked about anecdotal notes and how not to lead. But as far as actual assessments, I don’t remember ever having that training.

Isay shared that they currently keep portfolios but they are not like how she was trained to maintain them.

Isay stated that the time children spent in whole group activity such as circle time had increased. In professional development she learned that circle time should be fun and should keep children moving with song and finger plays. She also learned to keep children engaged by allowing them to lead parts of the group time. A circle time was recommended to last fifteen to twenty minutes and take place once a day. “To me circle time was fun. It was time we got together and sang songs and looked at what each other was wearing that day. We talked about the world. Now there is no time for any of that.” She continued, “… they do two to three circles a day. Each circle last about 20 to 30 minutes.”

Isay also described time as a factor. She was describing six hours and Cassie described eight hours. The difference was naptime. Naptime cannot be counted in the Voluntary Prekindergarten time.

Summer is even higher because we try to complete curriculum in ½ the time and 6 to 6 ½ hour day so in the summer it is more like 2.5 hours of circle broken down into 15 to 20 minute increments.
Isay described a pressure to teach the children academic skills. She was aware that this did not agree with her training. Even in time that children were allowed to play children are not experiencing the freedom. “Now instead of just stacking blocks and knocking them down it is counting them as you stack them and what shape is this <laughter> harassing them.”

Homework was an additional area that was not connected to her professional development. “It is like I said that we do dittos and I would have never thought we would be doing this now.”

Isay described a disconnection with training to practice when it came to assessment, direct instruction, and homework. She was not proud of the changes but believed by following these practices her scores would increase.

**Isay’s Perceptions and Beliefs about the Influences of Being a Provider on Probation in Voluntary Prekindergarten**

Isay’s center was placed on probation for not meeting the readiness rate in the summer of 2009-2010, 2010-2011, and 2011-2012 school year. Additionally, they were not able to meet the readiness rate in the fall during the 2010-2011 school year. This was the only year the center did not meet the requirements for the fall.

Isay displayed no concern for that fall of 2010-2011. She shared that she had a high staff turn-over and other challenges that prevented her staff to work with the children on the letters and letter sounds like they can do now. However, Isay was concerned about the summer scores. She was not concerned that they did not meet the scores as much as she was about the teacher who worked in summer Voluntary Prekindergarten.

She would come to me in tears and say I am doing everything that I know to do.

When you get these kids at a certain level, they are making progress but they are not
there. I told her don’t worry about it. It is going to be okay. We are doing the right thing. You are doing the right thing. Even if we don’t meet it you know in your heart that you have done what you can for those kids.

Isay believed the teacher was doing everything that she should be doing to prepare children for kindergarten. Isay described a system that placed boundaries on her as an owner that made it a challenge to prevent a negative impact on children. She described her hopes for a program that would continue with assessment but use the results as a way to improve and strengthen the center. Her goal was to prepare children for kindergarten following the practices that are considered best for young children.

Isay’s Stress as an Owner

Isay spent the majority of time as both the center owner and the director. She stated the stress that the positions held and was a major reason why she decided last year to take a step back and hire a director.

It was the changes-so much over the years. I don't feel as motivated I’ve gotten disgusted with the way things are. Disrespect from the children and for the children, disrespect for the teachers and staff and disrespect for providers in general. We are a very different business now. They expect us to be perfect even when they are not.

By stepping aside Isay had more time as the owner to attend community meetings and play with her new granddaughter. She understood all areas of regulation, dealt with attrition, handled misbehavior, practiced positive enrollment practices, and fought to not expel children. The constraint prevented her from moving forward and she was no longer feeling motivated to make changes, “Kind of given up- going with the flow- they don’t give exactly enough information to us and we don’t know how to proceed.” Her goal was to positively impact the
lives of each child who entered her care. However, she described the regulations that she had hoped to improve quality bring about more complications with attritions and stress on children and administrators.

**Multiple regulators.** With Lacy, I felt her stress derived from the daily aggravation of leading a center. With Isay, I felt her stress was different. She spoke extensively about the rules and regulations. Her concerns were beyond the basic rules from licensing. They were formed around the agencies that she felt should be her guide and support. She wanted to work collaboratively as partners to assist with following developmentally appropriate practices and with making sure children and families had their needs met. Her biggest stress was the lack of information. She shared on more than one occasion how hard it was to plan when she was not given enough time to plan for a change or was told after the rule was already created. “The paper work and agency make it difficult. Rules change often and notice is not timely to providers.”

I felt as if her words explained to me why the school improvement was written in pen on a monthly calendar versus a formal improvement plan. To Isay, she was just doing what was required in the most simplistic manner because she had so many other responsibilities that were higher priorities.

Because of being on probation she was required, along with her practitioners, to attend trainings and to purchase a curriculum. The trainings were not provided at times or locations helpful to her staff and there were few offered. “They say we need these before we begin our VPK programs again but the trainings are not offered. What can we do when they don’t provide the trainings they say we need.”

The curriculum was what sat in the boxes on the floor of the office during my first interviews with Lacy. Isay purchased it before hand because she had earned a grant offered to
centers on probation. The challenge was the approved curriculum list was not publicized. She was not confident the curriculum she purchased accepted and then she would need to purchase another. She hoped her teachers would have opportunity to train in the curriculum. Unfortunately, trainings were limited.

Because ELC [Early Learning Coalition] gave us all of that money to buy the curriculum but there is no substantial training to go with it. I know my boxes are still …well I just put them away in the cabinet yesterday <laughter>.

Isay wished that she could have more control over the time in the program. Her wish was for the Voluntary Prekindergarten program to have more days attached to the calendar year. She feared the large gap of time from the end of prekindergarten to the beginning of kindergarten for the fall. In the summer it was condensed and rushed.

There is also not enough time in the summer. We have them for 300 hours in a short period of time for very long days. We don’t have enough time to get comfortable with them. We need to bond with them before we teach them. Parents have come to me many times and told me how much their child has learned. They need this program and that’s what keeps me going. These low scores make us look bad and we are not. It is frustrating.

Isay conveyed that she knew she had a good program and the scores did not accurately reflect the center.

Attrition. Isay had followed best practices with her ratios and staff since she had opened the center. She had found it more effective to hire floaters as extra practitioners to have staff trained and accustomed to the routine and children if someone needed time off. This assisted in reducing stress of both staff and the children. Because of this practice attrition was not a major
concern. She did attribute not meeting the readiness one year because of her staff turnover, but
did not convey it negatively. Much like Lacy, Isay spoke of attrition as if it was a typical part of
the early childhood profession. Isay did say when it came to expelling a child with behavior
challenges or losing a teacher she would have to do what is best for the school.

**Children with behavior challenges.** Isay and Lacy shared with me the same account of
an event that had happened earlier in the week of the interview. The coach of the program that
the staff were all involved in to assist teachers with behavior challenges had come to the center.
As the coach entered the classroom a child did not like something she had said and cursed at her
causing her to become visibly upset.

The first person that came in, I don’t know if *Lacy* told you, one of the kids told her
to “f” off. After *Lacy* calmed her down and all of that was taken care of she was in
the office and *Lacy* asked what do you do in that situation? She said I don’t know, I
have never had that happen <laughter>. The challenges we face now are not the
challenges directors faced twenty or thirty years ago. It definitely has changed.

Isay shared this to emphasize a change in the field. Behavior challenges have always
been a part of working with young children but the type of challenges have increased to levels
that portray how children have changed with the times. Isay saw expulsion as the last resort after
all other avenues had been tried.

I do not believe in expelling a four-year-old. I have done it maybe three or four times
in twenty years and that was because that child was going to hurt themselves or
others. I just can’t believe for a four-years-old that is the answer.

Isay felt that some of the behaviors came from a lack of rest. The summertime Voluntary
Prekindergarten children typically would have around twenty minutes of rest time when
throughout the year they have almost two hours. “They sometimes don’t get enough time to rest by the time the cots get down and they get settled they only have about 20 minutes before they have to get up. Children may feel overwhelmed and rushed.” There could be multiple factors that lead to children not making appropriate choices. Isay felt that preschool was the time to teach children how to build self-control. She did feel that there was less of an emphasis on how children socialize and that may contribute to challenges yet to come.

**Changes in administration practices.** The administration practices had transformed throughout the years. Paperwork and regulation needed to change to align with present rules. Isay had no contention with those types of changes and was usually the first to attend the trainings. When it came to hiring she felt a need to adapt. “Years ago you were looking for that nurturing more kind of teacher she didn’t have to be so professional. Now you are looking for a professional who hopefully has nurturing qualities <laughter>.”

Isay reminisced that she came to the field like many of her staff with no qualifications or experience. If she had a position available in the prekindergarten classroom she could not fill positions like that anymore, someone with potential, but not the education. With her desire to increase professionalism this was not a terrible outcome, but it did change who she was looking for in staff.

As part of probation, Isay was required to increase staff observations and keep an improvement plan. Lacy was responsible for it currently as part of her duties as a director.

And then like I would look at what they are doing for the week and we talk about it. Because we are supposed to meet every two weeks or something like that and so I would go in and have a conversation with them and see what is going on.
Isay shared that teacher observation was not a change but writing when and what she observed along with meeting and talking about it as part of reflection to improve was a change.

**Isay’s Description of Stress on Children**

Isay shared with me her concern that children were spending too much time in direct instruction and not enough time in play. She was troubled with how these changes would affect children. She felt being ready to pass a test was irrelevant to childhood if the child could not get along with others or be able to listen and follow directions.

I feel like the skills we need to teach them are emotional iq and being able to regulate themselves and to be self-confident. They need to take those skills to school with them then do the academic part. I am not saying that they are not but I think there has been more of an emphasis on doing some more of the academics.

Isay was concerned that her staff have changed. She felt that her staff now teaching concepts to all of the children at the same time. This is against developmentally appropriate practices because preschool practitioners are encouraged to teach each child at his own level. Children grow and develop independently and in unique ways according to their environment and genetic makeup. When practitioners teach to the whole group, they fail to address individual needs. The needs of the individual child are not being addressed as they were in the past.

It was more teaching to the child. Don’t get me wrong there was still academics but it was more just teaching to the child. If that child was emotionally not there you could work on that. Now it is like we have to group them together and do these academics. Of course some of my time is not going to be spent on what this child really needs. Every child is different. Where one child is the other isn’t. That really is what
preschool is about teaching to the child. Some children need more of the emotional social piece before they can grasp the academic piece.

Isay was concerned about the impact to the child who needed that extra effort. Children need time to explore and investigate to build creativity and imagination.

It is a three-hour program. It seems like everything is purposeful and they drill children to teach more skills. It is sad but true but it has to be that way. Free play is not what it used to be. Children need choices and free choice is not what it used to be. Teachers have it in the back of their mind all of the time. They want to be able to meet the scores.

As things have changed so have those opportunities for play to ensure that enough children will meet the requirement.

**Teaching to the next level or teaching to the next age group.** Isay stated that children need time just to be children. But when it came to homework it was okay to want them to get the experience they will have in kindergarten. According to her, homework would help them prepare for primary school and it was something that parents expected. “That is correct. That is what parents know and it is something that they are able to do together. And honestly that is what they are going to be seeing in kindergarten.”

Isay believed there were lines that should not be crossed in pushing down academics but they are being crossed. Homework was not one of these lines. She did not agree with it but could not see a negative impact on children. She was more concerned about the curriculum being handed down to the younger ages and how that could take away from the socialization they really needed.
**Homework in prekindergarten.** When I began to ask questions about homework to Isay, she knew where I was coming from and why I was asking. She knew that homework was not an acceptable practice and she knew me well enough to understand my concerns.

Homework! *<laughter>* I would have never ever thought I would be sending out homework in preschool.” She agreed that children should not be assigned homework on dittos and handouts. She shared that she was never taught that in any professional development training. She said that this was a practice that emerged from the low scores.

Isay was comfortable with the practitioners in the school year. She made it clear her worry was with the summertime.

The teacher is fine in the school year it is the scores in the summer that are too low.

She tells me when a child has finally progressed to asking to use the restroom versus doing a dance. She sees the gains and that is what we are supposed to do.

Isay hoped that they could teach children as she was trained through intentional responsive teaching. She would hope to see instruction led more by the child so he could build a foundation of knowledge based off of his interests.

Because it is still teacher driven. Yeah kids will have fun doing anything if you make into a game but they could also be doing something more imaginative and creative on their own. The skills will come. They don’t have to have them at four-years-old.

What I say is direct instruction making them sit in circle and find something that starts with the letter “A” through their binoculars is still direct instruction. It is not their choice. They did not come over there and say hey I want to find something with my binoculars. If they did that would be different.
Isay wanted children to play and be guided by the practitioners’ to write, count, and learn new vocabulary. She saw a challenge with the extended time it took to receive the results. “It filters out very very slowly. They won’t allow us to see the test to know or even an example of the test because they don’t want us to teach to the test. That leaves us guessing.”

**Enrollment practices.** Isay was very careful with her words when I inquired about how the low scores had affected enrollment. Surprisingly, few parents have voiced a concern about the school being on probation. She said that only two have said anything to her about it when touring the school. When she had been faced with parent concerns she simply told her that the scores are based off of one test and that the score was not a well-rounded image of how the school was really doing. She told parents to come to the school anytime to visit and observe. She felt an open door policy would put worried minds at rest. However, she had very few parents that do take the time to visit.

When families came to enroll Isay would ask the parent many questions about the child’s health and history. The answers assisted Isay in knowing if the child was a right fit for the school. She stated that it was more challenging to enroll a student who was expelled from a center or one who has had no experience in preschool. The challenges created additional stressors and may reduce readiness scores, “Because this is the third year of probation, if we don’t do well then I won’t be able to provide VPK anymore.” She continued, “I have to say for summer this year I was more inclined to turn people away than I ever have been before.”

I believed that Isay’s decision to inquire more about the child’s and family history served as protection for her practitioners, but also for the readiness score. This protection might seem to be wrong to others and to even Isay, but the center was her investment and the children and staff were her responsibility.
Isay’s Thoughts on Kindergarten Assessment and Accountability

Isay had some similarities with her perspectives compared to the other participants in both assessment and accountability even though she saw them from a different lens. Isay felt that the scores from kindergarten assessment should be a factor in quality but should not be entire focus. She felt that in order to effectively teach young children assessment was necessary. Assessment should be the guide for taking each child to the next level. Accountability should be reviewing the results and making changes to improve. It is what is needed to move forward with quality.

What really guides you is assessing the child and then discussing and making a plan for each child together with the teacher. Then go back and talk about how it is working. The assessment is to teach programs what areas to work on.

Isay believed that technical assistance was one of the best outcomes from accountability; however, that support was not available due to funding.

Kindergarten assessment. If Isay could have it her way, kindergarten assessments would be directed to evaluate more of the social-emotional development of each child. She felt that children needed a strong foundation on how to handle their feelings and self-control.

I think the ECOS [Early Childhood Observation System] should be more of a focus than the FLKRS (Florida Assessment for Instruction in Reading-Kindergarten). I think their emotional level and social state is ten times more important and I think it is something that children are lacking in right now.

Isay believed the curriculum and the environment should be inclusive of the whole child. She feared that practitioners were no longer looking at the child as a whole but looking at the class as a whole.
It is true because teaching becomes a more whole group activity. Teachers are concerned with meeting scores rather than the whole child. You know I believe we need a process to identify characteristics of children who have a delay, have an IEP (individual education plan) or who are on protective services. If the public or powers that be could see the underlying factors then I believe they would understand low scores. The teacher wants the children to score well on the entrance exam so that becomes a focus rather than the emotional/social IQ. The owner/director wants to score well for the program also so the focus changes.

Isay received her scores for the program nearly a year and a half after the children leave the center. She felt that if there was a problem, they do not learn about it until it is too late.

And another thing, since we learn about the readiness rate a year and a half later, the child is actually in first grade by then. We are supposed to fix something that we did a year and a half ago? That doesn’t make sense. If something is wrong we need to know sooner so we can fix it before the next group of kids. We actually don’t even know what to work on. It would be beneficial if we got valid feedback to focus on.

Isay believed the gap in time to learn the results also caused stress to the teacher, especially if the teacher felt that the children had made the progress that was required. “You send them to kindergarten proud. Then a year and a half later we learn that the scores were too low. The teacher is deflated.” According to Isay, assessment was critical to learning about the child and creating a plan to take the child to the next level of development. The success of assessment is dependent on if practitioners had training that was more advanced, focused on social and emotional skills, and would have a more rapid relay with the results.
Voluntary prekindergarten accountability. Isay described many challenges with how her program was held accountable. She did not agree with using the score as the sole evaluation. Her center had now been on probation for three years because of her summer Voluntary Prekindergarten program. She could easily decide not to continue the program in the summer but she felt that was not the right thing to do for the families or children in her area. Her tension included a stress from scoring children with special needs equally to others. She continued to describe a lack of choices of when her practitioners were required trainings from being on probation. Isay was frustrated and had decided to request an exemption because she felt the program did fulfill the mandatory requirements.

Isay described the frustration of dealing with the results when she was aware that she had children with an individual education plan that would not do well when assessed. Children with an individual education plan had been evaluated and confirmed to have a special challenge that might prevent the child from succeeding in one or more developmental areas. Children were upon kindergarten entry and scored just like any typical child. Isay was concerned why children who received such a plan would not be held exempt in the scoring.

My biggest pet peeve with VPK they do not somehow allow us upfront to say…to identify a child. If a child has an IEP we should be able to upfront say this child has an IEP. Yes they are in the public school system but it does not transfer when they do that testing apparently. She felt children with an individual education plan should be assessed; however, the assessment should provide the school information on planning and placement. Isay felt that the assessment should do this for each child. “They are tested like everyone else. I don’t mind them being tested but there is no place where we can identify children with an IEP.” Isay continued, “There is an
autistic child in the class this summer- he is high functioning but I have no way of identifying that when the testing comes out.”

When a center has children with specific documented challenges they can address the needs of the child by creating additional goals and objectives, but they can provide the same benefits to those that have undocumented challenges. In any case, Isay was concerned because there was no way to request accommodations in testing those children. She believed that all children should be allowed in the program but there were times to look at them independently when scoring the assessment. She had similar concerns regarding bilingual children.

When Isay received notification that the scores for the summer were low for the third year she decided to request a good cause exemption. If she had not made this request she would not have been able to remain a summer Voluntary Prekindergarten provider.

You have to send documentation to the state about why you think you have a good cause for not meeting the readiness rates. It goes to a committee to verify that you provided an appropriate service due to factors out of your control; IEP, ELL children, delays not identified, etc.

To be approved for the good cause exemption the provider must have evidence that children in the care had learning gains, that health and safety requirements had been met, that there were circumstances out of providers control, and that the provider had followed probationary requirements. Isay was grateful that the summer instructor had kept the documentation from the authentic assessments she had completed. Isay gathered Cassie’s portfolios assessments from two years prior that had the evidence of growth and sent it with the required paperwork to the local Early Learning Coalition. Isay learned during the study that her
center earned the exemption. Isay spoke with pride about this exemption. Her center was the first and only center approved for a good cause exemption in the county.

The teacher always did assessments before it was required. She created her own version—simple like what letters, shapes and numbers they know. I am so thankful that she did. When I needed the good cause exemption from students four years ago we had to provide data that were not required.

Isay was able to keep her Voluntary Prekindergarten summer program because Casey kept the needed documentation. According to Isay, the low readiness scores were not a product of a poor Voluntary Prekindergarten program. The scores were low because of numerous factors that contribute to a child’s school success. Accountability should be based on gains and improvement.

**Summary of Isay Iris**

Isay Iris came into early childhood passionate and wanting the best for children and families. Through the many years she had spent in the profession she experienced tremendous change in all aspects of the field. She shared how children once were given more opportunity to play and pretend. She shared where teachers were given more creative opportunities to teach to the individual child versus the group.

Isay had been a proponent of the Voluntary Prekindergarten program even volunteering to have her school be one of the first in the county in the pilot program. Her school began strong but once the kindergarten assessment change so did her scores. She was baffled by the need to introduce children skills like letter sounds and compound words. She had lost her motivation.

Just before my last interview with Isay, she sold the school. Her heart was not in it anymore because the positive changes would not come like she desired. I had sensed that Isay
felt disenchanted with the field during my interviews. She wanted to see children learning more social skills. She wanted to see her staff have less stress. She wanted to be held accountable for individual growth and development and she wanted to learn from accountability. These were all things she wanted but she could not have. This left her feeling that she had nothing more to give to a field where she had spent her career.

Developmentally appropriate practices was how she was taught, what she believed, and exactly how she wanted to practice. There were parts of the accountability system she had no control of—assessment, time, and positive growth. Because of this she wanted to leave the system because she felt it was not in the best interest of children and families. Table 15 indicates the key findings for Isay Iris.

Table 15.

*Key Findings for Isay Iris.*

| Effective and Appropriate Teachings | Solid understanding of developmental appropriate practices
| Children learn through socialization
| Important to learn social skills
| Children need play
| Disconnect with training to practice | Was not trained on the use of prescribed curriculum, naming phonemes, compound words, formal assessment
| Felt children should play more
| Felt stress from probation
| Prescribed curriculum
| Additional assessment
| Influences from Probation | Increase of observation
| Increase of paperwork
| Increase of training
| Careful enrollment
| Low scores in summer times
| High regulations
| Dealing with children’s behavior
| Conflicts and Stressors | Working with children’s behavior
| Lack of time/rushed
| Lack of information from agencies
| Time learning scores
|
Table 15 (continued)

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<td>Increased formal instruction</td>
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<td>Lack of bonding before teaching</td>
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<td>Little teaching of social/emotional development</td>
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<td>Children-led activities</td>
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<td>Progressive Practices</td>
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<td>Individuality in children</td>
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Chapter Summary

In this chapter I provided data that enabled me to examine my inquiry questions. All of the participants were working in the same center that was an approved Voluntary Prekindergarten provider on probation. I separately described each case. I introduced each participant by providing descriptive data, including their background, time in the field, time at the center, level of education, and how they entered the field. I then addressed my exploratory questions and organized the participant’s responses by the themes and subthemes.

The common themes were the reliance on a prescribed curriculum, the disconnection of training and practice, teachers stressors, and children’s stressors. I concluded each case with a summary. The cases provide an understanding of who each participant was and their perceptions and beliefs of teaching.

The participants faced different challenges, especially the administrators and the practitioners. The stressors varied due their diverse roles at the center. Certainly, the practitioners that experienced Voluntary Prekindergarten only because they were working in a center that was on probation had a different stance on their perceptions than the practitioner whose classroom had the low readiness scores. Each case had unique characteristics and beliefs.
about Voluntary Prekindergarten. I was purposeful to give each case due diligence in order to provide a firm foundation for the research findings I provide in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER FIVE
DATA ANALYSIS

During the first five years of life the experiences, opportunities, and relationships that children are exposed to create learning pathways in their brains that set a foundation for school success and lifetime achievement. The foundation could be strong or frail depending upon how the pathways were formed from the level of quality of those experiences in the early years. Research suggests that children who attend high quality preschools with low teacher/child ratios, small group sizes, educated teachers with degrees, and highly trained professionals with expertise in early childhood education will realize the best long-term outcomes for academic success (Dotterer et al., 2013; Zigler, Gilliam, & Barnett, 2011). In 2005, a mandate titled Voluntary Prekindergarten was implemented in Florida as a way to expose all young children to quality learning experiences and ensure more children enter school with a solid foundation for learning. Providers began to be held accountable for children’s kindergarten readiness skills when they enter kindergarten. This qualitative study focuses on how practitioners in a school that has not been able to meet the accountability requirements share their experiences as they attempt to reach the goal.

In one of the interviews with a teacher working in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program, Cassie Carnation described her beliefs that had been formed from her experiences and her education. Her center was on probation due to 30 percent or more of her students not passing the readiness assessment in kindergarten. The following is a segment of one of my transcriptions
based on my interview with this Voluntary Prekindergarten teacher working in a center on probation. She describes what Pre-K (the year before kindergarten) was like prior to the Voluntary Prekindergarten mandate.

“It was less stressful, because back when I first started VPK (Voluntary Prekindergarten) we only had to focus on the kids knowing their letters, their numbers, their colors, and their shapes. We didn’t have to focus on letter sounds and writing their name. That wasn’t a priority back then. The priority was just teaching them the basics of what they needed to know. Nowadays the kids need to know letter sounds. They have to know how to write their names. They have to be able to do all of this stuff that I think is way too advanced for four and five year olds.”

I chose this segment from all of the interviews because Cassie shares her true feelings about Voluntary Prekindergarten as it connects to both her beliefs of effective teaching and her perspectives of changes to her practices. As this teacher expressed her thoughts, I imagined what had influenced her and what had aided in constructing her knowledge. I believed this teacher shared common values prevalent among early childhood educators. The values include a belief that what happens to a child in the first five years establishes the foundation for lifetime learning, and how a child is taught is critical to his/her school success.

According to research, quality care is dependent on low teacher/child ratios, small group sizes, teacher preparation and education, and extensive teacher experience (Rose, 2010). In the past, early childhood professionals have been publically viewed as baby sitters, often being referred to as “caregivers”. I believe that since more scientific research has been conducted that image has evolved.
Many can now recognize early childhood as a valuable time. Moreover, it is better known that those who work with young children have the potential to make a positive difference in their students’ school success. In Florida Voluntary Prekindergarten, providers have their positive difference measured by the funders by the results of a single outcome; the outcome of an assessment administered in kindergarten. If 70 percent of children pass the assessment, the prekindergarten program is deemed effective. If this outcome is not achieved, the program is placed on probation. The early childhood professionals working with children in a school not meeting the accountability requirement have a story to share.

The study was intended to describe and explain the participants’ viewpoints from a lens of working in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program unable to meet the readiness rates set by the Florida Department of Education. The exploratory questions that I examined were: What are the beliefs and perspectives about effective and appropriate early childhood education among practitioners in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program on probation? And in what ways does probation influence practitioners’ perspectives and beliefs about early childhood education?

Florida passed a constitutional amendment, Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V, in November of 2002 (CS/HB 7165) that was signed by Governor Bush on January 2, 2005. The amendment required implementation of a prekindergarten program for all four-year-old children by the 2005 school year (VPK Frequently Asked Questions for Providers, 2005). The program offers families with children who are four years old on or before September 1st of each school year an opportunity for their child to attend a free prekindergarten program. The mandate supported the importance of early childhood and quality preschool education. Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V includes:
The Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program is created and shall be organized, designed, and delivered in accordance with s. 1(b) and (c), Art. IX of the State Constitution. Each child who resides in this state who will have attained the age of 4 years on or before September 1st of the school year is eligible for the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program during that school year. The child remains eligible until the beginning of the school year for which the child is eligible for admission to kindergarten in a public school under s. 1003.21(1)(a)2. or until the child is admitted to kindergarten, whichever occurs first. (Florida House of Representatives, 2011)

Providers apply to become approved and must maintain a minimal readiness rate to provide care. Families can receive one voucher of choice in the summer or fall programs and choose from any approved program they would like the child to attend. The participating program receives a payment from the Florida Department of Education for each child in care with a voucher. The financial support brings a new accountability requirement to approved preschool programs.

In Chapter Two I provided a literature review on Voluntary Prekindergarten. I described a tension between quality and professionalism within the framework of developmentally appropriate practices. During the past three decades, the public has increased its interest in how young children learn and what they need to know before they enter kindergarten (Barnett, Carolan, Squires, & Brown, 2013; Cascio, & Schanzenbach, 2013). Some of the interest has emanated from concerns over rates of illiteracy, increases in unemployment, and the rise of incarcerations in our country (Children’s Defense Fund, 2002; Kirp, 2009). According to Friere
(2005), a great deal of money and research was allotted to improve the education system as a preventive approach to these concerns. Researchers have been able to link children who are placed in high quality stimulating environments with responsive caregivers before entering kindergarten to high academic achievement (Barnett, Jamy, & Jung, 2005, The Pew Center on the States, 2011). Other researchers have linked higher academic achievement to positive life experiences, such as community leadership, work permanence, and family stability (Rose, 2010). According to Barnett, the two consistent results of state and local preschool programs are an improved school readiness rate and positive academic gains beyond kindergarten (2013, p. 4).

In Chapter Three I provided details about this qualitative interview case study from a social constructivism lens. I engaged the participants from a center that had been placed on probation for low readiness rates for this study. In addition, I shared how an assignment brought me to this area of inquiry and how the center owner volunteered for this study. I spoke with each of the five participants in three one-hour interviews to explore their own insights on what effects the VPK mandate had on their beliefs about early childhood education and how they may have modified their practices to increase their readiness rate. Their self-perceived reactions to their teaching styles, their lesson planning, and their assessments helped describe their reform efforts.

In Chapter Four, five cases were presented. Each case included a narrative description and quotations intended to support the context. I integrated the presentation of data, and I included numerous direct quotations, multiple descriptions, and a rich narrative for each case. This chapter provided a conclusion, bringing each case together to compare and contrast. The dialogues the participants had with me were interwoven among each other, and I condensed the findings of my exploratory questions.
In this chapter I describe my analysis of data, and I identify the gaps in the literature. I analyze the exploratory questions while expanding on the sub-themes and categories that emerged. In addition, I discuss the inquiry and the future direction for research in this area of inquiry.

**Gaps in the Literature**

Currently, Voluntary Prekindergarten approved programs are evaluated on how the child responds to the assessment administered during the first 30 days of kindergarten (Florida Department of Education & Office of Early Learning, 2006). The Department of Education tracks each child who attended an approved program and subsequently enrolls in Florida public kindergarten. Children who attend a private school or leave the state of Florida are not tracked, and therefore, the Voluntary Prekindergarten program that cared for that child will earn a zero for that child. Children who do not attend at least 70 percent of the program are also not included in the score. The scores are totaled and distributed to providers approximately twelve to eighteen months after the child leaves the school. If the readiness rate was not met, the provider is placed on probation and must make a student improvement plan or purchase an approved curriculum. If the scores are adequate, the provider continues the services without requirements for change. There was a paucity of literature on Voluntary Prekindergarten Programs that do not meet the minimal readiness rate. Moreover, it is critical to the field of early childhood to better understand how practitioners implement a program to promote school readiness gains and high student achievement.

Many years ago when I was working with prekindergarten children, accountability was different. The program I worked in was licensed and approved to accept families earning subsidies to assist them in paying for preschool. Both the licensing agency and the agency-
providing subsidy would monitor the school. The tools they used were similar to each other as they both took the form of a checklist, yet different because one was more about safety and the other was focused more on quality, I can remember even back then the conversations I had with my peers about how items from both lists were subjective and at times the score was dependent on how the evaluator interpreted the rule or what was on the tool. These tools measured parts of the environment and the program and negated the progress of children. I held myself accountable for children’s success. I continuously collected children’s work and held them as artifacts for their portfolio. I had a system of checklists that I completed at certain times of the year so I could follow each child’s ongoing development and growth. This was not mandatory and not everyone practiced portfolio assessment in the center. I was self-motivated as I viewed assessment as a tool to guide my teaching.

The systems I used tracked progress and guided my plans for children. I believe systems are needed to assist preschool teachers so they can be aware of individual growth and development and use that information for planning and implementing classroom experiences. I chose this subject of inquiry because providers in approved Voluntary Prekindergarten programs need children to pass an assessment to retain their funding and maintain their reputation. The implementation of the assessment is not used to monitor progress, nor does it monitor effective teaching. I developed a greater interest in learning more about what the teachers are doing in Voluntary Prekindergarten programs during my pilot study. Because of the pilot study, I realized that more research was needed in order to advocate for continuous improvement in prekindergarten. Moreover, I wanted to understand what practitioners’ beliefs and perceptions were, and I desired answers. I wanted to share their story of Voluntary Prekindergarten, especially in a program on probation.
I was drawn to this study because I passionately believe that early childhood is the most important time of a child’s life. I believe early childhood sets the foundation for lifetime learning. I believe how children are taught is critical in their school success. I struggle with the notion that the level of quality of a program can be measured from the outcomes of a kindergarten assessment. Quality is more than the results of one assessment. It is within the walls of a school. It is how the teachers speak to the children, how they connect to their individuality, how they respond to their cues, how they guide their behavior, and how they lead them to the next level of development. Quality cannot be packaged and reproduced. Quality cannot be bound within the perimeters of one screening tool. My passion for children and for this profession motivated me to learn more about what happens to a program when a center does not meet accountability requirements. There was a need to understand how accountability affects early childhood programs as the results could aid in informing local practices.

Since 2005, providers in Voluntary Prekindergarten programs have been held accountable for how a child scores on an assessment they do not administer and have not previewed. This decision to assess children with a grade attached to a test was a drastic leap from the minor requirements, if any, that were implemented before 2005. According to research, this type of high stakes accountability has not been successful (Brown, 2011; Hatch, 2002; Kowalski, Brown, & Petti-Frontczak, 2005; Stipek, 2006). The literature reviewed indicated a need for prekindergarten programs that were of high quality. The review also indicated that the term “ready for school” could be interpreted numerous ways. Both terms, quality and ready for school, are complex, and are not interpreted the same by researchers, bringing another dimension to accountability.
Additionally, the review denoted that high stakes accountability could result in negative consequences if it was based on the outcome of a test (Almon & Miller, 2011; DellaMattera, 2010; Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Graue & Johnson, 2011). Much of the research included in the literature review was based on quantitative methods. Moreover, the negative outcomes primarily involved modifications to teaching methods in an attempt to improve school achievement through more whole group instruction and teaching to a test. I believed qualitative research could better explain this phenomenon.

According to Hall-Kenyon, Bullough, Mackay, and Marshall, the efforts to improve school achievement have negatively impacted preschool teachers and may have teachers in “crisis” (2013, p 153). The part of the crisis they refer to is the need for students to pass a test. Moreover, the desire for teachers to be seen as efficient has driven teachers to standardized instruction (Hall-Kenyon et al., 2011). Standardized instruction can also be described as traditional instruction. Hall-Kenyon et al. (2011) stated that in their review of literature they found little information about the perceptions of teachers when they were focusing on what they were doing and how accountability affected their physical and mental health. The minimal research in the literature does not denote adequately the teachers’ perceptions of the tension; however, it does help inform us how it affects their well-being.

With research indicating (Rose, 2010; Zigler, Gilliam, & Barnett, 2011) that preschool teachers attribute changes in their practice due to an increase in the amount of time spent in whole group instruction and a focus on instructing to the test, I wanted to understand their reasoning for shifting their pedagogy. This style of teaching was contradictory to what was taught in most professional development courses, and I was curious on how practitioners
defended their practice. It was important because our beliefs and our perceptions guide our responses about how children learn.

The framework of my study was based around the social constructivist context. I sought to understand the participants’ point of view and to understand each of them individually as they shared their Voluntary Prekindergarten experience. Dewey fueled the social constructivism philosophy with his emphasis on empirical teaching methodology and the value of quality experiences (1938/1998).

Using a progressive lens, I examined the Voluntary Prekindergarten scores, the participants’ résumés, my researcher journal, the program improvement plan, and the interview transcriptions. I studied the documents by congregating the following topics into separate pieces of data: 1) Understanding of teaching practices, 2) Perceptions of working in a school on probation, and 3) Assessment and accountability. I again reviewed and reflected on each theme with the data organized within the topic. By comparing and contrasting the information, coding the information by separating and uniting similar information, and categorizing the information as it related to my guiding questions, I was able to obtain saturation. All of the data I collected was not used consistently throughout the study. The résumés that I collected assisted me in gathering background knowledge. The readiness scores allowed me to compare the center to others in the county and the state, and provided me with specific information on the provider in the study. The scores also assured me that the center was indeed a center on probation, contributed to dialogue in the interviews, and served as a resource in the discussion. The program improvement plan allowed me to learn more about what the center’s responsibilities were for development. Although each data set held value, I found a heavy reliance on the interview transcriptions and my researcher reflective journal.
All of the participants I approached agreed to the study, and they used the words like Cassie Carnation shared, “I hope it helps.” Before and after the interviews, I wrote in-depth notes in my researcher reflective journal. My notes described my thoughts about what I hoped to gain from the interviews and what actually took place. I provided the transcriptions to the participants to approve them, and I feel I captured the essence of their viewpoints regarding the Florida Voluntary Prekindergarten program. I took an extended amount of time reading their words several times to code and to decode in order to interpret themes. I had not originally planned to present the cases separately. As the cases became real, I decided to separate each case to expose the participants’ perceptions and provide a clear understanding of who they were and what they experienced.

Examining the Exploratory Questions-Data Analysis

In Chapter Four, the five participants explained their beliefs and perspectives about effective and appropriate early childhood education among practitioners in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program on probation. The five participants described how the influence of probation affected their perspectives and beliefs of early childhood education. By evaluating their responses and what they know of developmentally appropriate practices I was able to compare and contrast what they said to what they did in the classroom. I learned that the practitioners disconnected training with practice. I wrote in my journal to reflect on what the participants had shared.

June 17, 2013

Tonight I attended a Pre-K Standard training because I am earning my Directors Credential. The instructor of the training began by saying that she wants us to take the standards apart so we can implement them in the classroom. As I look around, I
notice some of the tables had all of the center staff with them. I thought, what a good idea for back up! I discovered this class was mandated for all low performing providers and the staff in the VPK room so the intention was not just for back up. It was to meet the training requirement of a provider on probation. The instructor continued by saying that the benchmarks are the guideline to be used as a partner to create lesson plans. She stated that children learn better when the context is real and meaningful. She continued by stating that the low scores are often a result of low phonological scores. Everything that I am hearing in this training is connected to developmentally appropriate practices. This teacher was emphasizing real life intentional teaching versus direct instruction. She spoke of scaffolding skills and to avoid abstract subjects. I heard tension from the participants like there is not enough time or the opposite that the summer is all day and children are pushed without time to even nap. I have not even started the study but I sense a disconnection from training to practice.

I wrote in my journal that this training was connected to developmentally appropriate practices. A goal of mine was to gain knowledge about the participants’ point of view as it related to effective and appropriate education. I also wanted to learn what they felt the children needed to know and to learn to be successful in kindergarten. This training informed me that the participants in this study must have some knowledge of appropriate practices. I knew this because this was a mandatory class for new providers and for practitioners working in a program on probation. The literature reviewed in Chapter Two indicated that a definition to be ready for school could not be easily applied. I believed there was an importance to developmentally
appropriate practices, and it directly linked to being ready for kindergarten. I wondered what my participants thought as I reflected in my journal.

July 6, 2013

What does it mean to be prepared for kindergarten? The participants did not seem to agree with what it means to prepare children for kindergarten. What do children need to be able to do on the first day of kindergarten? The summer VPK teacher told me they should know the letters of their name, colors, and shapes. She stated that one of the most challenging concepts is to teach the letter sounds. She admitted in the second interview that she did not know how many letter sounds that children needed to know pass the test. She guessed that children might need to know half. I am concerned that there would be at least 52 symbols and sounds to learn not including the special “a” and “g”. If teachers believe that they need to teach them all, how much pressure would they put on themselves and on the children to have a good score on the test? Will this bring back the letter of the week? Will we once again see the “Q” marry the “K”? I remember that in kindergarten. Children will have a different set of memories in preschool than I had. I am questioning my training because for these practitioners they do not seem to believe in the educational system that was taught to them. They believe in the educational system that they experienced as a child. I am torn with what to do with this information because it is another progressive versus traditional conflict.

As I continued to reflect on the tension of progressive versus traditional education I reflected on the consequence of a low score controlling how the children were taught. That was predicted. However, I did not expect a reliance on a curriculum. The practitioners and the
director in the study used the Starfall curriculum as their crutch. The curriculum was one they respected and one they felt safe with implementing. The curriculum guided the practitioners on what to do in the classroom. The curriculum is a tool and can be an enhancement and a benefit to any classroom teacher.

Since, the curriculum is a resource for the teacher, an educator has the responsibility to make it meaningful for the class. Adaption and refinement during implementation is an important process to meet the individual needs of children. When the students find purpose in activities and make real world connections they are more likely to retain information. By adjusting the sequence of the activities or individual lessons, teachers may be more successful accommodating students in the class and engaging young children in the joy of learning. From the descriptions of the practitioners, they believed the curriculum was the only way to teach. Isay believed that if the readiness score fell below the readiness rate, the practitioners could place blame on the curriculum. It became their protection if children did not do well on the assessment. Appendix K: Starfall Curriculum Yearly Theme Plan was a broad example of the themes and holiday plans from the Starfall curriculum. The following was a reflection that I wrote in my journal.

July 14, 2013

All of the staff praised the Starfall Curriculum. They praised it because it was simple and told the teacher what to say and what to do. The curriculum provided props such as photos, books, and flashcards. It encompassed phonological activities. Phonological activities are also what the teachers say they struggle with the most. Thinking of my own experience, I have struggled with phonemes as well. The vowel sounds especially, the long “a”, the short “a”, etc. is something that was not taught to me- especially coming from the profession where we were taught the importance of
play. We were taught how to expand play how to make intentionally connect to cognitive growth. We were not taught to do the letter of the week. Letters should be incorporated in their play through natural learning. From what I learned so far from these participants is that they were trained like I was. Is the discrepancy in how they were trained, in a lack of confidence in the system, or is it the low score? There are numerous factors that could account for the change.

I provided these three examples of my reflections because they explained some of the tensions revealed in the study and some of my concerns as the researcher. During the interviews, I felt as if I was part of their school. I never felt like an outsider stepping into their world and never felt uncomfortable or unwanted. I was challenged because the answers to my questions and some topics that developed did not fit together well enough for me to offer a good explanation. At times, they led to more questions.

Some of those times of tension occurred when I was wearing my social constructivism lens. I believed my obstacle was determining what descriptions were progressive and which were traditional. In the words of John Dewey, “Everything depends on the quality of the experience” (1938/1998, p. 15). The experience for me was the interviews. I took the participants’ words to make them my experience and created a shared reality for all to learn from. It was my hope that this study might incite further investigations on the gray areas and lead to an accountability that would guide early childhood practitioners and assist in moving children to higher levels of development.
Question One- What are the Beliefs and Perspectives on Effective and Appropriate Teaching?

The first exploratory question of inquiry was what were the beliefs and perspectives about effective and appropriate early childhood education among practitioners in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program on probation? I proposed this as the first question because how you teach is critical to learning. It is not enough to hold a desire to teach and to enjoy being around children. Teaching is deeper and more purposeful. John Dewey stated, “No matter how strong his desire, it cannot be directly executed. The man must form an idea of what kind of house he wants, including the number of rooms, etc. He has to draw a plan…” (1938/1998, p. 82). He continues by adding, “They are no part of the original desire. But they have to be viewed and judged in order that a desire may be converted into a purpose and a purpose into a plan of action” (1938/1998, p. 82). In short, teachers cannot just trust in their aspiration to teach; there needs to be a plan to be effective and appropriate. Child assessments are a part of the plan. However, the feedback from monitoring and professional development opportunities should also be part of the plan to help teachers make informed decisions. How teachers use the assessments, the feedback, and their training is an important piece of that plan. Therefore, learning about how the participants in this study view effective and appropriate teaching was a valuable piece to the research. The data I utilized to answer this question included the interview transcriptions, the researcher reflective journal, the Voluntary Prekindergarten scores, and the participants’ résumés. The data exposed some conflicts in the field.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, there are disparate views when trying to define or value quality education. Some of the contention is with the subjectivity of the term quality. One of the indicators of quality is the education level of the lead teacher. It is recommended for the lead
teacher to have a four-year degree in the field of early childhood or one that is closely related. The minimal recommendation is a Child Development Associate Degree or Equivalency. There may be marked differences in the education level of a teacher with a four-year degree and the minimal recommendation. As it is related to quality, some argue that the level of education is not as important as how early childhood practices are implemented in the classroom. As I discuss the practices, I align quality with suggestions from the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The National Institute for the Early Education Research has created quality markers based off of NAEYC’s recommendations.

To connect the participants’ stories to effective practices that were connected to NAEYC’s recommendations I took their descriptions of training and interpreted their beliefs and perspectives in alignment with developmentally appropriate practices. I then discussed similarities and differences in connecting their knowledge to practice. The participants might have shared similar training experiences; however, they did not share the same knowledge base on effective practices.

The five participants in the study described a large variation of how they understood developmentally appropriate practices. In Chapter Two, I mentioned practices suggested by Copple and Bredekamp (2009) that included: “(a) creating a caring community of learners, (b) teaching to enhance development and learning, (c) planning curriculum to achieve important goals, (d) assessing development and learning, and (e) establishing reciprocal relationships” (p. 16). I used these as a guide for the interview questions.

The participants expressed the tension I described earlier regarding developmentally appropriate practices. However, it was not similar to the tension described in research. The
conflict was formed around the level of understanding of how to implement appropriate practices, not in their disagreement with it in a cultural context or from a subjective perspective.

Out of the five participants, three of them entered the field at the beginning of the Voluntary Prekindergarten implementation in 2005, Deborah, Sally, and Lacy. The three were trained in the same 27-week training program as the owner; however, they did not participate in the program at the same time. I taught the training in this program for eight years, and I am knowledgeable of the curriculum and structure. The emphasis of the training was developmentally appropriate practices. The training program guided new teachers to teach math, science, social studies, literacy and social/emotional skills by creating thematic units. The program encouraged themes to be the center of the plan. Theme based plans were typical for preschool teachers to create lessons and activities during play or center time in the daily schedule. Since then my views on theme teaching have expanded, but for many programs themes still appear to be a typical approach in professional development trainings. For example, if the theme were bugs the teacher would plan to sing songs, to chant finger plays, and to provide literacy experiences, science experiences, counting experiences, and art experiences associated with bugs. The teacher would typically seek ideas from teacher books, magazines, and the Internet and would try to place the activities as part of their daily play. This was to encourage growth through hands on and meaningful interactions. The goals and objectives may be based on the results of the children’s skills assessed. Students in this program were evaluated through observation with a checklist that aligned to the guidebook *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8* (Copple & Bredekamp, 2006).
Cassie was the only participant trained in a four-year college, earning a Bachelor’s Degree. Cassie was well versed in early childhood appropriate practices. I noted in my journal that she displayed a much higher level of understanding of practice than the other participants. Cassie’s description of what she learned and how she was taught was similar to the other participants; however, I believed her teacher preparation program covered a more in depth broader spectrum of subjects. Because her training took place over twenty years ago she vaguely described her training and education. I resonated with how she was trained because I earned my Bachelor’s degree a few years after Cassie. I was impressed with her ability to articulate her knowledge of the development of young children, especially when she spoke of play. I was perplexed with how she described her inability to teach that way. She was trained and believed in how she was trained as what was right for children. But when faced with the dilemma of her students not passing the assessment, she lost her faith. This feeling of loss was also shared with the owner who had earned an Associate’s degree. The other participants expressed a different perspective.

The themes that emerged from this question were how the participants were educated and a failure to translate training into practice. A subtheme that developed from the disconnect between training and practice was a lack of preparation on teaching children literacy skills and phonemes. The participants had marked differences in their perspectives regarding effective and appropriate teaching but reached consensus that they were inadequately trained in this domain. I can explain the variation in their perspectives as emanating from their diverse backgrounds and the commonalities due to their similar in-service professional development experiences. Cassie was the only participant who earned a Bachelor’s degree. She believed she was not trained to teach Voluntary Prekindergarten. I noted in my researcher journal that it appeared Cassie strived
to do her best as a teacher. She appeared to be motivated to reach the readiness rate for the benefit of others—the children and the program. According to social constructivist theory a desire to help others can be a powerful motivator (Scholz, Dewulf, & Pahl-Wostl, 2013).

Deborah Dogwood was the weakest at describing developmentally appropriate practices. She was aware that children should spend more time in active play; however, she did not imply in any of her statements that children learn through play. Sally Shyflower was also weak at describing play, but she was able to connect play to learning. Sally and Lacy had similar views that play was important. Lacy described play with wording such as allowing children to learn through their interest in their play and adjusting the schedule to meet their needs. All of the participants shared similar feelings that children needed more time to play. Cassie and Isay both shared that lack of play would negatively affect learning and socialization. According to Copple and Brendekamp (2009), play is essential to learning. The Association for Childhood Education International (2011) has stated that play is a natural right for every child. Play can be child led but also teacher facilitated. I believe play and meeting individual needs are two factors that are the most important aspects of working with young children, and it is the most challenging to learn how to implement. Another challenge is that it is difficult to see developmental gains when children are playing. This process takes more time and more observation. To show a child a flashcard and then ask the child what is on the flashcard is simple and quick. It is also what is publically viewed as learning.
Figure 5 is a visual descriptor of the participants’ knowledge of developmentally appropriate practices. Deborah seemed to have minimal level of knowledge of appropriate practices while Isay and Cassie were well versed in what was appropriate for children. My reflection was established not just from their words but the concern expressed as they shared certain experiences. I listened to their words but noted body movements and changes in voice reflections. For example, Deborah did not hesitate to tell me about homework or flashcards. Her mannerisms and her descriptions were stated with confidence that these methods were the best to prepare children for kindergarten. While Cassie and Isay explained these same practices and described them with pauses and hesitations. The three practitioners and Lacy described practices that were not aligned to their professional development training and heavily depended on the prescribed curriculum.
Lack of Confidence in Teaching Literacy and Phonemic Awareness. Before the study began I heard in training that a reason why many providers were on probation was due to the children’s low scores in literacy and phonemic awareness. Each participant with the exception of Isay stated that they felt that their professional development courses did not prepare them to teach these concepts to young children. In the review of the literature, The National Center for Family Literacy (2009) recommended guiding children to learn literacy skills and phonemic awareness through a balance of direct instruction, play, and inquiry within the framework of developmentally appropriate instruction. The review also denoted the effective early childhood teachers provide opportunities for children to learn by embedding instruction into hands-on activities that relate to children (Stipek, 2006). I argued that because how children learn literacy is as important as or more so than what is learned, the outcomes of a child’s assessment should not be the chosen accountability method of ensuring children are exposed to literacy. In addition, one of the requirements of Voluntary Prekindergarten providers is to expose children literacy. What is missing in that requirement is how to expose children to literacy. If developmentally appropriate practices was used as the guide for how exposure to literacy would be embedding books to multiple areas of the classroom, encouraging children to write during their play such as grocery lists, invitations, and signs. The practitioners described a more teacher directed approach in their classrooms with flashcards and ditto.

In this study, the participants were unsure how to expose young children to literacy. This could explain both a reason and also a need for the Starfall curriculum. The practitioners in the study began to teach with flashcards and the worksheets. According to Dewey, this is viewing the teacher as the giver of knowledge and the child as the collector of information. This is a shift from the perception of preschool as play based and child directed to an environment where
learning involves memorizing facts. This represents an absence of children learning from personal experience to a desire to have all of the children learn the letter A at the same time. The reasoning why these practitioners would revert to traditional practices could be that they were likely taught like that in their school experience and they may not know how to confidently teach to guide children to solve problems. Without having practice or experience in their own school contexts, connecting training to practice may be challenging.

Disconnect between Training and Practice

Many of the participants shared common educational backgrounds. All but one of the participants attended the same child development associate equivalency course at the local vocational school. In 2013, there were 26 training programs in Florida listed on the approved training program list (Florida Department of Education, 2013). I reviewed each of the websites to see if the training program incorporated developmentally appropriate practices. Four of the programs did not have a working website or no longer had an early childhood training track. Twelve of the websites included developmentally appropriate practices in the program. Ten had the description of developmentally appropriate practices missing from their website. I do not want to give the impression that any of the ten programs did not teach or follow developmentally appropriate practices because many of them included descriptions that described objectives that aligned to appropriate practices; however, the sites did not contain that exact language. The website from the program the participants attended stated the term developmentally appropriate practices. The major practice that did not align to training included not creating plans based on the interests of children. Some others included sending homework home, memorizing flashcards, and lack of play. This information is important because developmentally appropriate practices do hold a high value in the early childhood field.
The prescribed curriculum. The center in the study had implemented the Starfall Curriculum in 2013. Because the center was consecutively not meeting the readiness rate they were required to use a curriculum approved by the Department of Education. I describe Starfall as a prescribed curriculum because it contains specific plans, activities for children, questions to ask, and what to say. My personal fear with a prescribed curriculum is that it may assume that every child is developmentally at the same point as each child in the class. I believe that a curriculum serves as a teacher’s guide. Good teachers can take the guide and pull from it and manipulate it to meet the needs of the learners in the classroom as a tool for teaching. Since, it is not practical for all of the children to be at the same point developmentally, a curriculum should not be used as the only resource for instruction I sensed a heavy reliance on this curriculum throughout all the interviews. The curriculum seemed to offer the practitioners a detailed manual for instructing young children. Given the varied backgrounds, experiences, and ranges in development the students come to preschool with, teachers need to use the tool wisely. If used appropriately, a curriculum like Starfall can be a valuable resource.

In addition, to believe that “ready for kindergarten” is passing the kindergarten assessment will allude to a goal to have all children on the same developmental level from the beginning. I am conflicted because if this goal were even possible the achievement would create an even playing field for kindergarteners; all children at the same level at one time. The closest humans should ever come to this is at birth and even that could be contested.

I am uneasy about the reason why this would be a goal. Is this an expectation that is not only unreasonable but also disadvantageous? What about the developmental factors that are not part of the assessment that are attributers to success like creativity, problem-solving, and intervention? These are talents that should not only be recognized but also appreciated. My fear
is that some of the most critical factors that define the leaders in our world hold these very same characteristics that are not appreciated. I also fear what we lose in the process if we stifle these skills by placing too much emphasis on academics (i.e., math, language arts, science). I am concerned that children are missing opportunities in developing important skills or experiencing topics that interest them (i.e., painting, building, science) while they are young. I fear a movement of a one-size fits all package may deprive children of necessary experiences.

All of the participants, except for Isay, embraced the prescribed curriculum. Each of the participants shared that the use of a prescriptive curriculum was not part of their training. The curriculum reduced the need for teachers to write a lesson plan based on the needs and skills of the children because the weekly plans were prepared for the teachers. The practitioners changed from implementing practices learned in professional development to relying on a curriculum adopted when the program was placed on probation. The fact that practices changed over time does not unto itself result in an issue of concern. Teaching should not be stagnant but dynamic. However, the challenge is that the adoption of the Starfall curriculum has resulted in a change in the teachers’ pedagogic approaches, whereby they no longer allow for children to investigate, draw conclusions, and reflect while engaged in active processes. The foundational philosophy of early childhood teaching that the participants had learned as part of their initial preparation and ongoing professional development has become negated. The teachers have been unable to reconcile how developmentally appropriate practices can be embedded into the new curriculum.

Using a purchased curriculum was a requirement for providers with low readiness scores (See Appendix L VPK improvement process). Each classroom practitioner used the curriculum as the tool to make the children “ready for school”. They each believed the curriculum was easy to use and simple to administer. Deborah even described it as “idiot” proof. As they saw
children able to distinguish letters, count, and rhyme they viewed this as what was needed for children. The curriculum provided flashcards, homework ideas, and a classroom schedule for the practitioners to follow.

Together the participants’ knowledge of developmentally appropriate practices and their reliance on a prescribed curriculum allowed me to learn about their beliefs on teaching children. As I listened, I understood that the practitioners placed more emphasis on the children being able to answer what was on the assessment and less emphasis in applying what was taught in professional development. This disconnect impacted the teaching practices of all the practitioners in the study. However, it only seemed to bother Cassie and Isay.

**Question Two - What are the Perspectives and Beliefs about the Influences of being a Provider on Probation in Voluntary Prekindergarten?**

The second exploratory question of inquiry was in what ways does probation influence practitioners’ perspectives and beliefs about early childhood education? I proposed this as the second question because from a social constructivist lens there is an “Either-Or” perspective meaning many choose either a traditional approach to teaching or a progressive approach (Dewey, 1938/1998, p. 8). This was a controversy in our field and a core dispute in the progressive versus traditional educational philosophies (Dewey, 1938/1998). This question allowed me to delve into influences of probation. I expected to hear that they believe that children will be prepared for kindergarten by either bringing kindergarten methods to preschool or developing new methods that will support learning that will increase academic outcomes.

Dewey asserted that progressive and traditional philosophies were very different. However, he did not believe that there needed to be an “either-or” choice and that sometimes balance was needed (Dewey, 1938/1998). I took this approach because I was attempting to understand what
it would be like to work in an environment with a negative descriptor. I use the term negative because probation in general has a negative connotation. The term “probation” is a signal to others that something could be wrong. I wondered if this would influence the participants and lead them to a more dichotomized approach when teaching that focused on directed instruction rather than exploratory learning.

The five participants in this study indicated varying opinions about the experience of probation. Deborah and Sally were the least influenced by probation, probably because they were fairly new at working in the Voluntary Prekindergarten classroom. Lacy was moderately influenced. Lacy had stressors caused by the administrative work of the program and was concerned for Cassie; however, these pressures did not appear to heavily influence her decision-making. Cassie and Isay were highly influenced by probation. Cassie shared she altered teaching methods and was extremely stressed. Isay stated she felt the program was not what she thought, and she had not expected it to negatively change teaching practices. The following indicated the results of the influences of probation concerning additional stress on practitioners, administrators, and a perceived stress to children. The data I utilized to answer this question included the interview transcriptions, the researcher reflective journal, the Voluntary Prekindergarten scores, and the program improvement plan.

Stressors Effecting Practitioners, Administrators, and Children

The tensions the practitioners and the administrators felt varied. The practitioners were responsible for working with children who were not meeting milestones, felt pressured from what they described as a time crunch, were accountable for administering child assessments, and struggled to manage children’s behavior on a continuous basis. Administrators needed to oversee the practitioners’ responsibilities and were burdened with multiple regulations and
attrition. Given the diminished focus on play and emphasis on kindergarten preparation, I assumed that the children similarly experienced stress in the early learning environment.

**Practitioner stressors**

Each of the three practitioners described challenges. The participants’ pressures arose in the Voluntary Prekindergarten classroom when they had children who were developmentally behind the group. Each participant also felt pressured from a lack of time with children, experienced difficulties when assessing children, and felt challenged when dealing with undesirable behaviors from children.

**Working with a struggling child.** The practitioners have a responsibility to ensure the children achieve the curriculum objectives. When a child does not meet the instructional goals, most teachers will work with the child to promote the child’s progress across the assessed domains. The results indicated that when a child was not keeping up with the curriculum, such as not being able to understand the concept of five or to say the letter “F”, the child would spend more instructional time with the practitioner. The instructional time was focused on more small-group sessions. The small-group sessions consisted of the practitioner working with the child on the skill through flashcards, games, or practice via rote memorization. In addition to smaller group experience, practitioners would send homework in the form of dittos that connected to the skill.

From the participants’ descriptions, teaching with traditional practices began when the participants felt they needed to advance teaching methods. One participant attributed these practices to be a result of probation, and another two participants perceived that they were a requirement of working in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program. Although the traditional practices may lead the child to be able to answer the questions on the kindergarten readiness
screener, I do not believe that this approach benefits a young child in the long term. This tension experienced by teachers to abandon child-centered instruction for direct teaching needs more research and further investigation.

**Lack of time.** In the fall program, Voluntary Prekindergarten programs may offer 540 hours of preschool. Program administrators can determine the hours and days as long as it totals 540 hours during the school year. For example, a provider may offer Voluntary Prekindergarten education for 135 days for four-hour days. While another provider may choose to offer 180 days for three hours a day. It can be dependent on the needs of the provider and/or the families.

Deborah and Sally felt that the three hours that their center offered during the school year was not enough time with the students. They described a rush to complete all of the activities, circle time instruction, and small group lessons. They both felt that extra time was important. However, the provider was not on probation for the fall program when only three hours was dedicated to Voluntary Prekindergarten.

On the other hand, Cassie struggled with the long days of the summer program. She taught in Voluntary Prekindergarten both in the fall and in the summer. In the summertime Voluntary Prekindergarten programs are required to provide 300 hours for ten weeks. In order to implement the program in the summer, providers must offer school for six hours five days a week. According to Cassie, the six hours could not include nap or lunch time. From Cassie’s perspective she needed to rush lunch and shorten nap to accommodate meeting the six-hour day. She felt that the days were too long for children. She felt pressured to teach the entire Starfall Curriculum during the ten weeks. At one point she shared that there were many days she would teach the children one letter in the morning and one letter in the afternoon.
Cassie struggled with this schedule as she asserted, “This isn’t right!” The practitioners had difficulty planning their time and managing the requirements of the program. Their stories and descriptions of the classroom instruction troubled me as an early childhood educator. I have an image of children sitting down in circle time or small group practicing daily a letter or multiple letters. I visualize an absence of play and meaningful experiences. I also experience conflicting emotions when I imagine that these adverse practices result in children successfully passing the assessment.

The results implied the practitioners struggled with time. Each of the participants felt that when children leave the program at the end of fall, children might forget what was taught to them during the school year. Even though the stress of time differed with the time of the year the program was offered, it was a consistent stressor on practitioners. They felt three hours was not enough to cover the subjects in the curriculum. Moreover, they desired to have the children for the full year: fall and summer. Cassie felt an additional challenge with time during the summer program. She stated that ten weeks was not long enough time to cover what was in the curriculum and to complete three child assessments on every student in the program.

**Challenges with child assessment.** According to NAEYC, assessment is a central component of early childhood education (Copple & Brenekamp, 2009). NAEYC recommends that assessment be tied to daily activities and experiences that connect to practices. By connecting the assessment to practices the results can be used to plan teaching, to identify developmental concerns, and to improve educational programs (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). NAEYC also recommends examining multiple sources of evidence for assessment. Moreover, according to best practices, the use of norm-referenced tests should be reduced and should not be the sole indicator of growth, improvement, or quality (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).
The practitioners in this study administered assessments to children in form of norm-referenced tests as a requirement of being a Voluntary Prekindergarten program. All approved providers are required to administer assessments and to report the findings in September (assessment period 1-AP 1) and in April or May (assessment period 3- AP 3). Providers on probation are also required to assess the children in January (assessment period 2-AP 2).

The practitioners and administrators in this study shared positive feelings about the need for child assessments. Conversely, the results indicated the practitioners in the study believed the required assessments were lengthy, and children were easily distracted during testing. Cassie was trained on how to administer the assessments while Deborah and Sally learned as they practiced. The practitioners shared additional distractors while assessing, such as the children who were not being assessed needing assistance or parents wanting their attention. I surmised that the positivity they shared toward assessment was genuine because they were able to see progress of the children in the program. The ability to see the growth of the children overpowered the challenges that emerged while administering the tests. The participants were unified in their belief on the importance of assessment; however, they each struggled with assessing children in their classroom when other children were present and felt that some children needed more social guidance than others.

**Dealing with challenging behavior.** According to Fettig and Ostrosky (2011), ten to twenty-five percent of preschool children exhibit challenging behaviors that require teacher intervention. These behaviors may include temper tantrums, physical and verbal aggression, and self-injury. Children need to learn valuable life skills such as cooperation, ingenuity, and self-regulation to be successful. According to Stipek (2006), kindergarten teachers would rather have students enter primary school with highly developed social skills. Similarly, the practitioners
shared that it was a challenge when children did not follow the rules and agreed that Cassie had more behavior challenges than others. All of the participants noted that Cassie had the highest stress related to children’s negative behaviors. Deborah and Sally believed that parents had an impact on how the child behaves, while Cassie felt that many needed more time to play. The practitioners were concerned that they spent too much time regulating children’s behavior when they should be focusing on learning activities. Their perceptions clearly indicated that they can teach children more when the group is well behaved. During, the study one child was expelled from the program. According to the Yale University Child Study Center preschool children are expelled from programs at an alarming 6.7 per 1,000 children (Gilliam, 2005).

**Administrator Stressors**

Isay and Lacy encountered challenges as administrators. Both of these participants were involved in the delivery of Voluntary Prekindergarten since the beginning of the mandate. Isay looked at Voluntary Prekindergarten as a way to improve quality in centers. Challenges with multiple regulators and attrition emerged as themes for the administrators.

**Multiple regulators.** This center was regulated by the Early Learning Coalition, the local License Board, the Fire Marshall, and the USDA Food Department. Ensuring that all staff followed regulation was important. It was challenging for both administrators to comply with regulations. On my first visit the Health Department was at the site, and the inspector had a concern about the microwave near the classroom. Lacy stated to me the microwave had been there for years and admitted frustration with inconsistent approaches to regulating the rules.

During the interviews, Isay stated she purchased a curriculum because of probation; however, there was a requirement for providers on probation to use an approved curriculum. She believed Starfall was not going to be part of the list and was unsure about the curriculum she
recently purchased through a grant. At the time of the interviews the list was not available to the providers. Lacy and Isay were both concerned because as the end of the summer was nearing, the list was still not published. They stated they wanted time to purchase another curriculum if neither resource was on the approved list, nor they also needed time to train the practitioners on implementation.

**Attrition.** Whitebook and Sakai (2004) estimate that yearly one-fifth to one-third of teachers working in preschools leave their position. I discussed this with the participants during the interviews, but issues of attrition did not affect the participants until the end of the study. Attrition was not strongly indicated as a source of stress by the participants. However, I felt it was a critical piece. Deborah was teaching in a Voluntary Prekindergarten classroom even though she wanted to leave the profession but found her personal situation would not warrant a change. Sally was new at the school and had only been at the center for around five months when the study began. Staff turnover has been part of the reality of the site.

Additionally, three out of five participants left the center since the study began; however, only Isay suggested that policies and regulations had any influence on her decision to leave. Deborah resigned from the center to pursue a career in the ophthalmological field. Lacy, seeking a change, left the center after the new owner arrived. Isay sold the center because she no longer felt that she was making a difference. I wrote in my research journal that neither Isay nor Lacy appeared to be concerned about attrition. Their attitude towards turnover was flat, as if it was just something to expect as part of the profession. Change in practitioners and in administrators at any time must affect families and children. Attrition detracts from consistency in practice and undermines the formation of relationships with children, two fundamental quality indicators in any school program.
Stress on Children

When I discuss the knowledge I gained from the interviews, I am aware I share only my opinions on the possible cause of stress to children. I found that children were offered less time to play and that play was often interrupted. I also found a push to have children practice kindergarten activities, including the assignment of homework to prepare children for school.

Reduction of play. Each participant shared that children do not play as much as they did before Voluntary Prekindergarten implementation. According to Campbell et al. (2014), when children engage in play in early childhood they experience fewer health issues in adulthood. I found that the stress of teaching the concepts in the curriculum increased the amount of time spent in large group discussion and small group activities, resulting in an overall reduction in time for play. This was a shared concern by all of the participants. Research supports the importance of play. The First Steps Study researched the effect of teaching practices in reading and mathematics, including 1,268 kindergarten children (Lerkkanen et al., 2012). The researchers found children have a higher interest in reading and math when teachers apply social constructivist practices and wait until they are older to begin former education on the topics (Lerkkanen et al., 2012). The study results indicated that children need more time experiencing child-centered practices and play. It can be argued the time children spend in play assists them in creating connections for later literacy and academic advancements (Liew et al., 2008; Kirp, 2009; Stipek, 2007). Conversely, time spent in rote memorization tasks is ultimately time wasted.

The reduction of play appeared to be a common theme expressed by all of the participants. I believe that play is the foundation of learning. What I found was these practitioners reduced play and subsequently diminished the foundation of their students’
cognitive development. What I fear is that these adverse practices may spread if centers perceive benefits to the program as more children pass the assessment. What is being removed or diminished is play, and play is an important part of childhood. The results indicate a need for more research in this area.

**Teaching them to the age/grade level.** Throughout this paper I referred to stress on children connected to completing homework in prekindergarten. The rationale that practitioners were consistently attempting to teach children the concepts that will be introduced at the next level was common. I found that if practitioners learned that children will be working on a concept in the next age/grade level, practitioners will work on that concept to prepare the children.

**Homework in prekindergarten.** The results indicate that homework was important to Deborah, Sally, and Lacy. They did not view homework as inappropriate for the age of the children, yet they all admitted that homework was not taught in their professional development. They each stated that homework was important because it allowed children to practice the skills they were working on during the program. Each of them also defended homework by stating that parents wanted it because it made the program similar to school. They added that children liked it because they felt like a big boy or girl. In addition, they protected the practice of homework when they stated that the teachers did not punish children who did not turn in the homework. When I asked the participants if the practice of making homework optional might confuse a child because homework was a requirement in kindergarten, each of them agreed that this practice might set a poor example for the children; yet they did not stray from their firm beliefs that homework was necessary and helpful.
Enrollment practices. Deborah, Sally, and Lacy spoke proudly as they described enrollment practices at the center. They stated that multiple times a child would come to the center because the child was dismissed from several other centers for negative behavior. They shared that when that occurred the child was placed in Cassie’s care. Lacy was firm about this practice during the first two meetings. Cassie stated she felt stressed when she was constantly working with a child on behavior issues versus what the class was working on in Starfall. Cassie stated that she wanted to help children; however, it was difficult to assist the child in learning social skills and also prepare the child for kindergarten. Cassie stated that Isay understood her challenges more than Lacy because Lacy would enroll all children. Isay stated that she was careful because a child was not always a good fit. Lacy admitted to being more cautious when enrolling for the summer Voluntary Prekindergarten. I approached this tension because I have heard fears from other providers that it is too easy for centers to select desired children and restrict access to others. Providers have shared with me that during the tour of the center they would often ask the parents many questions about the child before telling the parent or guardian if any spaces were available at the center. One child’s misbehavior can affect the entire classroom. That one child could have multiple needs that distract the teacher from keeping to the daily schedule or may lead a teacher to avoid activities that may be too stressful to offer to children because too much attention would be on one child. If this gatekeeping practice is happening, measures should be in place to prevent bias and selective enrollment.

Thoughts on Kindergarten Assessment and Accountability

The participants in the study all agreed that children should be assessed in kindergarten. They also agreed that a system should be in place to hold programs accountable. The results
denoted a need for further investigation as these participants shared their concerns and suggestions for improvement.

**Kindergarten assessment.** The practitioners were required to complete assessments three times a year, and each participant felt assessment in kindergarten was positive and necessary. They shared a common desire to know what was on the assessment. Additionally, they felt that children needed more time to become comfortable in the kindergarten environment before the assessment was administered.

**Voluntary prekindergarten accountability.** Each participant shared the importance of programs being held responsible for outcomes at the sites. However, they had a common suggestion that accountability should be based off of individual growth versus centering it off of one test. Cassie and Isay shared they wished more monitoring would take place at the center so they can learn what they did wrong and correct it immediately. Isay suggested a monitoring checklist and review by the Early Learning Coalition, followed by technical assistance. Isay also believed that the assessment should be based on the ECOS (Early Childhood Observation System), an assessment that measures social-emotional development, more than the FLKRS (Florida Assessment for Instruction in Reading-Kindergarten), an assessment that measures academic concepts. In a study completed by Flanagan and Greenberg (2013), the FLKRS had a high correlation rate with the domain and the subdomains. The high concordance is strongly associated with school readiness.

The present study investigated the beliefs and perspectives of practitioners working in a program on probation. There was a shared sense of discomfort among the participants of not knowing what questions were going to be asked. During the interviews the participants expressed a concern with one of the questions on the assessment administered during the school
year. The question required the child to provide two specific answers. Cassie shared that she was upset when children answered one part but not the other because she was not allowed to score the answer. She felt that it was unfair. I had the sense that she was concerned that if the children did not have exposure to both of the words they would be disadvantaged. She admitted to teaching the children the words on the prekindergarten assessment because she wanted to score well. This is a prime example of how opportunity and experience are valuable but also the absence of them may be contributing to low scores. How children learn does not seem to be as valued as what they know. With the mandate including five high quality requirements and only one measurement it fails to create the whole picture regarding how the program is preparing young children.

Figure 6 below offers a visual representation of the unbalanced measurement system. The Voluntary Prekindergarten mandate may place unwarranted stress on young children and on practitioners, by pushing academic achievement when children are not ready for such demands. The field of early childhood has certain complexities that make it a challenge to assess with a one-size-fits-all accountability system. Researchers have indicated a need for “quality” preschool experiences, yet the term “quality” can be interpreted in innumerable ways (Howes et al., 2008; Kirp, 2009; Spidek, 2006).

Policy makers have indicated a need for accountability; yet, the term was only viewed quantitatively in the development of the legislated mandate. Conversely, researchers have identified a need for more evaluative studies to examine the effects of preschool and the consequences of rigid accountability (Kirp, 2009; Pianta et al., 2007). There is a need for a balance in accountability to ensure all five indicators are present in programs. More research is needed to level the accountability scale.
A quiet controversy surrounds how the approved Voluntary Prekindergarten programs comply with the requirements of the mandate. The controversy was quiet because it is not in research; yet, from experience, I have heard the voices of many practitioners regarding the stress of accountability and the concern of changing practices. When quality was based on a score from one measurement tool, providers have a responsibility to ensure as many children as possible pass the tool. The scores may create a false indicator of the level of program quality as many parents and practitioners will base the value of the program on a number.

**Connections with Previous Research**

The literature review described the importance of quality preschool experiences. The review also denoted negative consequences that can come with high stakes accountability. The purpose of Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V was to provide opportunity for four-year-olds eligible
for kindergarten a kick-start to school. The aim was to allow access to prekindergarten regardless of a family’s income level or social status. Researchers have linked outcomes for high academic achievement to children who are placed in high quality stimulating environments with responsive caregivers before entering kindergarten (Barnett, Jamy, & Jung, 2005; The Pew Center on the States, 2011). Other researchers have correlated higher academic achievement to positive life experiences, such as community leadership, work permanence, and family stability (Rose, 2010). The research suggests higher student outcomes and higher achievement for all young children who participate in high quality programs.

It is important to consider what higher student outcomes and higher achievement means. From a simple perspective they would mean an increase in test grades and graduation rates. I can almost visualize a checklist that can be marked off that this goal has been accomplished. On paper this would look like an excellent way to prevent some of society’s challenges. But the research also denotes that how outcomes and achievement occur play critical roles in determining the end result. The brain research studies indicate that every interaction forms connections and builds patterns to how thoughts and actions are processed and executed (Bransford et al., 2002; Shonkoff, 2003). The three studies that attribute to the significance of preschool were the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, the Carolina Abecedarian Study, and the Chicago Child-Parent Center Program Study (Barnett & Yarosz, 2004; Burke, 2009). These studies denote a positive long-term impact on student outcomes and accountability from high quality programs. High quality is defined as low teacher/child ratio, high teacher education, positive teacher/child relationships, and hands on learning opportunities. These are variables that should be accounted for in Voluntary Prekindergarten to be successful because the way that children reach achievement is an important factor for success.
In my research study, the findings indicated that the practitioners and administrators providing a Voluntary Prekindergarten program not meeting the readiness requirement believed the need for programs to have systems of accountability. They believed accountability is important; however, they believed holding programs accountable for a test at the beginning of kindergarten is ineffective. This study indicates that teachers will teach to a test, and they will move to traditional teaching methods in an attempt to teach children what they are assuming is on the readiness test. The participants stated they knew “teaching to a test” was not appropriate. However, they lacked confidence and needed support for how to teach children without excessive reliance on drills. The responses from the participants gave me the impression that they would be willing to learn more. What they needed was to be monitored and to be held accountable for their actions with children versus the results from one test.

I provided a literature review on Voluntary Prekindergarten. I explained that the past three decades the public has increased its interest in how young children learn and what they need to know before they enter kindergarten (Barnett, Carolan, Squires, & Brown, 2013; Cascio, & Schanzenbach, 2013). Some of the interest has emerged based on growing rates of illiteracy, the rise of unemployment, and increased rates of incarceration in our country (Children’s Defense Fund, 2002; Kirp, 2009). According to Friere (2005), a great deal of money and research was allotted to improve the education system. According to Barnett, the two consistent results of state and local preschool programs are an improved school readiness rate and positive academic gains beyond kindergarten (2013, p. 4).

The practitioners welcomed monitoring and desired it so they were more confident they were teaching correctly. Their depictions on how they taught were in direct opposition as to how they described they taught. I found they knew that practices such as flashcards, homework and
more direct instruction with limited playtime was not how they were taught. Because of this, more research is needed in this area. It could be that providers know what to do but do not truly believe the methods work or lack the ability to put the methods in place.

Implications for Voluntary Prekindergarten Programs

The preschool years play a major role in the outcomes for the rest of our lives (Brown, 2013; Research Council Institute of Medicine, 2000). The experiences and opportunities that a young child is exposed to build the foundation for lifetime learning (Brown, 2013; Shonkoff, 2003). To promote positive student achievement the government of Florida has taken an approach to fund preschool education for children in Florida as a way to prepare them for kindergarten. This is a preventive approach to invest in children early to reduce remedial assistance in the future (Barnett & Yarosz, 2004; Burke, 2009). To ensure that preschools were promoting student achievement, accountability in programs must be observed.

Accountability

From my experience in the profession and my relationships with providers I learned that the vision of Voluntary Prekindergarten was not what providers had imagined. Isay stated, “I thought the powers that be would help us. I thought they would give us the basics and then lead us to a higher level over the years. But they didn’t. First grade is being pushed down to kindergarten; kindergarten is being pushed down to preschool. It’s hard for them and for us.” The implementation of Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V, or the Voluntary Prekindergarten mandate, marked the beginning of high stakes accountability in preschools. This type of accountability is changing the dynamics of early childhood education. Preschool educators are expected to do more than in the past. New methods of accountability need to be created to ensure programs can improve. However, the current system of grading a center based off of scores of a kindergarten
assessment is not a productive way to measure the quality of a center. The fact that programs do not learn the scores until a year and a half later does not serve to support or improve a program. The practitioners stated that they wanted the scores sooner, but also stated knowing could help them correct what they were doing wrong. As Cassie said, “Wherever my weaknesses were, I would improve on myself. I don’t know what my weaknesses are. It could be in math because I am not doing enough math or it could be in phonological awareness. I may not be doing enough of that. I wish I knew.” I argue that the scores do not inform the providers about anything beyond a percentage number. How would they know what to change or how to improve without more information? It is this lack of meaningful accountability that is problematic. The assessment should be used as a tool for continuous improvement versus as a resource of who is effective and not effective.

In addition, programs do not learn which students in the program were able to pass or not pass the assessment. The perceptions of the administrators in this study viewed both the length of time to be graded and the concealed student results as a barrier to improvement. At this center it may be a simple process of elimination to determine the identities of the children who did not pass, but I am not confident that it matters. Knowing could aide the practitioner to feel better, because knowing could be a reassurance that “that child” was the one. The practitioners wanted to know this information, but it is unknown what they would do with that information to improve the program.

From the participants’ perspective this meant that they did not believe that the process of accountability was effective. The program improvement plan was a requirement the providers needed to complete to reflect on the educational level of the teachers, the type of training teachers received, the completion of the required Voluntary Prekindergarten training, the
curricula, the environmental assessment, child attendance, and family involvement activities. The program improvement plan requested the provider to inform the Early Learning Coalition on some of the major tensions identified within this study but did not include continuous progress strategies to alleviate the challenges with evidence-based approaches.

**Good Cause Exemption**

During the study, I built a relationship with the five participants and sought to understand the Voluntary Prekindergarten program from their lens. Although the participants did not experience the same tensions, they each faced their own stressors. The stressors derived from working in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program, and they had additional trials when placed on probation for not meeting the readiness score.

The program in this study had been on probation for two consecutive years for the summer Voluntary Prekindergarten program. They were placed on probation for a third year; however, the owner applied for a good cause exemption. In order for the good cause exemption to be approved the program must prove that children in the Voluntary Prekindergarten program made learning gains for the past three years. The owner was fortunate that Cassie had kept scrupulous records and had continued with portfolio assessment. I assume the goal of the good cause exemption is to assist providers in providing evidence of developmental growth in students. It is unknown how much growth is needed for approval. It is also unknown why developmental growth would not be important for all children. The learning gains of the students must be proportionate to the students ready for kindergarten, and a valid assessment must be part of the tool to indicate gains.

The program was granted the good cause exemption. According to Isay, the center was the first and only in the county to earn the exemption. Because of this, the program could remain...
on probation for another year and was able to keep their approved status to teach Voluntary Prekindergarten. This center, however, did not have to stay on probation. When the provider sold the center the new owner was able to begin as a brand new provider. The slate was wiped clean for this center with a new owner, a new director, and a new Voluntary Prekindergarten practitioner. Cassie and Sally were still there. Cassie’s class was the one that did not have 70 percent pass the assessment. Yet, Cassie was the participant with the highest degree, the most experience, and the one I felt had a good understanding of developmentally appropriate practices.

After examining the Voluntary Prekindergarten scores of the center I have some concerns that I hope future studies will address. In Chapter 2, Table 5 indicates the readiness rates since the provider in this study began to implement the program. There are marked differences with the number of students attending the program during the school year and in the summer. Each year, not all of the children were scored. The program was on probation for three consecutive years between 2009-2012.

In addition, the program only served six to eight children during each of those summers. One child missing in the scoring could drastically reduce the center’s readiness rate. According to the provider improvement plan, the owner assessed the classroom environment with the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale- Revised. Isay noted on the plan that the room scored a four and that the environment was not the reason for the low readiness rate. She argued, “We had children with developmental delays and did not have proper documentation/ or anyway to support that fact.” If providers are experiencing the status of probation because of a number of students not being assessed or because of children with developmental delays that have not been diagnosed yet are accounted for in the rate, this cannot be considered a reasonable way to hold a
program accountable. This could explain why Cassie’s class did not meet the readiness rate.

She shared she wanted to know what she was doing wrong. More research is necessary in the area to provide further explanation regarding these concerns.

**Disconnect between Training and Practice**

I learned that the practitioners’ practices were disconnected from what they learned in professional development. They either struggled with how to apply their knowledge, or they felt the program was now about teaching the children cognitive skills. This surprised me during the study. I felt uncomfortable thinking that their understanding of the mandate was to now teach the children. I wondered why they did not feel they were teaching children before. I also grappled with what their idea of teaching meant. To me it was connected to their lack of education for some, and for others it was no longer about how to teach the right way, but rather it was about reaching a mandated score. The idea that some practitioners could hold the perspective that a score is more important than how the score is achieved is frightening. I think of it as trying to teach the child to run when the child is still crawling. I believe little was understood about developmentally appropriate practices for them to believe that child-centric approaches did not align with teaching. The participants differed on their beliefs on what aspects of their professional training no longer applied to their practice. There was consensus that because they were now a Voluntary Prekindergarten program they must sway from how they were prepared as early childhood educators and now adopt practices extrapolated downward from elementary instruction to ensure that their students met the readiness score. More research is needed to assist in guiding new teachers to practice what they are taught and become more knowledgeable of why their approaches to teaching are important to children’s success.
The practitioners were able to implement the curriculum through direct instruction and note progress effectively during assessment. This is consistent with research suggesting cognitive gains are evident when direct instruction is applied. According to Ackerman and Barnett (2009), this type of teaching practice will not produce lasting gains. The fact that the practitioners used formal instruction aligns with research from Pianta et al. (2007) that teachers will revert to traditional approaches when pressured from accountability. They suggested that formalization of instruction would accompany accountability when the results are based on a test (Pianta et al., 2007). Research also supports the participants’ expressed need to know what was on the test so they could teach the children those skills. Pianta et al. (2007) believed teaching to a test is an outcome of high stakes accountability. As the curriculum became a shield for the participants, their instructional practices changed. All but Cassie and Isay appeared not to be stressed by the change in practice. This could be explained by Dewey’s theory that most believe there is only one way, traditional or progressive. Perhaps there is some reason why many believe it needs to be one way or another. A philosophy of teaching that restricts practice to a singular approach leaves little room for children to have their individual needs met.

**Time**

Each participant felt that children were rushed through the curriculum, especially during summer time, even though only two participants were responsible (Cassie Carnation and Isay Iris) for the summer Voluntary Prekindergarten program. The practitioners felt compelled to adhere to the schedule and fit all the information in the 3-hour time period or the 6-hour time period during the summer. According to Almon and Miller (2011), when children are hurried, children can experience stress. The participants voiced a shared concern over the stress of limited time, and indicated challenges with gaps in retention of learning as a result of summer
slide. This finding created a dilemma for me, because if teachers were following developmentally appropriate practices and the children were in a high quality environment, should they need more time? Or, what if the three hours were spent rushed and the activities were not age appropriate, then would extending the time be helpful? From this study, it appeared the classroom that had the most children, who had practitioners with less experience and less education, and who displayed limited knowledge regarding appropriate practices fared better than the other classroom. The issue that all of the participants shared regarding the amount of time children were in the program was real. The participants wanted to spend more time with children, and they wanted the gap of time from the end of the school year to the beginning of the school to be reduced. Their concerns do deserve more attention; however, if that time is not spent in high quality experiences it may not be a benefit to children. I grappled with suggesting more time was needed because it would be more important to ensure the time was valuable. I feel that if the accountability system could change perhaps then the issue of time could be addressed.

Summary

The premise that built the dream of the Florida State funded preschool was based on research that the preschool programs could produce significant positive impacts on children (Barnett, Lamy, & Jung, 2005). When Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V began, the intent was to increase school readiness by offering free programs to all children eligible to prekindergarten. According to Stone (2006), improving a child’s readiness level for kindergarten was believed to have a positive affect on closing the achievement gap. I developed the following recommendations to support practitioners and to support children in a hope that knowledge learned in professional development trainings will be applied and developmentally appropriate practices will be followed in all Voluntary Prekindergarten programs.
I was able to illuminate the participant’s perceptions and beliefs of both appropriate practice and how they described working in a school on probation. I found some commonalities and some distinct differences. I share my recommendations based on the findings to assist in the improvement of Voluntary Prekindergarten.

The field of early childhood has become more respected as science and research indicated that there are methods that can be implemented to expose children to skills that will be the foundation of future success. The practitioners all agreed that their education did not prepare them for Voluntary Prekindergarten. Those methods are much different from how the practitioners were taught as young children; sit still, raise your hands, memorize, and complete the worksheets. According to the Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standards for Four-Year-Olds, “work sheets, drills, or simply allowing children to play without teacher planning and reflection will not facilitate optimal progress for children” (p.13). According to social constructivist theory, learning is linked to prior knowledge (Dewey, 1938/1998). However, what happens when that prior knowledge cannot be forgotten? There must be a reason why some teachers revert back to how they were taught and why others do not and follow new methods. It is critical to link learn more and effectuate progressive methods into teaching training. Methods need to be created that will bring stronger training to practice outcomes to prevent this reversion.

Assessment and accountability are critical for planning, reflecting, and evaluating. They can lead to higher outcomes and more responsive teaching. These positives are not a part of the system in place guiding Voluntary Prekindergarten. Currently approved Voluntary Prekindergarten providers are required to: (a) ensure the program applies developmentally appropriate practices, (b) ensure children are exposed to early literacy, (c) ensure children are prepared for kindergarten, (d) ensure Voluntary Prekindergarten performance standards are the
foundation for strengthening the progress of children, and (e) ensure children enter kindergarten able to pass the statewide kindergarten screening (Florida House of Representative, 2011). Yet, the programs are only monitored on the outcomes of the statewide kindergarten screening.

Kirp (2009) stated that there are more early childhood programs that provide low to mediocre care than high quality. The chance that many children in Florida program may not experience high quality care is a reason that changes are needed in how programs are held accountable. Moreover, according to Stipek (2006), leaders need to reconsider high stakes accountability. Children need experience and exposure to high-level critical problem solving to expand their cognitive abilities and to keep the excitement and curiosity of learning throughout their primary years (Stipek, 2006).

Additionally, the findings denoted further studies are necessary to assist practitioners to understand the importance of teaching children at where they are developmentally and just beyond. The participants’ in this study practiced getting the group ready for kindergarten versus learning where they are and taking them to the next level. The belief that “they will have to do this is kindergarten” (homework, flashcards, etc.) was a common theme for these participants and an excuse of why children needed to “do this” in prekindergarten. From a social constructivist lens meeting children where they are and then intentionally providing experiences for them to move to the next level is an intricate part of teaching. I feel more research is needed to learn if this was the intent and more training is needed or if they feel pressured to teach this as a result of accountability.

A major indication of this study is the need for more advocacy for early childhood. Basing the quality of a center from the outcomes of an assessment is not a reasonable way to judge a preschool. I believe that some people both in the field and out of the field are not
knowledgeable about the importance of how children learn. They often align learning to how they were schooled; behind desks, teacher as the giver of knowledge, and homework. Four year olds can learn in that manner, but research indicates that learning in that manner will not be the most beneficial to children. This manner of teaching is often absent of hands-on activities for children to make meaning from the lesson. According to Dewey (1938/1998), children need opportunities to explore and investigate while linking new learning to previous knowledge. According to social constructivism theory, when a child learns in this manner they will be more likely to retain and apply the new information. However, a common misconception is when children learn via social constructivism, time looks wasted because it is disguised in the form of play or inquiry. What is needed is for the public and for policy makers to become more informed on how young children should learn. Without this information, this contention will reoccur, and young children will continue to be taught in manners that do not link to appropriate practices. The worst-case scenario is that this push down of academics and primary school expectations will continue and eventually affect children at younger and younger ages.

In addition, I would also suggest more advocacy efforts that support a better balance in the accountability section of the mandate. I would encourage more opportunities for practitioners, teachers, and administrators to be heard. It is important to learn about Voluntary Prekindergarten and if it is truly benefiting the child. By examining this program that has a potential to positively affect children and society the children attending Voluntary Prekindergarten in the future will benefit from all of its advantages.

Conclusion

In summary, the findings have illuminated the perceptions and beliefs of five participants in a Voluntary Prekindergarten program on probation. I have concluded that the system of both
assessment and accountability created in the mandate can improve. There have been challenges in the field with practitioners struggling to apply new training methods in the classroom. There have been researchers that have indicated teachers will teach to a test under the pressure of high stakes accountability. There has been research noting that classroom accountability should not be the result of one test given to children. However, this study also offered insight on the stress that can be felt in an early childhood classroom that is graded from a system of high stakes accountability. It also provided insight to the differences in the perspectives and beliefs on effective teaching practices in just one program. Moreover, it revealed information on the need for practitioners to use a curriculum as a guide versus a prescriptive approach to instruction. The intent of my research was not to critique the participants about how they believe children should be taught but to enlighten me to share their realities to better understand a program.

This particular program faced a common dilemma--probation. However, only one practitioner experienced embarrassment and feelings of failure. Each of the participant’s perceptions were real and were created by their own experiences and opportunities. Three out of the five participants resigned from the center. Two of those left the field (although before this study was published Isay was back as a classroom teacher). Only one of them resigned because of her belief that the system was no longer what was best for children.

Since each child deserves to have a high quality preschool education, changes need to be made to ensure accountability is measuring the entire program. The current system is just a snapshot of one piece of a complex structure. I am grateful that attention is on young children. I hope that in the future attention can be placed on how they learn.
Afterthoughts

The study provides an ending to my journey to earn my doctorate but a beginning to advocating for the potential benefits that can come from Voluntary Prekindergarten. I hope that this study instigates further discourse on improvements to how the programs are monitored so that positive change can emerge.

This journey is a personal adventure assisting me in becoming aware of my strengths and my weaknesses. I have changed in many ways in that I have grown as a teacher, trainer, and have a much stronger voice for children. That voice will be heard each time I speak of children and preschool programs.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A: Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V

1002.53 Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program; eligibility and enrollment.—

(1) The Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program is created and shall be organized, designed, and delivered in accordance with s. 1(b) and (c), Art. IX of the State Constitution.

(2) Each child who resides in this state who will have attained the age of 4 years on or before September 1 of the school year is eligible for the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program during that school year. The child remains eligible until the beginning of the school year for which the child is eligible for admission to kindergarten in a public school under s. 1003.21(1)(a)2. or until the child is admitted to kindergarten, whichever occurs first.

(3) The parent of each child eligible under subsection (2) may enroll the child in one of the following programs:

(a) A school-year prekindergarten program delivered by a private prekindergarten provider under s. 1002.55;

(b) A summer prekindergarten program delivered by a public school or private prekindergarten provider under s. 1002.61;

(c) A school-year prekindergarten program delivered by a public school; or

(d) A specialized instructional services program for children who have disabilities, if the child has been evaluated and determined as eligible, has a current individual educational plan developed by the local school board, and is eligible for the program under s. 1002.66.
Appendix A (continued)

Except as provided in s. 1002.71(4), a child may not enroll in more than one of these programs.

(4)(a) Each parent enrolling a child in the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program must complete and submit an application to the early learning coalition through the single point of entry established under s. 1002.82.

(b) The application must be submitted on forms prescribed by the Office of Early Learning and must be accompanied by a certified copy of the child’s birth certificate. The forms must include a certification, in substantially the form provided in s. 1002.71(6)(b)2., that the parent chooses the private prekindergarten provider or public school in accordance with this section and directs that payments for the program be made to the provider or school. The Office of Early Learning may authorize alternative methods for submitting proof of the child’s age in lieu of a certified copy of the child’s birth certificate.

(c) Each early learning coalition shall coordinate with each of the school districts within the coalition’s county or multicounty region in the development of procedures for enrolling children in prekindergarten programs delivered by public schools.

(5) The early learning coalition shall provide each parent enrolling a child in the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program with a profile of every private prekindergarten provider and public school delivering the program within the county where the child is being enrolled. The profiles shall be provided to parents in a format prescribed by the Office of Early Learning. The profiles must include, at a minimum, the following information about each provider and school:

(a) The provider’s or school’s services, curriculum, instructor credentials, and instructor-to-student ratio; and
Appendix A (continued)

(b) The provider’s or school’s kindergarten readiness rate calculated in accordance with s. 1002.69, based upon the most recent available results of the statewide kindergarten screening.

(6)(a) A parent may enroll his or her child with any private prekindergarten provider that is eligible to deliver the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program under this part; however, the provider may determine whether to admit any child. An early learning coalition may not limit the number of students admitted by any private prekindergarten provider for enrollment in the program. However, this paragraph does not authorize an early learning coalition to allow a provider to exceed any staff-to-children ratio, square footage per child, or other requirement imposed under ss. 402.301-402.319 as a result of admissions in the prekindergarten program.

(b) A parent may enroll his or her child with any public school within the school district which is eligible to deliver the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program under this part, subject to available space. Each school district may limit the number of students admitted by any public school for enrollment in the school-year program; however, the school district must provide for the admission of every eligible child within the district whose parent enrolls the child in a summer prekindergarten program delivered by a public school under s. 1002.61.

(c) Each private prekindergarten provider and public school must comply with the antidiscrimination requirements of 42 U.S.C. s. 2000d, regardless of whether the provider or school receives federal financial assistance. A private prekindergarten provider or public school may not discriminate against a parent or child, including the refusal to admit a child for enrollment in the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program, in violation of these antidiscrimination requirements.
Appendix A (continued)

**History.**—s. 1, ch. 2004-484; s. 4, ch. 2009-3; s. 26, ch. 2010-210; s. 3, ch. 2010-227; s. 449, ch. 2011-142; s. 3, ch. 2013-252.

**Title 48-Chapter 1002-Part V Taken from**

Appendix B: Reflective Journal Entry- Thoughts on Training

May 12, 2013

…I thought this would be powerful and participants would connect to this lesson. As I read the previous excerpt I tried to read with passion. My goal was to touch on the emotions of the participants a this training created to enhance their ability to plan, implement, and assess professional development trainings.

I gave the participants a few minutes to silently reflect on their thoughts and feelings about the reading. The participants reacted as I predicted. Some of them stated, “The child feels helpless and that she doesn’t care”, “The teacher is uncaring and distant”, “The child is mistaken, sad, and misunderstood”, and “The teacher is a witch”. These are just a few of the reflections. I am not sure why I took a different approach to the discussion than the curriculum suggested but I did.

I said, “I want to think a little outside of the box. Think about the teacher. Why would she react in this manner? What are the variables that we do not know about? Is there a chance that a higher power such as a Principal demanded that every child learns the letter W by a certain time? What if her pay or her job relied on how many children know the alphabet? What is she had an additional 29 children in her class? What about how she was trained?” I saw several mouths drop when I began to defend the teacher’s unacceptable practices. I brought it back to the purpose of the activity-reflection. How many times have we said something inappropriate and wished we could take it back? How many times have we known we could have done something differently?
Appendix C: Interview Consent

Consent for Participation in Interview Research

Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study

IRB Study # Pro00013079

I (Susan Weber) would like to invite you to participate in a study entitled *Perceptions of Practitioners in a Voluntary Prekindergarten Program on Probation*. I am conducting this study as part of a graduate condition for the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of South Florida. This study will complete the dissertation requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree. If you decide to participate in this study I encourage you to contact me anytime at sebrowe2@usf.edu or 727-688-3069. Dr. Ilene Berson is serving as my Major Professor and is the supervisor to this study. You may also contact her at iberson@usf.edu or 813-974-7698.

The purpose of the study is to describe and to explain your views about Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK). It is known some children in your program are struggling with passing the kindergarten-screening tool reducing your VPK score. The tension of why children are not successful on the kindergarten entrance screening and how you strive to meet requirements is critical. Your perspectives can clarify information that may help others understand the realities of what it takes to teach children from diverse backgrounds and varying developmental levels. It is hopeful that as part of this research, you will reflect and learn more about your teaching practices and your program. Additionally, your story will enhance my understanding of why your program is on probation and how you work to meet the VPK accountability requirement. This
Appendix C (continued)

study will be shared with my Dissertation Committee, the USF Internal Review Board, and possibly used for presentations and publications.

You are being asked to volunteer to participate in the study because you have involvement with VPK and work towards improving your readiness score. You have unique knowledge of the benefits and challenges that you, your children, and others in your program face on a daily basis. Your stories and experiences are important for me to understand, so I can share them with others. The study may assist in guiding professional development and making decisions for future policy regarding the preschool accountability system.

Participation involves minor inconveniences, as you will need to agree that I interview you at least three times for approximately 60 minutes in the summer and fall of 2013. You will also be asked to read the transcriptions created from the interviews to assist in accuracy of information within one week of receiving them. I will ask you for permission to record the interviews with a Zoom H1 Handy audio recorder. The interviews will take place at a location of your choice and at a time of your convenience. If you are able, please provide me a current résumés to allow me to learn more about your background, experience, and education.

I will implement all reasonable measures to ensure the information remains as confidential as possible. The digital data will be stored on a password protected hardware device. A locked box will store documentation of the data at my office. This signed consent form is the only document including your name. The data will be stored for a minimal of three years. Pseudonyms will be used on all notes, transcriptions, and in any possible future publications.
Appendix C (continued)

I plan to apply the data to complete a research dissertation, to write articles for publication, and to present in workshops. I anticipate sending you a two-page summary of the results in a sealed envelope via your participating school during the Summer of 2014.

Take your time to make your decision. I encourage you to talk with your family, friends, and professional peers before you decide to take part in this research study.

This study is considered minimal risk, meaning there are no additional risks other than what you would face on a normal day. Contact me as soon as possible if you wish to withdrawal from this study. Your information will not become a source of data if you choose to withdrawal from the study.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, general questions, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638.

Consent to Take Part in this Research Study

Your signature below indicates your agreement to participate in this study. Your signature also indicates you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and you have had the researcher has had opportunity to answer your questions.

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and the researcher will take a copy

__________________________  ______________________
Signature of Person Taking Part in StudyDate

____________________________
Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study
Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I hereby certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he/she understands:

- What the study is about;
- What procedures will be used;
- What the potential benefits might be; and
- What the known risks might be.

I can confirm this research subject speaks the language used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in the appropriate language. Additionally, this subject reads well enough to understand this document or, if not, this person is able to hear and understand when the form is read to him or her. This subject does not have a medical/psychological problem that would compromise comprehension and therefore makes it hard to understand what is being explained and can, therefore, give legally effective informed consent. This subject is not under any type of anesthesia or analgesic that may cloud their judgment or make it hard to understand what is being explained and, therefore, can be considered competent to give informed consent.

____________________________________                           __________________
Signature of Primary Researcher                                      Date
Appendix D: Interview Protocol

The main questions I plan to ask include:

Why did you decide to be a preschool practitioner?

Describe a typical day when you did not teach Voluntary Prekindergarten.

When you first became aware of Voluntary Prekindergarten what were your thoughts?

How did you prepare to become a Voluntary Prekindergarten teacher/director?

Describe what you looked forward to in teaching Voluntary Prekindergarten.

Describe any fears you had about implementing Voluntary Prekindergarten.

Describe a typical day in a Voluntary Prekindergarten room.

Describe your schedule.

Tell me how your teaching strategies have changed because of Voluntary Prekindergarten.

Describe your first experience in preschool (how long, what ages, etc.).

How you currently feel about Voluntary Prekindergarten?

Describe the benefits Voluntary Prekindergarten has for children and families.

Describe the challenges Voluntary Prekindergarten has for children and families.

Tell me why you think your program is on probation.

Describe your classroom when the children are in “extended” time.

Is there anything you would like to share with me?
Appendix E: Readiness Rate for Center

Taken directly from https://vpk.fldoe.org/InfoPages/ReportCriteria.aspx

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children Served</th>
<th>Children Meeting Substantial Completion</th>
<th>Children Screened on Both Measure</th>
<th>Children in Readiness Rate Calculation</th>
<th>Percent of Children in Readiness Rate Calculation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

VPK Readiness Rate Calculation Based on ECHOS™ and FAIR

**Children Ready for Kindergarten:**
ECHOS™: Demonstrating or Emerging Progressing and
FAIR: Probability of Reading Success: At or Above 67 Percent with Substantial Completion.

**Children In Readiness Rate Calculation:**
The number of children substantially completing and Screened on Both Measures.

**Percent of Children Ready for Kindergarten:**
The number of Children Ready for Kindergarten divided by the number of Children In Readiness Rate Calculation.

* No data are displayed when there are less than 10 children

For more information, contact Florida Department of Education/Florida Office of Early Learning, by calling (850) 245-0445 or 1-866-447-1159 or via e-mail at VPKQuestions@ole.mryflorida.com
Appendix F: Provider Improvement Plan

Provider Agreement

I hereby acknowledge that the center noted above has been identified as a VPK Low Performing Provider based on the 2011-12 VPK Provider Kindergarten Readiness Rate.

Provider Acknowledgment Information

1. List the total number of your VPK instructors who are qualified to teach VPK. Do not count teachers or aides who do not have a CDA or degree. Of the total, indicate the highest corresponding levels of education for each, as they pertain to their qualification to teach VPK. (For example, an instructor with a PGFPC and a Ph.D. in English would be counted as a CDA (PGFPC) Each instructor should only correspond to one education level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Year 2011-12</th>
<th>Total # of Instructors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education Level</td>
<td># of Instructors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Development Associate (CDA) Florida Child Care Professional Credential (PGFPC) formerly (CDME)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Year 2012-13</th>
<th>Total # of Instructors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education Level</td>
<td># of Instructors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Development Associate (CDA) Florida Child Care Professional Credential (PGFPC) formerly (CDME)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Indicate the number of VPK classrooms in which the primary language of instruction is one of the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language of Instruction</th>
<th># of Classrooms</th>
<th># of Classrooms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Of your total number of VPK instructors, how many completed the following training?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training</th>
<th>Program Year 2011-12</th>
<th>Total # of Instructors: 3</th>
<th>Program Year 2012-13</th>
<th>Total # of Instructors: 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VPK Education Standards Training</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare 10-Hour DOE Emergent Literacy Training</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrating the Standards: Phonological Awareness</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergent Literacy in the VPK Classroom</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Learners in the VPK Classroom</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. What curricula was implemented in your VPK program? (check all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curriculum</th>
<th>Program Year 2011-12</th>
<th>Program Year 2012-13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creative Curriculum</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition, Health &amp; Safety</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: Start to Write</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Are the children in your VPK program administered child assessments? If yes, which ones? (check all that apply)

Appendix F (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Program Year 2011-12</th>
<th>Program Year 2012-13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administered?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: VPK Assessment</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Are the children in your VPK program administered developmental screenings? If yes, which ones? (Check all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Program Year 2011-12</th>
<th>Program Year 2012-13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administered?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages and Stages Questionnaire</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: GCLD</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Have any of your VPK classrooms had an independent assessment administered within the last year? If yes, what screenings were used? (check all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Program Year 2011-12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administered?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Study for Accreditation</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. Have you taken any steps to increase the percentage of students attending at least 70% of your program? (check all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Program Year 2011-12</th>
<th>Program Year 2012-13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussed with each parent, the center's attendance policy and the impact of attendance on child learning</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewed individual child's attendance records to identify patterns of non-attendance and their causes, as appropriate</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussed with individual parents, causes for non-attendance and options for improvement</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewed center's written attendance policy and revised, if appropriate</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: Made phonically when needed</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9. Have you taken any steps to increase family involvement in your program?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Program Year 2011-12</th>
<th>Program Year 2012-13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provided opportunities to meet with parents during regularizer process</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled periodic parent meetings and/or workshops</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sent materials home to parents related to center activities, upcoming events, etc.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided opportunities to meet with parents individually to discuss their child's progress</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Self-Assessment Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Assessment Instrument</th>
<th>Targeted Completion Date (MM/DD/YYYY)</th>
<th>Completed?</th>
<th>Completion Date (MM/DD/YYYY)</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS-R)</td>
<td>05/27/2011</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>07/15/2011</td>
<td>Room scored a four overall. The environment was not the issue. We had children with developmental delays and did not have proper documentation of any kind.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

https://talk.mdb.org/Provider2011-2/PrintableImprovementPlan.aspx
Appendix F (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Assessment Instrument</th>
<th>Targeted Completion Date (MM/DD/YYYY)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Study for Accreditation</td>
<td>08/17/2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are no Self-Assessment instruments to display.

Target Areas Information [What are Target Areas?]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target Area</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Completion Date (MM/DD/YYYY)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developmentally Appropriate Curricula</td>
<td>Other 2013 Approved Curriculum : Looking to purchase Starfall if approved.</td>
<td>06/10/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-Emotional Interactions Among Prekindergarten Instructors and Children</td>
<td>Provide planning time for instructors. Train staff in English as second language learners.</td>
<td>06/10/2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Provider Comments, if any:
None.

Improvement Plan Review

For Coalition Use Only

Coalition Review:
Coalition Review Date:
Coalition Comments:
Appendix G: Reflective Journal Entry- Before an Interview

July 16, 2013

While creating the transcripts I seem to be talking about training. How they were trained. How that training aligns with what is expected of them in VPK. The challenge teacher’s find is in dealing with the behavior. The owner described to me when the coach was there to help guide her staff to better handle behaviors a child told the coach to “f” off. She said the coach was dumbfounded about how to handle it. The director described this same situation without me even mentioning it. She described it with a matter of fact attitude. She said that she tells the teacher what to say when they teacher asks for help or seems like they need help. She says what she would do and say to the child. She says the child still continues to do it the next day and the day after that it feels a little hopeless.
Appendix H: Example of a Transcript with Notes

Owner- 2 interview
R- Researcher
P-Participant

FLKRS= The Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener
ECOS= Early Childhood Observation System
ITERS= Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale
ECERS=Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale
LAUNCH=Linking Actions with Unmet Needs in Children’s Health
ASQ= Ages and Stages Questionnaire

R        So you read and made a few corrections because we didn’t have everything recorded.

A 2PO It was mostly just grammatical like me fixing grammatical that’s funny

(laughter). One of the answers I just clarified what I meant by it.

R        The subsidy answer was a big one.

B 2P0   Yes.

R        What I am seeing is a concern about assessments, training, and one of the things

is homework. Let’s talk about training first. All of them are pretty much in consensus that the

professional development training that they received for the CDA or Bachelors did not train them

for the VPK experience. What do you think about that?
Appendix H (continued)

C 2PO I would agree with that. There needs to be that hands on with this field. Nothing can prepare you for a child throwing shoes at you except a child throwing shoes at you (laughter). And that is just fact: there is nothing in the textbook that tells you what to do (laughter). Get ready. Professional development did not prepare for VPK. C2PO

R But it is really not just behavior is it?

D 2PO No it is also development. There is such a range at that age in preschool. A child Stress on teacher and owner- discipline and developmental ranges D 2PO at 12 months, well one child is developmentally right on schedule, another one could be at 24 months and another one is at 8 or 9 months. You deal with such a variety of levels and groupings. The professional development, I really feel like a lot of my teachers are pretty seasoned and it is pretty basic, what is available to them. Maybe if they got on-line they might find some more in depth but what is available in the county, it doesn’t seem to meet what they need. Even now they are doing the LAUNCH project. The first person that came in, I don’t know if _____________ (director) told you, one of the kids told her to “F” off. After _____________ (director) calmed her down and all of that was taken care of she was in the office and _________________ (director) asked what do you do in that situation? She said I don’t know, I have never had that happen (laughter). The challenges we face now are not the challenges directors faced twenty or thirty years ago. It definitely has changed.

R Is there anything else about training that you think that they need?

E 2PO That they need? (pause) It is hard to pick because some have strengths in areas Description of training that is needed E 2PO and not enough in others. Do you mean is there something in the professional development that is lacking? I would say nutrition is one. I don’t
Appendix H (continued)

see a lot for that. Like I said current challenging behaviors. One of the best trainings I ever did was the Project Challenge training probably twenty years ago, which really leant teachers to understand why children that have challenging behaviors do what they do. It made me a much more compassionate and understanding of those behaviors. That might be something to look at.

R   I thought that was something LAUNCH was going to do?

F 2PO I don’t know they just started it maybe it will. I hope so.

R   In the classroom I noticed that there is a push for language and literacy. That is one of the things on the FLKRS the phonological awareness is what they are not doing good at. Well the kids are not doing good at. Do you remember being trained in how to do those letter sounds and compound words?

G 2PO One of the trainings I did go to with ___________ (trainer) was exactly that. She gave some examples of pictures on sticks and putting words together. So she did do some of that yes.

R   Did you do that after you were on probation?

H 2PO Yes, that was last year maybe. The thing about that was is we didn’t even know that was something the children even really needed to know until after the fact. Stress on owner- lack of information on what children were tested on

R   Why do you think that is?

I 2PO Lack of information. It filters out very very slowly. They won’t allow us to see the test to know or even an example of the test because they don’t want us to teach to the test. That leaves us guessing.

R   Have you seen the example on line?

J 2PO No.
Appendix I: Example of Coding and Theme Selection

COMMON THEMES
*Among practitioners in a VPK program on probation, what are their beliefs and perceptions about effective and appropriate early childhood education?
   The owner, the director, and VPK 2 and 3 shared their beliefs
*In what ways does probation influence practitioners’ perceptions and beliefs about early childhood education?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>VPK 1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>VPK 2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>VPK 3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold</td>
<td>School Director</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

STRESS ON OWNER/DIRECTOR
Stress on administration- no payment FF P3
Stress on director- working with multiple regulators A SD
Stress on director- regulatory P SD
Stress on directors- staff and parents JJJ SD
Stress on director- thick description KKK SD
Curriculum 3000 to 4000 dollars OOO SD
Stress on director- describes fall year of low scores. VVV SD
Stress of director - Losing teachers due to lack of pay BBBB SD
Stress on owner- lack of support from ELC C PO
Stress on owner- lack of information K PO
Stress on owner – lack of information BB PO
Stress on owner- lack of information on what children were tested on H 2PO
Stress on owner- lack of choices and options for training on curriculum M 2PO
Stress on director- children with special needs J1 *SD (VPK 2-2)
Appendix I (continued)

Stress on teacher and owner - discipline and developmental ranges D 2PO
Stress on owner - lack of information on what children were tested on H 2PO
Stress on owner - lack of choices and options for training on curriculum M 2PO

STRESS ON TEACHERS

Not enough time in VPK

Did not plan to teach VPK

Discipline

Small groups

Distractions during assessing

Staff turn over

No help from parents

Stress on teacher – gap of time CCC P2
1st interview shows no concern for scores. TT P2
Stress on teacher-children never been to school B P3

Stress on teacher-children not being counted C P3

Stress on teacher-Children with disabilities C P3

Stress on teacher-Parents not working with child C P3

Stress on teacher-Not enough time with children F P3

Stress on teacher – no time to create lesson plans G P3

Stress on Teacher- VPK in summer OO P3
Stress on teacher- pressure to teach same amount MM P3
Teacher stressed because of low score. SS P3
Teacher stressed – child with disability SS P3
Stress on teachers- child discipline. KKK P3
Stress on teacher- letters NNN P3
Stress on teacher- GAP of time H PO
Stress on teacher- more in summer than school year.
Stress on teachers- discipline T 2P
Appendix I (continued)

Stress on teachers—discipline U 2P
Stress on teachers—thick description of a challenge with discipline who had to be expelled W 2P
Stress on teacher-discipline FF 2P
Stress on teacher—Number of children at 22. OO2P
Stress on teacher—more time with children QQ 2P
Stress on teacher—lack of one on one time RR 2P
Stress on teacher—lack of communication from management. Thick description. VV 2P
Stress on teacher—assessment process JJJJ 2P

Stress on teacher—children not meeting assessment YYY 2P
Stress on teachers—challenge with phonemes ZZ 2P2

Stress on teacher—lack of time BB 2P3
Stress on teacher—Child makes progress but not enough to pass K test CC 2P3
Stress on teacher—Because of “POP” teachers must assess three times a year—even in summer CC 2P3
Stress on teacher—Gap of time—description QQ 2P3

Teacher concern they do not know which children do not score well RR 2P3
Stress on teacher—not passing Thick description —of not passing would like to know how to improve SS 2P3
Stress on teacher—not knowing what is on test. R 2P3

Stress on teacher—discipline—thick description of the need to expel a child IIII 2P3
Stress on teacher—Teacher described another child who was expelled LLLL 2P3—MMMM 2P3

Stress on teacher—Thick description of how teacher deals with stress on children OOOO 2P3

More stress in summer than school year SSSS 2P3

Stress on teacher— low scores EEE 3P
Stress on teacher—not enough time w child EEE 3P
Appendix I (continued)

* The letters described to me where to find what the participant said in the transcription. The first number tells me what interview it was. The P followed by the number tells me what participant it was.
Appendix J: Good Cause Exemption Rule

Taken from https://www.fldoe.org/board/meetings/2012_07_17/gce.pdf

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION
Action Item
February 15, 2011

SUBJECT: Approval of New Rule 6A-1.099824, Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) Low Performing Provider Good Cause Exemption

PROPOSED BOARD ACTION
For Approval

AUTHORITY FOR STATE BOARD ACTION
Section 1002.69, Florida Statutes

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
This rule establishes the criteria for granting VPK Good Cause Exemptions. Pursuant to Section 1002.69, Florida Statutes, the State Board of Education, upon request of a private prekindergarten provider or public school that remains on probation for two (2) consecutive years or more and subsequently fails to meet the minimum rate adopted under Section1002.69(6)(a), Florida Statutes, and for good cause shown, may grant to the provider or school an exemption from being determined ineligible to deliver the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program and receive state funds for the program.

Supporting Documentation Included: Proposed Rule 6A-1.099824, Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) Low Performing Provider Good Cause Exemption, Form VPK-GCE-01, VPK Good Cause Exemption Data Form, and Form VPK-GCE-02, VPK Good Cause Exemption Application Form

Facilitator/Presentor: Dr. Frances Haithcock, Chancellor, PreK-12 Public Schools
Appendix J (continued)

6A-1.099824 Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) Low Performing Provider Good Cause Exemption.

Pursuant to Section 1002.69, F.S., the State Board of Education, upon request of a private prekindergarten provider or public school that remains on probation for two (2) consecutive years or more and subsequently fails to meet the minimum rate adopted under Section 1002.69(6)(a), F.S., and for good cause shown may grant to the provider or school an exemption from being determined ineligible to deliver the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program and receive state funds for the program.

(1) Criteria for Granting Good Cause Exemptions. Each of the following criteria must be met to be granted a good cause exemption:

(a) Learning Gains. The private prekindergarten provider or public school must demonstrate learning gains on a standardized assessment that tracks the achievement and progress over time of the children having completed the provider’s VPK program. The ratio of students making learning gains to the total number of students assessed must be proportional to the ratio of students ready for kindergarten reflected in the current year's readiness rate. The documentation of learning gains shall meet the following criteria:

1. Providers may utilize an assessment from a list of Department-approved assessments which may be accessed on the Department’s website at https://vpk.fldoe.org/Downloads/ProviderAcknowledgement.pdf. A provider using an assessment which does not appear on the list of approved assessments must include technical documentation supporting the standardized assessment as evidence of the reliability standard of the assessment and must address VPK standards incorporated in Rule 6A-1.099823, F.A.C., not
Appendix J (continued)

limited to, but including emergent literacy. The standardized assessment must have an internal consistency reliability coefficient of 0.70 or greater as documented in the publisher’s technical manual.

2. Testing procedures for each assessment shall be performed according to the publisher’s guidelines and assessment results shall be tabulated according to the publisher’s guidelines. The provider shall take appropriate measures to ensure the integrity of the testing process. The resulting data from the standardized assessment must be presented in a manner that is clear, concise and easily allows the reviewers to determine the achievement and progress made by the children who completed the VPK program. Applicant must submit a summary of the data using the Department’s VPK Good Cause Exemption Data Form VPK-GCE-01,(http://www.flrules.org/Gateway/reference.asp?No=Ref-00031) March 2011, which is incorporated by reference herein.

3. At a minimum, data must be provided for all years following the third year of a provider having been designated a low performing provider. Additional data may be included. Assessment results for all program completers who were assessed shall be included in the documentation provided. An explanation shall be included for any program completers who were not assessed.

4. The results of the assessment shall demonstrate substantial and appropriate learning gains by program completers. Learning gains are substantial and appropriate if the ratio of students making learning gains to the total number of students assessed is proportional to the ratio of students ready for kindergarten reflected in the current year’s readiness rate.
Appendix J (continued)

(b) Student Population. The private prekindergarten provider or public school must have served at least twice the statewide percentage of children with disabilities as defined in Section 1003.01(3)(a), F.S., or children identified as limited English proficient as defined in Section 1003.56, F.S.

(c) Health and Safety Requirements. Pursuant to Section 1002.69(7)(d), F.S., a good cause exemption may not be granted to any private prekindergarten provider that has any Class I violations or two or more Class II violations within the 2 years preceding the provider’s or school’s application for the exemption. For purposes of this rule, Class I violations and Class II violations have the same meaning as provided in Section 402.281(3), F.S. The good cause exemption application must include copies of all Department of Children and Families Childcare Inspection Checklists for all inspections performed by the Department of Children and Families under authority of Sections 402.301-402.319, F.S., during the two-year time period prior to application for good cause exemption.

(d) Individual Circumstances. Extraordinary or unique circumstances under which the provider should be allowed to continue to deliver the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program after having been designated as low performing for at least four (4) consecutive years.

(e) Adherence to an approved provider improvement plan under Section 1002.67(3)(c), F.S., following all steps towards improvement specified in the plan.

(2) Calculation of Percentages:

(a) The statewide percentage of kindergarten children with disabilities or limited English proficient students shall be calculated based on the October FTE enrollment survey.
Appendix J (continued)

(b) A provider’s percentage of children with disabilities shall be calculated based on the number of children with disabilities who were included in the provider’s last readiness rate divided by the total number of students included in the provider’s last readiness rate.

(c) A provider’s percentage of limited English proficient students shall be calculated based on the number of limited English proficient students who were included in the provider’s last readiness rate divided by the total number of students included in the provider’s last readiness rate.

(3) Application. A provider seeking a good cause exemption shall complete the Department’s VPK Good Cause Exemption Application Form VPK-GCE-02, (http://www.flrules.org/Gateway/reference.asp?No=Ref-00032) March 2011, which is incorporated by reference herein. The submission of an application for a good cause exemption must adhere to the following:

(a) In addition to the application form, the provider must submit with the application supporting documentation meeting the criteria described in subsection (1) of this rule. The provider may submit additional documentation in support of its application.

(b) A fourth-year low performing provider may submit a good cause exemption application at any time after the release of the annual preliminary VPK Readiness Rates. Supporting documentation submitted with the application must include a review of adherence to the provider improvement plan, fidelity of implementation of the required curriculum pursuant to Section 1006.27(3)2, Florida Statutes, and feedback from the previous year Department’s site visits. The good cause exemption application and all supporting documentation must be received by the Department no later than fourteen (14) days after the timely filed provider
Appendix J (continued)

acknowledgment of being a low-performing provider submitted pursuant to Rule 6A-1.099821, F.A.C.

(c) The Department may grant an extension of time for submitting the good cause exemption application or supporting documentation for good cause shown. Good cause includes unavoidable circumstances such as illness or natural disaster, or excusable neglect.

(4) Department Review and Recommendation.

(a) Eligibility. The Department shall review each application for a good cause exemption to verify that the provider is eligible to apply. The Department shall deny any application that is submitted by a provider who does not meet the criteria described in paragraph (1)(b) or (1)(c) of this rule, without further review.

(b) The Department will review each application for a good cause exemption filed by an eligible provider, and shall make a recommendation to the State Board of Education as to whether or not to grant the good cause exemption to the provider. The Department may include outside consultants in the review process. The Department may request additional information from providers to supplement provider applications and may consider additional relevant documentation gathered or received by the Department from any source. The Department shall allow the provider an opportunity to rebut any evidence considered that was not submitted by the provider.

(c) The Department will consider each application individually and shall include in its recommendation and report:

1. Whether the provider met the criteria described in subsection (1) of this rule;
2. Whether the provider was previously granted a good cause exemption;
Appendix J (continued)

3. The readiness rates of other providers in comparable circumstances, if such information is available and relevant;

4. Whether the circumstances warrant granting the request for a good cause exemption; and

5. Whether any conditions should be imposed upon the grant of a good cause exemption.

Each conclusion or recommendation shall be accompanied by an explanation in the report.

(d) 1. The Department shall issue a preliminary recommendation and report and provide a copy of it to the provider.

2. The provider may submit a written response to the Department’s preliminary recommendation and report within fourteen (14) days of receipt.

3. The Department shall consider any timely response and revise the recommendation and report, if appropriate.

(5) State Board of Education Determination.

(a) The Department will make its final recommendation to the State Board of Education by forwarding a final recommendation and report to the State Board of Education regarding each application submitted. A copy of the final recommendation and report will be provided to the applicant.

(b) The Department will provide to the State Board of Education copies of the following documents:

1. The provider’s good cause application, with supporting documents;

2. Additional documentation considered by the Department in making its recommendation;
Appendix J (continued)

3. The Department’s preliminary recommendation and report;

4. The provider’s response to the preliminary recommendation and report, if one was submitted; and

5. The Department’s final recommendation and report.

(c) The State Board of Education may consider a provider’s application based on the written submissions alone or may, in its discretion, allow oral argument before the Board.

(d) The State Board of Education shall grant or deny each application. The State Board of Education may conditionally grant an application if, but for the proposed condition(s), the application would be denied.

(e) The Department shall notify the Agency for Workforce Innovation of all good cause exemptions granted by the State Board of Education. Any provider granted a good cause exemption shall continue to implement its improvement plan and continue the corrective actions required under Section 1002.67(3)(c)2., F.S. Any exemption granted by the State Board of Education is valid for one (1) year and may be renewed through the same application process.

(f) The Department will provide onsite review of adherence to the curriculum as approved in the provider improvement plan pursuant to Section 1002.67(3)(c), F.S., implementation of the VPK standards and research based instructional practices, and ensure that ongoing student progress monitoring is administered by all providers granted a good cause exemption.

Rulemaking Authority 1002.73(2), 1002.69(7) FS. Law Implemented 1002.67(3), 1002.69(7) FS. History–New
Florida Department of Education
2011 VPK Good Cause Exemption Application Process
VPK Good Cause Exemption Data Form - March 2011

Please provide the following information regarding student data demonstrating learning gains for review through the VPK Good Cause Exemption Application Process. A sample chart is provided below. This form may be submitted via mail, fax, or email to:
Florida Department of Education, Office of Early Learning
325 West Gaines Street, Suite 514
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0400
Fax: 850-245-5105
earlylearning@fldoe.org

Achievement and Progress of Children Served:

SAMPLE Data Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Provider/School:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name of standardized assessment used to support application:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student's Name:</th>
<th>Student Number:</th>
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<table>
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<th>Assessment Period 1</th>
<th>Assessment Period 2</th>
<th>Assessment Period 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Date: <strong>/</strong>/_______</td>
<td>Date: <strong>/</strong>/_______</td>
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<tr>
<td>Results: ___________</td>
<td>Results: ___________</td>
<td>Results: ___________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Summary:

CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

I, ____________________________, as the owner/director/principal/district contact of the VPK Program aforesaid, hereby certify that the facts set forth in the above data document are true and correct.

Signature of Owner/Director/Principal/District Contact (name if emailed)

Agency Submitting Application

Title of Person Submitting Application

* Please note that Section 837.06, Florida Statutes, provides that "[w]hoever knowingly makes a false statement in writing with the intent to mislead a public servant in the performance of his or her official duty shall be guilty of a misdemeanor of the second degree, punishable as provided in s. 775.082 or s. 775.083."
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</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of standardized assessment used to support application:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student's Name:</th>
<th>Student Number:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Period 1</th>
<th>Assessment Period 2</th>
<th>Assessment Period 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date: <strong>/</strong>/____</td>
<td>Date: <strong>/</strong>/____</td>
<td>Date: <strong>/</strong>/____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results:</td>
<td>Results:</td>
<td>Results:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Form VPK-GCE-01  
Rule 6A-1.1099824  
Effective March  2011
### Appendix K: Starfall Curriculum Yearly Theme Plan

#### Yearly Theme Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Target Letter</th>
<th>Theme Focus</th>
<th>Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Off to School</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Alphabet Preview</td>
<td>Here We Are!</td>
<td>Teacher's Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Gingerbread Boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Alphabet Preview</td>
<td>Look at You!</td>
<td>The Gingerbread Boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Alphabet Preview</td>
<td>Be a Good Friend</td>
<td>&quot;Mr. Bunny's Carrot Soup&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Alphabet Preview</td>
<td>Colors &amp; Numbers</td>
<td>&quot;Draw Dragon Dot Eyes&quot; Let's Eat!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Your Home &amp; Neighborhood</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Bb</td>
<td>Your Family</td>
<td>&quot;The Little Red Hen&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unit 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stone Soup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tt</td>
<td>Your Neighborhood</td>
<td>The Cobbler and the Elves</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A Day in the Life of a Firefighter*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Nn</td>
<td>Community Helpers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Your Body</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ss</td>
<td>Your Five Senses</td>
<td>&quot;Chicken Little&quot;</td>
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<td>Unit 3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Aa</td>
<td>Staying Healthy</td>
<td>&quot;One Rice Thousand Gold&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Pp</td>
<td>Being Safe</td>
<td>Goldilocks &amp; the Three Bears</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The Great Outdoors</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Li</td>
<td>Observing Weather</td>
<td>Who Likes the Rain?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Thermometers*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Rr</td>
<td>The Four Seasons</td>
<td>How the Turtle Cracked Its Shell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Cc</td>
<td>Outer Space</td>
<td>Why the Sun &amp; Moon Live in the Sky</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reach for the Stars*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Animals Everywhere!</strong></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Ee</td>
<td>Pets</td>
<td>The Frog Prince</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Mm</td>
<td>At the Farm</td>
<td>&quot;The Little Rooster&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Story of Milk*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Troll Who Lived Under the Bridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Ff</td>
<td>In the Wild</td>
<td>Over in the Meadow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Dd Oo</td>
<td>Animals in the Air and Sea</td>
<td>The Ugly Duckling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Humpback Whales*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dolphins Are Not Fish!*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Kk</td>
<td>Dinosaurs</td>
<td>Dinosaurs!</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix K (continued)

Screen shot of the Starfall yearly theme 1 taken directly from


### Yearly Theme Plan (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Target Letter</th>
<th>Theme Focus</th>
<th>Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Watch Us Work</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Ww</td>
<td>Let’s Build It!</td>
<td>The Three Little Pigs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Hh</td>
<td>Let’s Move It!</td>
<td>My Father Runs an Excavator*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Xx</td>
<td>Let’s Go!</td>
<td>A Tale of Two Little Engines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Gg</td>
<td>How Things Grow</td>
<td>The Green Grass Grew All Around</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Troll Who Lived Under the Bridge (repeated)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Uu</td>
<td>Plant It!</td>
<td>“The Turnip”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Qq</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Jj</td>
<td>Things Change</td>
<td>The Ant and the Chrysalis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Zz</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Review</td>
<td>Look At Us Now!</td>
<td>“The Four Friends”</td>
</tr>
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</table>

### Holiday Plans

Starfall Pre-K formally schedules 25 weeks of lesson plans. The remaining weeks are allotted to seasonal activities as they occur throughout the year. Rather than taking a week off and delaying the next set of concepts and skills to accommodate a seasonal event, extend one week of plans to two, and incorporate holiday activities as part of the regular curriculum. The holiday plans include activities, songs, rhymes, recipes, and more!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fall</th>
<th>Winter</th>
<th>Spring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Season of Fall</td>
<td>Season of Winter</td>
<td>Season of Spring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparents’ Day</td>
<td>Chinese New Year</td>
<td>St. Patrick’s Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnny Appleseed</td>
<td>Groundhog Day</td>
<td>Earth Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvest/Halloween</td>
<td>Valentine’s Day</td>
<td>Cinco de Mayo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanksgiving</td>
<td>Black History Month</td>
<td>Mother’s Day</td>
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</table>
Appendix K (continued)

Screen shot of the Starfall yearly theme and holiday plans taken directly from


Lesson Plan Format
The easy-to-follow lesson plans include Whole Group, Small Group, and Learning Center activities. Each session builds on the next, and must be completed in sequence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>10 minutes</th>
<th><strong>Gathering</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Attendance Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Weather Observation/Prediction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Weekly Calendar (beginning Week 5)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>15 minutes</th>
<th><strong>Morning Meeting</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Warm Up Your Brain Activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Integrated theme development including literacy and/or math skills</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>45 minutes</th>
<th><strong>Learning Centers</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teacher/Paraprofessional interact, engage, and observe children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• No pull-out sessions</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>15 minutes</th>
<th><strong>Circle Time</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Share center experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Phonemic/Phonological Warm Up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Early Literacy/Letter-Sound</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>15 minutes</th>
<th><strong>Story Time</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Read-alouds and related concept-development activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>40 minutes</th>
<th><strong>Exploration/Small Group</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Children move freely among Exploration activities facilitated by paraprofessional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Small Group pull-out sessions led by teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix L: VPK Provider Improvement Process

Taken directly


VPK Provider Improvement Process

Florida Statute 1002.69 requires the Office of Early Learning to adopt a minimum readiness rate that demonstrates a provider has delivered the VPK program satisfactorily. Providers who have a score below the minimum are required to submit an improvement plan. Rules 6M-8.700, 6M-8.701 and 6M-8.702 specify requirements for coalitions or school districts to approve an improvement plan for a VPK provider on probation.

Providers on probation are required to:

Year 1: Submit an improvement plan for approval by the coalition or school district and implement the plan. The provider must select two target areas for improvement. The first target area is mandatory; providers must purchase and implement a DOE-approved curriculum or complete the DOE-Approved Staff Development Plan for Providers on Probation.

Year 2: Remain on probation and submit a VPK Education Program Annual Probation Progress Report.

Year 3: Apply for and be granted a good cause exemption or be removed from the VPK program for five years.

Providers must complete all steps of the improvement process electronically on the website.

Coalitions and school districts can review and track provider progress by logging into the secure area of the website and navigating to the OEL administrator's home page.
Appendix L (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Setting and Licensing Information:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Please check one of the following and provide the supporting documentation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licensed private provider:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Child care facility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Family day care home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Large family child care home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Private school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-licensed private provider:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Faith-based child care (claims exemption under s. 402.318, F.S.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Faith-based private school (claims exemption under s. 402.3025, F.S., or s. 402.316, F.S.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Nonreligious private school (claims exemption under s. 402.3025, F.S.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public School:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Public school (licensed or uses contractors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Public school (exempt from licensure under s. 402.3025, F.S.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Public/charter school (exempt from licensure under s. 402.3025, F.S.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Accreditation Information (for non-licensed providers): |
| Name of accrediting agency: |
| Accrediting agency is a member of: |
| □ Commission on International and Trans-Regional Accreditation |
| □ Florida Association of Academic Nonpublic Schools |
| □ National Council for Private School Accreditation |
| □ None of the above (Specify Florida Approved Gold Seal Accreditation Program: ) |

| VPK Provider Demographic Information (to be completed by DOE): |
| Percentage of children served with disabilities: |
| Percent of children served identified as limited English proficient: |

| Curriculum Information: |
| Curriculum Name: |
| Purchase Date: |
| Implementation Date: |
Appendix L (continued)

Health and Safety Requirements:
Application must include copies of all Department of Children and Families Childcare Inspection Checklists for all inspections performed by the Department of Children and Families under authority of s. 402.301-402.319, Florida Statutes during the two-year time period prior to application for good cause exemption.

Individual Circumstances
Cite any extraordinary or unique circumstances under which the provider should be allowed to continue to deliver the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program after having been designated as low performing for at least four consecutive years.

Narrative:

Compliance with Improvement Plan:
The Improvement Plan under authority of s. 1002.67, F.S., is being faithfully adhered to and implemented as agreed.

☐ YES
☐ NO

If no, please explain:

Additional Information:

Certification Statement
I, ______________________, as the owner/director/principal/district contact of the VPK Program aforesaid, hereby certify that the facts set forth in the above application are true and correct.

Signature of Owner/Director/Principal/District Contact (name if emailed)

Agency Submitting Application

Title of Person Submitting Application

Date

* Please note that Section 837.05, Florida Statutes, provides that "[w]hoever knowingly makes a false statement in writing with the intent to mislead a public servant in the performance of his or her official duty shall be guilty of a misdemeanor of the second degree, punishable as provided in s. 775.082 or s. 755.083."
Appendix M. IRB Approval

June 18, 2013

Susan Weber
Childhood Education and Literacy Studies
Tampa, FL 33620

RE: Expedited Approval for Initial Review
IRB #: Pro00013079
Title: Perceptions of Practitioners in a Voluntary Prekindergarten Program on Probation

Study Approval Period: 6/18/2013 to 6/18/2014

Dear Ms. Weber:

On 6/18/2013, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and APPROVED the above application and all documents outlined below.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol Document(s):
Perceptions of Practitioners in a Voluntary Prekindergarten Program on Probation.

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(8) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.