

THE IMPACT OF KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM ASSIGNMENT ON CLASSROOM
TEACHERS AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

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To determine the impact of an administrator's decision on student placement in kindergarten classrooms, teachers were asked to share their perceptions on how that decision impacted their ability to deliver instruction and follow the district scope and sequence, as well as how that decision impacts student academic achievement and social and emotional development. This qualitative study was designed to gather data from kindergarten teachers using focus group interviews and individual interviews of campus principals from two campuses within the same district. The following two ways in which kindergarten classrooms were created were explored: (a) by random assignment or (b) knowledge of students' academic and behavioral performance based on information relevant to their Pre-K experience. Campus principal participants reported that they each chose their method to provide equity in the classrooms and fairness amongst their teachers. Teacher participants reported that overall, they preferred to have as much information about incoming students as possible and to be a part of the process of placing students into classrooms for the following year. By examining these teachers' perspectives, the findings from this study may positively influence policy and practice for campus administrators as they decide how they will place students in kindergarten classrooms. Continued qualitative examination of student achievement could help determine if one method of placement positively impacts student achievement. Data collected from a larger sample within the district or expanded to compare between districts could help campus administrators make positive classroom placements for kindergarten students. Also, a quantitative study using a survey might provide a more expansive view of the impact of administrators' process of assigning kindergarten students to classrooms.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The most important period of life is not the age of university studies, but the first one, the period from birth to the age of six.

~Maria Montessori

In the early 1960s, researchers started writing about the importance of early childhood education. In 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson's State of the Union speech declared a war on poverty. Soon after, the exploration and development of early childhood education programs began to address the educational needs of children from low socio-economic backgrounds. For the first time, researchers focused on the effect of poverty on children and on how to break the cycle of poverty. In 1965, the Head Start program was developed to provide preschool education to children living in poverty. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2019), "Head Start was designed to help break the cycle of poverty, providing preschool children of low-income families with a comprehensive program to meet their emotional, social, health, nutritional and psychological needs" (para. 2).

In 1962, the High/Scope Perry Preschool study was conducted to examine the potential short- and long-term benefits of providing children with an early childhood, preschool education. Researchers identified 123 low-income African American children as high-risk students in terms of economic status. Drawing from the total student population, 58 children were randomly assigned to a high-quality preschool program while 65 children were assigned to a separate group of children who did not receive preschool education. Researchers collected data annually from the participants as they progressed through the program when they were 3 to 11 years of age. Additional data were collected at ages 14, 15, 19, 27, and 40, with a missing data rate of 6% across all measures (Highscope, 2019). Findings from this study revealed that students who

participated in the high-quality preschool program had lower overall arrest rates, earned higher incomes, presented higher basic achievement scores at age 14, and presented higher IQ scores at age 5. The researchers also presented the overall cost benefit of preschool education, which revealed that the overall benefit of providing a preschool education for students far outweighed the cost of providing the education. This long-term study showed that preschool education provides benefits for children who attend such programs at personal, economic, and educational levels, proving it to be an economically sound investment for state and federal tax dollars.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of practice that led to this dissertation research study is that administrators are charged with making decisions about how to create kindergarten classrooms. Ultimately, the decisions that they reach can have an impact on teachers' instructional practices, students' academic achievement, and students' social and emotional development. For example, student placement in kindergarten can be impacted by a student's participation in preschool programs; however, these programs are not readily available to all students. Despite the short- and long-term research and subsequent findings discovered by researchers in the High/Scope Perry study (2019), every child does not necessarily have access to early childhood education.

According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2022), for a child to receive free early childhood education, families must qualify in one of the following areas: (a) be unable to speak or comprehend the English language, (b) be economically disadvantaged as proven by qualification for the national free-reduced lunch program, (c) be homeless, (d) be a child of an active-duty member of the armed forces for the United States who is ordered to duty or who was killed while serving in active duty, (e) be in or have been in conservatorship of the Department of Family and Protective Services, or (f) is a child eligible for the Star of Texas award under

Texas Government code 3106.002, 3106.003, or 3106.004. To qualify for the free or reduced lunch program, a family of four must not exceed an annual income of \$45,510 for reduced lunch and may not exceed an annual income of \$31,980 for free lunch participation (Department of Agriculture, 2018, Table 1). Funding of eligible half-day preschool programs is established through average daily attendance (ADA) from the federal school program (FSP).

Students who fail to meet the criteria set forth by TEA (2022) are ineligible for free preschool and cannot be served by their local school district unless the district provides a tuition-based preschool program. However, TEA stipulates that providing preschool to ineligible students must not interfere with preschool programs for eligible students. In other words, eligible students must be served first before a district can provide for ineligible students. Ineligible students can also participate in private preschool programs at tuition rates set by the private institution. While publicly funded preschools serve many students, there are many students who are *not* served. Nevertheless, those who are not served could benefit from early childhood education because the research clearly demonstrates that students who participate in preschool programs wind up having more successful academic careers than students who do not (Highscope, 2019).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand, from the teachers' perspective, the impact that administrators' decisions about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on (a) the classroom teacher's instructional planning and delivery of instruction according to the district's scope and sequence of the curriculum over time, as well as (b) their students' academic success and social and emotional growth. Students who participate in preschool programs are expected to come to school with higher levels of knowledge and experience about school.

Typically, there are two ways in which kindergarten classrooms are created: (a) by random assignment or (b) by knowledge of students' academic and behavioral performance based on information relevant to their pre-K experience. The type of assignment to classrooms that administrators' make and how students are then distributed to the classroom based on their assignment can affect the students' school experience as well as their overall success. Therefore, an additional goal in conducting this study was to understand, from the administrators' perspective, the background and rationale behind why one of the two assignment protocols was selected and the level of impact they believe their decision had on teachers and students.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this dissertation study:

1. From the administrators' perspective, what led to their decision for the assignment protocol chosen for their campus (rationale and background) and how did it impact their teachers and students?
2. From the teachers' perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator's decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their instructional planning and delivery of instruction according to the district's scope and sequence of the curriculum over time?
3. From the teachers' perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator's decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their students' academic success?
4. From the teachers' perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator's decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their students' social and emotional growth?

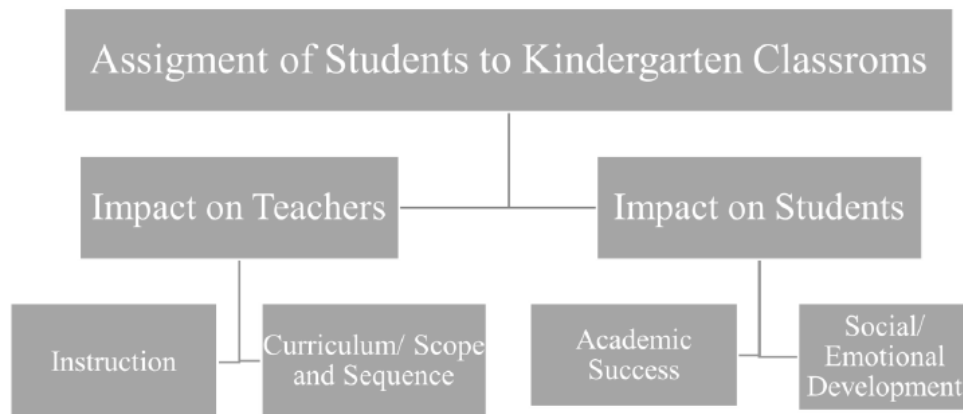
Conceptual Framework

The decision that an administrator makes can cause a ripple effect on how teachers and students are impacted by that decision. The conceptual framework created to guide this study is based on how an administrator's decision relevant to assigning kindergarten students to

kindergarten classrooms can impact teachers’ instructional planning and delivery of the curriculum and how that decision impacts students’ academic success and social and emotional growth. Figure 1 represents a visual of this impact. This conceptual framework depicts the impact an administrator’s decision about kindergarten student placement has on teachers’ instructional planning and curricular decisions and the students’ academic achievement and social and emotional needs.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Significance of the Study

For this dissertation study, I wanted to discover, from the teachers’ perspectives, whether one type of classroom assignment is more beneficial to students in terms of their academic success and social and emotional growth. Findings from this study may inform educational leaders and teachers about the most appropriate approach to follow when developing kindergarten class assignments for students: (a) clustering kindergarten students by academic achievement and behavior, or (b) randomly assigning students to kindergarten classrooms. Results from this study could help inform campus administrators when having to make similar decisions pertaining to their campus.

Delimitations

Roberts (2010) explained that delimitations clarify the boundaries of the proposed study and how the researcher narrowed the scope of the study. Delimitations for this study include the campuses selected for the research. These campuses were chosen based on location and their proximity to me and those decisions were based on the method the administrators used to create kindergarten classrooms.

This study was limited to kindergarten teachers and their campus administrators and took place during the 2020-21 school year. Data gathered were based on campus administrators' perspectives about how they decided to select one of two different protocols for placing students into kindergarten classrooms and included teachers' perspectives on the impact that one of two different protocols used to place kindergarten students in their assigned classrooms had on their instructional planning and delivery of instruction according to the district's scope and sequence of the curriculum over time and their students' academic success and social and emotional growth.

Assumptions

Researcher assumptions refer to what the researcher takes for granted upon proposing a study. In this study, I assumed that all participants would participate in an open and honest manner regarding their responses to the questions asked during the focus group and individual interviews. I also assumed that by agreeing to participate, teachers and administrators would accurately reflect their professional opinions.

Definition of Key Terms

To provide a common language throughout the study, a definition of key terms is provided below.

- *Head Start*. This government funded program provides early childhood education to students in poverty (Head Start, 2019).
- *Holistic*. The Cambridge (2023) dictionary defines the word holistic as “dealing with or treating the whole of something or someone and not just a part.” A holistic review for this study involves a review of student data including behavior, background, academic ability, social and emotional needs, and any additional information pertaining to a student’s individual specific learning needs.
- *State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR)*. STAAR is a state-mandated test which includes annual assessments for reading and mathematics, grades 3-8; writing for grades 4 and 7; science for grades 5 and 8; social studies for grade 8; and end-of-course exams for English I, English II, Algebra I, Biology and U.S. History (TEA testing, 2019, para 1).
- *Texas Education Agency (TEA)*. TEA is the state agency that oversees primary and secondary public education in the state of Texas. TEA establishes the eligibility for students attending preschool (TEA, 2019, para 2).
- *Two-way dual language program*. TEA defines a two-way dual language program as a program with identified English learners with the same primary language as well as English proficient students (TEA, 2023, Dual Language Immersion Program Implementation Rubric). In this study, dual language programs included pairing two teachers, one who taught in English and one who taught in Spanish. Teachers switch classes based on the campus schedule for language instruction. For this study, teachers switch each day

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized into five chapters, appendices, and references. Chapter 1

provides an overview of the problem, purpose, and significance of the proposed study. Chapter 1 also includes the research questions, a conceptual framework for the study, and definition of significant terms. Chapter 2 includes a review of the related literature, including current and seminal works as well as a focus on the areas lacking in the literature related to this study. In Chapter 3, the methodology is presented along with the rationale for the study's design. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the research conducted in this study. Chapter 5 provides an overview of the study, a discussion of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for further related studies. Chapter 5 also presents implications, to suggest the ways this study can impact campus and district administrators in the future.

Summary

In this chapter, the impact of early childhood education is examined to provide background and clarity regarding the options available to administrator when making decisions about how to create kindergarten classrooms and how to assign kindergarten students to kindergarten classrooms. To understand positive ways to impact early childhood learning, the purpose of this study and the conceptual framework address the impact that an administrator's decision on creating and assigning students to kindergarten classrooms can have on teachers' instructional planning and delivery of instruction as well as the overall academic success and social emotional learning of students. My overall intent in conducting this study was to discover the most optimal way to create kindergarten classrooms and potentially influence practice to provide equitable and optimal learning environments for kindergarten students. Chapter 2 includes a review of the research literature related to the purpose of this study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them.

~Lev Vygotsky

In Texas, the compulsory attendance age for school is six years old, meaning that students often do not begin school until kindergarten. Opportunities for students to receive an early childhood education at no cost, provided by the state of Texas, are generally based on income level, native language, or residence status (e.g., homeless, foster care, or active military). Students whose family circumstances do not meet these criteria are limited to tuition-based preschool programs.

Increased access to preschool programs has been found to impact positively the future capability for educators to close the achievement gap and increase long-term student success as enrollment in preschool is linked to future academic and life success (Highscope, 2018). Early childhood programs provide foundational skills in language arts, mathematics, and social skills (TEA, 2019). Because access to these programs is limited, students who do not attend preschool are sometimes at a disadvantage. This disadvantage, in turn, can manifest over time in student achievement and success, creating a distinction between those who attended a preschool program and those who did not. In some cases, the gap between those who did or did not attend preschool may result in different configurations, such as student grouping or classroom instruction, or how students are assigned to a specific kindergarten classroom.

In their most recent Condition of Education report, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019) shared the following 2017 data for students attending preschool:

In 2017, the percentage of 3- to 5-year-olds enrolled in preschool programs was higher for children whose parents' highest level of education was a graduate or professional

degree (46 percent) or a bachelor's degree (47%) than for children whose parents' highest level of education was an associate's degree (36%), some college but no degree (34%), a high school credential (33%), or less than a high school credential (26 %). (p. xxxi)

These data indicate that in each group examined, less than 50% of eligible students attend preschool before entering kindergarten even though research such as the High/Scope Perry project shows the benefits of students attending preschool programs.

In this chapter, I review the different ways campus leaders assign students to classrooms, the impact on how teachers plan for and provide instruction within their selected classroom assignment, and ultimately, the impact the selected classroom assignment can have on students' academic success and social and emotional development. Currently, there is a dearth of research literature related to the ways in which administrators determine kindergarten classroom assignments and the impact that the selected assignment has on each of these areas. Most of the literature revolves around ability grouping within the classroom without specifying a specific classroom configuration. Therefore, in this literature review, older studies are reviewed that delve specifically into this topic, as well as more current studies that relate to assessment-based classroom placement in kindergarten and student grouping within the classroom. Exploring the literature related to within-class student grouping, however, may offer an understanding of the specific advantages and disadvantages to grouping students for classroom assignment.

Classroom Assignment in Elementary Schools

Traditionally, when students entered elementary school, they began their educational career with a clean slate. No previous academic or behavioral data existed on which to base their classroom assignment. Consequently, students were randomly assigned to a teacher with little to no information at the beginning of the school year (Monk, 1987). As stated by Monk,

When a pupil is assigned to a class, three parties are affected (the student being placed, the teacher receiving the student, and the other students assigned to the class), no two of

which are necessarily affected in the same way. (p. 168)

While the Monk study dates back over 30 years, it is important to understand the way in which classroom assignments impact more than just the student.

In addition, Monk (1987) explained that the assignment of students varied based on principal involvement and the philosophy of each principal. He identified three levels of principal involvement: high, medium, and low. High involvement principals were principals who either led the charge or were involved with the responsibility of creating classrooms from start to finish. Medium involvement principals relied on their teachers for input while low involvement principals showed little to no involvement in class creation.

In schools with highly involved principals, some principals believed that strict randomization was most important and did not look at any student factor when assigning students. To create a balanced classroom, other principals considered factors such as behavior and reading and mathematics achievement when creating classrooms. One highly involved principal claimed to assign students based on knowledge of the students and the teacher. The assignment was made based on “what the teacher could handle” (Monk, 1987, p. 170). This meant some teachers received a higher number of behavior issues while others received smaller classroom numbers. This was the least successful in terms of teacher climate.

At the medium level of principal involvement, Monk (1987) determined that principals relied on teachers to help in the creation of classrooms. At the end of the year, the sending teachers used their knowledge of the students to sort the students into classrooms for the following year and, most often, the principal assigned the teacher’s name to the group of students. At the low level of principal involvement, the sending and receiving teachers met to create the classrooms for the following year. Principals using this strategy emphasized that the

teachers knew their students best and therefore were best suited to make these decisions.

All in all, Monk's (1987) study determined that principal tenure determined their level of involvement in the creation of student classroom assignments. The more veteran the principals, the more involved they were as they knew the students better. In the end, no matter the way classrooms were assigned, they were all balanced by way of gender and race. They differed, however, in the balance of ability level, social and emotional needs of students, and "their willingness to tailor classes to perceived strengths and weaknesses of teachers" (p. 177). Monk reported that even within the same district, classroom assignment practices varied and there was no accountability or documentation about how classroom assignments were determined at each campus.

In 1998, Burns and Mason explored the formation of classrooms in 22 elementary schools in two districts, as well as the impact these decisions had on the classrooms created. Burns and Mason discussed class formation and class composition, defining class composition as the "class personality" (p. 3). They noted, "Because class formation procedures lead to classes with particular teachers and class compositions, class formation and composition bear a cause-and-effect relationship to each other" (p. 740). Burns and Mason identified three reasons for understanding classroom formation and composition: (a) the way administrators create classes impacts the interpretation of classroom research findings; (b) classroom formation impacts the ability to cover curriculum, students' ability range, teachers' feelings about their teaching, teachers' sense of self efficacy, and student learning; and (c) classroom formation "undergird(s) concerns about the effects of ability grouping" (p. 741). Burns and Mason asserted that sometimes administrators used classroom formation to reduce classroom heterogeneity.

Based on their study, Burns and Mason (1998) found that principals created classrooms

in the same general way. They provided teachers with a template with grade-level configuration information. This information included enrollment projections, academic programs, teacher certification, and combination of classes, if applicable. Then, principals provided guidelines for creating the classes. Guidelines included rules related to grouping philosophy, parent requests, pairing or separating students, and student ability levels. Teachers of the previous grade level met with the next year's teachers to create classrooms by gender, using individual color-coded student profile cards. Between schools, the cards varied, but the basic information was the same. The direction given by principals varied from explicit to vague. Principals reviewed the rosters and made final adjustments. These adjustments were made if classes were unbalanced, conflicts existed, parent requests were not met, or there was a conflict concern between students. On campuses where mixed-age classrooms were present, the creation of classrooms was more specific and less random. Specific criteria were used to select the students who were placed in these classrooms and the classroom composition was less heterogeneous. Principals used class composition to "manage teacher motivation and student learning" (p. 765). Burns and Mason commented about a later study conducted by Monk (1992). They noted that Monk,

...suggested that teachers respond to compositional differences with either engagement or accommodation, and he identified three common properties of a class that help determine which response is adopted: (a) churning, the movement of students in and out of the classroom, either through pull-programs or student turnover and mobility; (b) the number of excess-demand students who require considerably more time because of academic or behavioral reasons; and (c) mismatches between teachers' grade-level placement and experience with the curriculum. According to Monk, when the aggregate properties of a class are desirable, a teacher tends to respond with energy and commitment or, what Monk calls, engagement. In contrast, when faced with a difficult and frustrating class, teachers tend to respond by going through the motions – what Monk calls accommodation. (Burns & Mason, 1998, p. 766)

However, Burns and Mason (1998) also questioned whether a class composition can be manipulated by principals by the movement of just one or two high-ability students to adjust the

class test averages. In the future, they warned, if student achievement functioned as a determining factor in the rating a teacher received as part of the teacher evaluation process, this could be an issue.

Recent Practices in Classroom Assignments

In 2014, Paufler and Amrein-Beardsley sought to examine (a) what methods were used by elementary principals to assign students to classrooms; (b) whether random or non-random practices were used to make placement decisions; and (c) what roles students, teachers, and parents played in these practices. They discovered that 98% of classroom assignments were non-random. Principals took a variety of background information into consideration when making placement decisions, including academic achievement, behavioral issues/needs, language proficiency, student interactions with peers, and student/teacher personalities, including instructional and management styles. Principals varied in their philosophy about the creation of heterogeneous or homogeneous classrooms. In 88.7% of the schools, teachers were highly involved in the classroom creation process. Principals reported providing guidelines for teachers to create balanced classrooms using specific criteria. Most principals reported honoring parents' requests for their children, when possible.

In this study, Paufler and Amrein-Beardsley (2014) determined that 67.9% of principals strongly opposed random placement of students. Principals suggested that random assignment of students did not allow for balanced classrooms. Most principals (48%) believed that random assignment of students in elementary schools was impractical or detrimental, citing the potential for inequity in the classrooms. Principals supported purposeful placement of students to promote equity and fairness.

Within the past five years, however, campus leadership teams have tried new and

innovative ways to assign students in hopes of positively impacting student achievement, classroom instruction, and the social and emotional development of kindergarten students. In 2015, in an article in the *St. Louis Today*, Brock reported that Oak Brook Elementary School would take a new approach to assigning kindergarten students to classrooms. During the first week of school, students rotated through four different kindergarten classrooms and teachers observed and got to know the students according to their academic, social, and behavioral needs. After learning more about the students, based on teachers' assessment of how each student managed their emotions, settled conflicts with their peers, and functioned academically, the principal created "a balanced mix for each kindergarten classroom" (para. 4) in terms of their "academics, behavior, race" (para. 5). In addition, students were assigned to teachers best suited to meet specific students' needs. Brock reported parents initially expressed concern about their child adjusting to the changes after one week of school rather than having the same teacher with whom they started the year. It was important that administrators communicate to parents that the purpose of this getting-to-know-you period was not for the sake of tiering students by ability, but for truly getting to know the students, creating the right mix of students, and assigning every student to the teacher who would most appropriately meet their needs. After experiencing this process, parents reported feeling relieved that their child's needs would be met by the teacher that best suited the children.

School Readiness Assessment for Kindergarten Classroom Placement

As stated previously, kindergarten students typically enter elementary schools with little to no formal early childhood education or educational background for campus leaders to use to place students into classrooms (Monk, 1987). Campus leaders have struggled to find the best ways to purposefully place students. One approach has been to use kindergarten readiness

assessments. In 2006, Conn-Power and Peters, at the Early Childhood Center at the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community at Indiana University-Bloomington, conducted a survey of preschool and kindergarten teachers to determine the practice of using school readiness assessments for students entering kindergarten to determine their academic ability.

The survey revealed that three-fourths (75%) of the respondents used readiness assessments for students entering kindergarten. These assessments were conducted in the school setting, either prior to school starting or the first week of school. They included teacher observations, checklists, a commercial assessment tool, and/or a parent report. Kindergarten teachers most often gave the assessment but were also assisted by other school assessment personnel. The results of these assessments were used to determine classroom placement, make programming recommendations for a full or half-day kindergarten, delay entry, make special education recommendations, and determine curriculum/instructional decisions. At the time, Conn-Powers and Peters (2006) cautioned that while there was little evidence to guide leadership in their assessment, there was evidence that discouraged “using the assessment results to make placement decisions or delay children’s enrollment” until they were “more ready,” especially when the results came from “a single instrument or source” (p. 1).

Student Ability Grouping in Kindergarten

In the 1980s and 1990s, within-class homogenous grouping was strongly criticized because it benefited the high-ability achievers only (Hong et al., 2012). Their research was challenged by Condrón (2008), who pointed out that the comparison between the growth of students in high-ability groups versus those in low-ability groups was akin to comparing apples to oranges. These studies did not consider the previous literacy skills of the students, so the growth comparison was simply not the same.

Since previous research concluded that high achievers benefit from homogeneous grouping (Hong et al., 2012), gifted and talented program leaders tend to recommend self-contained classrooms for this student population. Within the general education classroom, homogeneous grouping often occurs when teachers create ability groupings to target specific learning needs (Murphy et al., 2017). Selah et al. (2005) conducted a study examining 104 homogeneously grouped fourth grade students based on ability. Ability classifications were based on students' test scores. Thirteen homogenous groups were created and received the same instruction for 16 lessons. The low-performing groups scored better on posttests when placed in heterogeneous groups, but average-ability students performed better when placed in homogeneous grouping. Students who were grouped according to high ability also performed better when homogeneously grouped.

Ability grouping is a strategy used by teachers and administrators to target instruction for students. McCoach et al. (2006) referenced two types of ability grouping: between-class ability and within-class instructional grouping. Administrators and teachers use between-class ability grouping to separate students into different classes, based on academic abilities or prior knowledge. Within-class grouping, on the other hand, occurs when a heterogeneous group of students are placed within the same classroom. In such cases, the teacher creates and assigns students to smaller groups based on student ability or academic performance in specific content areas, most commonly for reading instruction. This type of grouping is generally more flexible and successful when the teacher differentiates instruction and implements pacing for the students in each group.

According to Stenbergen-Hu et al. (2016), ability grouping can "affect students' experiences in school, including the courses they take, the curricula they receive, the peers with

whom they learn, and the teachers who provide instruction” (p. 852). Steenbergen-Hu and colleagues conducted a meta-analysis of 100 years of research on the effects of ability grouping. They determined that the effect of between-class groupings was negligible, whereas within-class ability grouping showed a small, positive impact on students. Cross-grade grouping also showed a small, positive outcome for student achievement. Grouping for students identified as gifted, however, showed a positive, statistically significant outcome on student achievement. The current research furthers the debate about the need for student grouping at all.

Ability grouping for literacy instruction presents the strongest indicator that ability grouping has positive outcomes for student achievement (Hong et al., 2012). Hong and colleagues analyzed the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study kindergarten cohort data to make assertions about the impact of homogeneous grouping for students. Homogeneous grouping for literacy allowed teachers to work within Vygotsky’s framework of the zone of proximal development (Simple Psychology, 2019, para 2). With proper time and specific instruction, students met positive achievement goals in literacy instruction. Time spent in the high-intensity ability group was the biggest indicator of success for low-level learners. While results about ability grouping were sometimes mixed, a key factor in exploring the research was understanding that higher-level ability groups covered more content than lower-level ability groups. The research showed that ability grouping could sometimes widen the preexisting gap due to this fact.

School Readiness Assessment for Student Grouping

School administrators continue to search for innovative ways to enhance student achievement. One way this is being done is by using academic readiness assessments to place students in kindergarten classrooms. Conn-Powers and Peters (2006), from *The Early Childhood*

Center Indiana Institute on Disability and Community, specifically looked at kindergarten readiness practices in Indiana by inviting 4,500 preschool and kindergarten teachers to participate in this study. Of those recruited, 343 individuals participated. The researchers reviewed (a) what class placement decisions were made based on the assessment; (b) how the assessment results influenced classroom planning and work; (c) what skills were addressed in the kindergarten readiness assessment; (d) what method was used to assess kindergarten readiness; (e) who, when, and where the assessment was conducted; and (f) how well the readiness assessment practices yielded useful information for all children. They determined that the results of the assessment were used for several purposes, including class placement decisions, recommendations to defer entry, information shared with families, curriculum planning, and classroom instruction. They did not explain how the information was explicitly used.

Kindergarten readiness assessments may look different depending on the site, but the purpose of the assessment is to get a picture of the student to guide decision making about placement, the need for additional services, and instruction (Msyzak & Conn-Powers, 2008). Based on the National Education Goals Panel's (1991) adaptation of the goal for "all students to be ready to enter school by the year 2000" (p. 16), the panel identified three main components of school readiness: readiness by the child, the school, and the family. According to the National Education Goals Panel, readiness of the child was defined by the following:

- Physical well-being and motor development, including health status, growth, and disability
- Social and emotional development, including turn-taking, cooperation, empathy, and the ability to express one's own emotions
- Approaches to learning, including enthusiasm, curiosity, temperament, culture, and values

- Language development, including listening, speaking, and vocabulary, as well as literacy skills, including print awareness, story sense, and writing and drawing processes
- General knowledge and cognition, including sound-letter association, spatial relations, and number concepts (National Education Goals Panel, 1991, p. 16)

Further studies focused on the goals of the readiness assessment. Msyzak and Conn-Powers (2000) identified eight key points a kindergarten assessment should address:

1. Benefit both the children and adults involved
2. Be used for their designated purposes
3. Have appropriate validity and reliability
4. Be age appropriate, and use naturalistic observations as children interact in real-life situations
5. Be holistic, and obtain information on all developmental domains (physical, social, emotional, and cognitive)
6. Be appropriate, both linguistically and culturally
7. Collect information through multiple processes and sources (collection of children's work, observations of children's work, interviews with children, parent reports, etc.)
8. Be used to guide instruction, rather than determine placement in school. (p. 6)

The purpose for testing is not always something educators agree on. Shepard et al. (1998) asserted that testing should be used for instructional purposes and not for decisions regarding student placement. They explained that the main goal for the assessment was to support learning. While these assessments took place in a variety of states across the United States, there was no universal test, thus there was no universal use for these assessments (Msyzak & Conn-Powers, 2008).

A 2018 study conducted by Curran et al. explored the use of kindergarten assessment for sorting students across classrooms, based on prior academic ability. Curran et al. used the term "cross-class ability sorting" (p. 5) to explore the practice of dividing students into homogeneous

classrooms. This type of sorting can sometimes be viewed as promoting inequity as students do not have opportunities to learn from peers with different academic ability and the research on cross-class ability sorting is mixed. In theory, with cross-class ability sorting, students get the instruction they need; however, in contrast, students may not all be exposed to the same level of rigor or quality of teacher. The Curran et al. findings determined that kindergarten readiness assessments were most pronounced for reading readiness placement and not so much for mathematics assessment.

Conceptual Framework

The review of the literature brought to light the impact that student grouping has on student academic achievement and social and emotional development. It is evident that there is a relationship between the ways in which students are grouped and the way a teacher prepares instruction, along with the way students achieve, based on their peer group. Although the literature provides a connection between student grouping within the classroom, it does not provide a sound relationship between the ways student classes are created. The conceptual framework substantiates the need to understand the impact on the teacher and the student of an administrator's decision to create kindergarten classrooms, based on the teachers' perceptions. Therefore, the purpose of this research study was to understand, from the administrators' perspective, how they reached the decision to create kindergarten classrooms and to explore the relationship between the way students are placed in kindergarten classrooms and the impact on teachers' instructional practices, student academic success, and students' social and emotional development as told from the teachers' point of view.

Summary

The literature reviewed reveals the lack of previous research around creating classrooms

for kindergarten teachers. However, the literature reviewed and reported in this chapter provides information about student grouping and establishes a need for more research in this area.

In Chapter 3, the purpose of the study and the research questions are reviewed. The research design is presented along with the population and sample group for this study. Data collection tools, data collection procedures, and data analysis strategies are explained. The positionality of the researcher, limitations, and ethical considerations for the study are also described.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

If you would understand anything, observe its beginning and its development.

~Aristotle

After administrators determine how many kindergarten classrooms are necessary and decide how the classrooms are created, they determine how students will be assigned to their specific classroom: (a) by random assignment or (b) by knowledge of students' academic and behavioral performance based on information relevant to their pre-kindergarten experience. The type of assignment to classrooms that administrators' employ and how students are then distributed to the classroom based on their assignment can affect the students' school experience as well as their overall success.

The purpose of this study was two-fold: (a) to understand, from the administrators' perspective, the background and rationale behind why one of the two assignment protocols was selected; and (b) to understand, from the teachers' perspective, the impact that administrators' decisions about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on (1) the classroom teacher's instructional planning and delivery of instruction according to the district's scope and sequence of the curriculum over time, and (2) their students' academic success and social/emotional growth. The following research questions guided this dissertation research study:

1. From the administrators' perspective, what led to the decision for the assignment protocol chosen for their campus (rationale and background) and how did it impact their teachers and students?
2. From the teachers' perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator's decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their instructional planning and delivery of instruction according to the district's scope and sequence of the curriculum over time?

3. From the teachers' perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator's decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their students' academic success?
4. From the teachers' perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator's decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their students' social/emotional growth?

Research Design

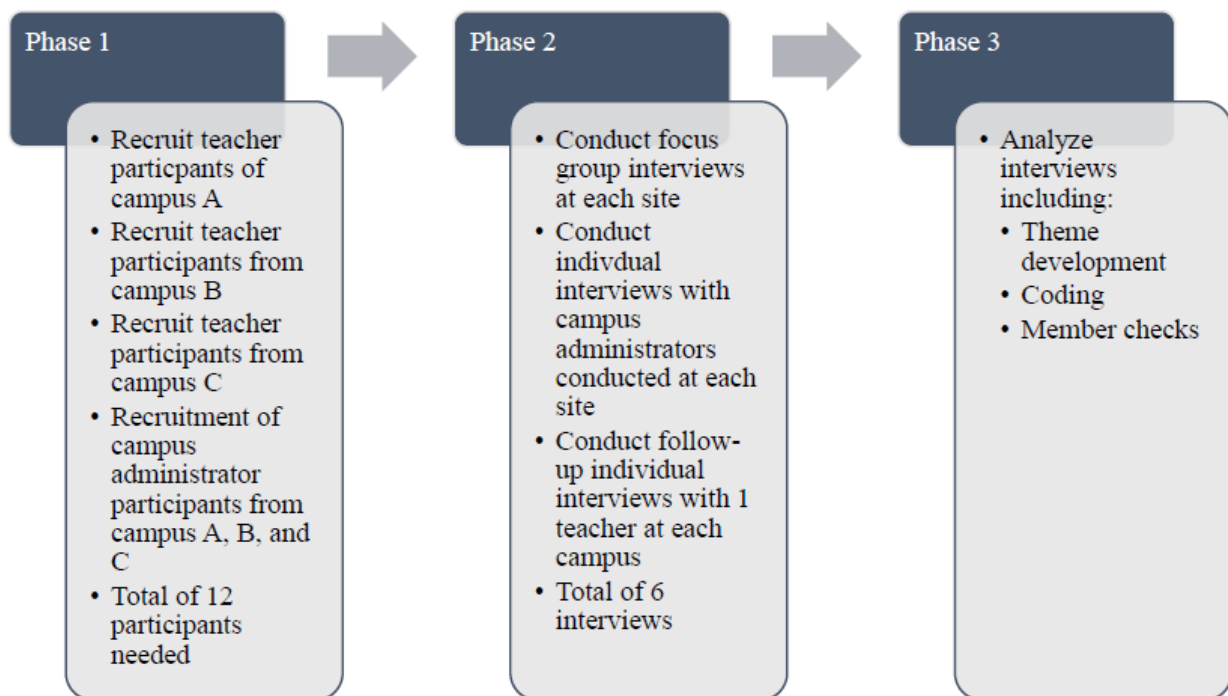
To address the purpose of this study and answer the research questions guiding this study, a phenomenological qualitative research design and approach was utilized. According to Hesse-Biber (2017), a phenomenological qualitative research approach is “aimed at generating knowledge about how people perceive experience” (p. 26) and, in terms of a research method, it is useful for “capturing lived experiences of individuals” (p. 25). Durdella (2019) claimed that a phenomenological research approach “moves qualitative research in the direction of exploring the meaning that individuals attribute to experiences in their world” (p. 105). Because I was interested in learning about teachers' perceived experiences of the assignment of students to their classrooms and how that impacted them and their students--whether by a traditional random assignment, clustering by preschool attendance, or creation based after two weeks of kindergarten at a campus--a phenomenological qualitative research design was most appropriate.

When the researcher wishes to explore the meaning that individuals attribute to a particular phenomenon, they typically employ “personal interviews as the primary data collection method” (Durdella, 2019, p. 108). As stated by Bloomberg and Volpe (2016), “In this process, the researcher ‘brackets’ her or his own experiences to understand the participants' experiences” (p. 48). By taking a reflexive stance, the researcher searches for essential themes that represent the nature of the participants' lived experience and describes the phenomenon. In addition, the researcher engages in an interpretive process to give meaning to their lived

experience. As much as possible, the researcher brackets personal experiences to gain a fresh perspective of the phenomenon under study. The researcher “analyzes the data by reducing information to significant statements or quotes and combines these into thematic categories” (p. 49). The research occurred in three phases: recruitment of participants, focus-group and individual interviews, and analysis of the data. The research design, data collection, and analysis timeline are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Research Design



Creswell (2013) suggested that the researcher discuss how their personal experiences and understanding might affect the study and incorporate that information into the analysis rather than trying to bracket one’s personal experiences. Further information about this is addressed later in this chapter.

If the researcher can establish and maintain a rapport with the participants and rich data

can be obtained, the number of participants who need to be interviewed can be smaller, ranging from 5-15 participants (Durdella, 2019). At each studied site, a qualitative focus group interview was conducted with kindergarten teachers and an individual interview was conducted with the campus administrator most directly involved with kindergarten student placement.

With approval by the University of North Texas Instructional Review Board (IRB), the collection and analysis of data took place in the winter of 2021/2022.

Population and Sample

Participants for this study were drawn from a pool of kindergarten teachers and campus administrators at two different sites, within one district. Attempts were made to ensure teacher participants possessed a range of experiences in terms of how students were assigned to their classroom and represented all stages of experience in terms of number of years served as a kindergarten teacher and/or classroom teacher. Regardless of their previous grade-level assignment, teachers selected to participate in this study were currently serving as a kindergarten teacher under one of the two student assignment variations identified for this study.

Table 1

Site Demographic Data

	Lone Star ISD
Number of students served	33,000
Number of Elementary Campuses	20
Number of kindergarten students	2,200
African American	13%
American Indian	2%
Asian	3%
Hispanic	71%
White	9%

(table continues)

	Lone Star ISD
Pacific Islander	Less than 1%
2 or more races	1%
Economically Disadvantaged	78%

Note. These figures are approximations rather than the actual data at the time of the study.

Description and Context of the Research Site and Population

Two elementary campuses from the same district in the north Texas region were selected as the schools and district site for this study. Based on the data found on the Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) (TEA, 2022), the demographics for Lone Star Independent School District (ISD) (pseudonym) are found in Table 1.

Selection of Research Participants

The sites selected for this study were purposefully selected based on their administrator’s decision to create kindergarten classrooms. Participant sites represent the two ways in which kindergarten classes are created in this district relevant to this study: (a) by random assignment or (b) knowledge of students’ academic and behavioral performance based on information relevant to their pre-kindergarten experience. The administrators chosen for this study were purposefully selected based on their participation in the decision to create kindergarten classrooms in one of two ways explored in this study.

- *Description of the participant sample.* Participants in this study were purposefully selected. The goal was to understand the impact an administrator’s decision to place students in kindergarten classrooms has on (a) the classroom teacher’s instructional planning and delivery of instruction according to the district’s scope and sequence of the curriculum over time, as well as (b) their students’ academic success and social and emotional growth. Therefore, kindergarten teachers and administrator participants were teaching at a site that determines kindergarten

placement based on one of the two ways being studied. Administrators were purposefully selected based on their knowledge and participation in the decision made to place students in kindergarten classrooms.

- *Recruitment of participants.* Teachers and administrators at the selected sites were invited to participate in the study. First, I met with the campus administrator to explain the purpose of the study and the potential benefit to their school and kindergarten students should the administrator agree to allow their school and teachers to participate in the study. In concert with the administrator, I then met with kindergarten classroom teachers to explain the study. Attendees were assured that their participation in the group was voluntary, their identity would be confidential, all responses would be held in strict confidence, and they would have the opportunity to decline participation at any time. Once participation was secured, each participant received a copy of the purpose of the study, the research questions, and who to contact should they have further questions about the study. Informed consent was obtained from each participant. Documentation of approval granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of North Texas was provided to the district and individual participants.

Data Collection Tools

Most, if not all the data collected for this dissertation study were derived through interviews. The primary method used to gather data was face-to-face focus-group interviews via Zoom with kindergarten teachers; however, face-to-face individual interviews via Zoom were also conducted with the campus administrator who works with or oversees the kindergarten program at each site. Both interview protocols consisted of a predetermined set of open-ended questions to facilitate dialogue and give participants the opportunity to provide specific examples of prior experiences. The questions were designed to elicit participant responses that were

aligned with the purpose statement and research questions guiding this study. The individual and focus-group protocols included probing questions for the purpose of acquiring more specific information and/or examples, as well as for clarification purposes.

Individual Interview Protocol

Individual semi-structured interviews were held with the campus administrator who directly supervises the kindergarten program at each of the participating elementary schools. Interviews ranged in length from 45 to 60 minutes. The individual interview protocol consisted of 15 questions (See Appendix A) designed to understand the background and rationale for the decision to place students in kindergarten classrooms and answer the research questions guiding this study. Each of the interview questions was aligned to one or more of the research questions guiding this study.

Individual interviews were used to gain insight from each campus administrator on this research topic (Hesse-Biber, 2017). The interview began with introductions and a review of the purpose of the study. I then began the interview with ice-breaking questions, allowing the administrators to share their background experience and their work with the kindergarten program at their school. A semi-structured interview protocol was used because it “allow(s) individual participants some latitude and freedom to talk about what is of interest or importance to them” (p. 112). This type of flexibility supports more fluid conversation, enables the opportunity for conversation to develop more deeply, and helps to uncover information or knowledge not previously known to the researcher. The goal of these interviews was to understand the background and rationale as to how and why the decision to place kindergarten students in classrooms was made.

Focus-Group Protocol

For each of the focus-group interviews, I served as the moderator. The focus-group protocol consisted of 16 questions (Appendix B). Open-ended interview questions were used in the focus group. The questions for both the focus-group and individual interviews were designed to elicit participants' responses specific to answering the research questions guiding this study. A focus group approach was chosen because they "can help the researcher inductively figure out what the key issues, ideas, and concerns are from multiple participants at once" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 149). Each of the interview questions was aligned to a research question for this study. To create a successful environment for focus groups, Hesse-Biber offered the following interviewing suggestions:

- Allow participants time to introduce themselves and review the ground rules for the focus-group event.
- Prepare a set of questions to guide the discussion.
- The questions should include three types: beginning (easy icebreakers), middle (key questions), and ending (sum up the overall discussion).
- Sequence naturally and move from general to specific topics.
- Manage time effectively.
- Listen intently to all focus group participants.
- Interact with participants after the group concludes.
- Follow up with a personal thank you. (p. 170)

Teachers were asked to introduce themselves and the focus-group protocol was shared with the participants. Included in the interview protocol were questions and probes that helped me, as the researcher, lead the discussion. Each interview question was designed to uncover the teacher's perceptions of the impact that each administrator's decision makes on their instructional practice and on their students' academic and social and emotional development.

The opening set of questions served as icebreakers and provided background information about the participants. The next set of questions addressed the heart of the study. The final set of questions allowed the participants to sum up their experiences as well as share any additional information that might not have been previously shared. As the moderator of the group, I was responsible for sequencing the discussion topics, managing time efficiently, and interacting with the participants before and after the interview began. After the conclusion of the focus group interviews, participants received a personal thank you note from me.

While the focus-group interviews ranged in length from 45 to 60 minutes, teachers were given the freedom and latitude to elaborate on their responses beyond the expected time frame if warranted. The composition of the focus group consisted of kindergarten teachers who taught in one or more of the two configurations of kindergarten classrooms in which students are placed. Participants in each focus-group interview were limited to the kindergarten teachers who all teach at the same elementary school campus.

Data Collection Procedures

Hesse-Bieber (2017) remarked that the purpose of qualitative research is to use questions to find and discover meaning from the data gathered in the study. To gain an understanding of the rationale and decision-making process of campus administrators and the teachers' perceptions of the impact of those decisions, individual and focus-group interviews were conducted. Data were collected from teachers who were assigned to teach kindergarten, as well as from administrators responsible for the kindergarten program at two elementary schools located within the studied district.

Each of the two elementary school administrators utilized a different approach to assign the kindergarten students who attended their school. Individual in-depth interviews occurred with

a campus administrator responsible for the kindergarten program at each site. Participants were welcomed, introductions were made, the informed consent form was reviewed, and the established semi-structured interview protocol was used to explain the purpose of the interview, the research topic being explored, and the reason their site was chosen.

At each site, a focus-group interview was conducted with members of the kindergarten team. Krueger (2015) suggested that focus groups range in size from 7 to 10 individuals; however, depending on the experience of the researcher, the size can range from 4 to 12 participants. Additionally, mini focus groups, with 4 to 6 participants, are often more comfortable for participants when the people in the group have more expertise on the topic or when they may have strong feelings about the topic. Mini focus-group interviews allowed me to gain an understanding teachers' perceptions of how the way that students were assigned to their classrooms impacted them, their students, and their instruction

Two teacher focus-group interviews and two campus principal individual interviews were conducted. Each set of interviews took approximately 45-60 minutes, allowing latitude for participants to share their experiences fully. To capture the participants' responses, and with their permission, the individual and focus-group interviews were audio recorded via Zoom.

Data Analysis Strategies

The goal of this study was to understand, from the teachers' perspective, the impact an administrator's decision makes on their daily classroom experiences. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the background and rationale behind the specific assignment of students to kindergarten classrooms that applies to each elementary campus. Therefore, data gleaned from the individual administrator interviews were used to provide a specific context for me, as the researcher, prior to interviewing the teachers to gain their perspective. An explanation of each of

the two campus scenarios enabled me to depict a more accurate rendition and enabled me to offer a more detailed and nuanced description of each of the two types of classroom assignments.

According to Hesse-Biber (2017), one of the primary purposes of conducting a qualitative study and “doing qualitative analysis is to get at understanding subjective experience” (p. 59) which, in the case of this study, involves an analysis of teachers’ perceptions. To gain an understanding of the impact an administrator’s decision had on each of the classroom teacher’s instructional planning and delivery of instruction according to the district’s scope and sequence of the curriculum over time and their views on the level of academic success and emotional growth their students achieved, it was important for me to pay close attention to the specific codes and themes that emerged from the teachers, both collectively and individually, at each campus.

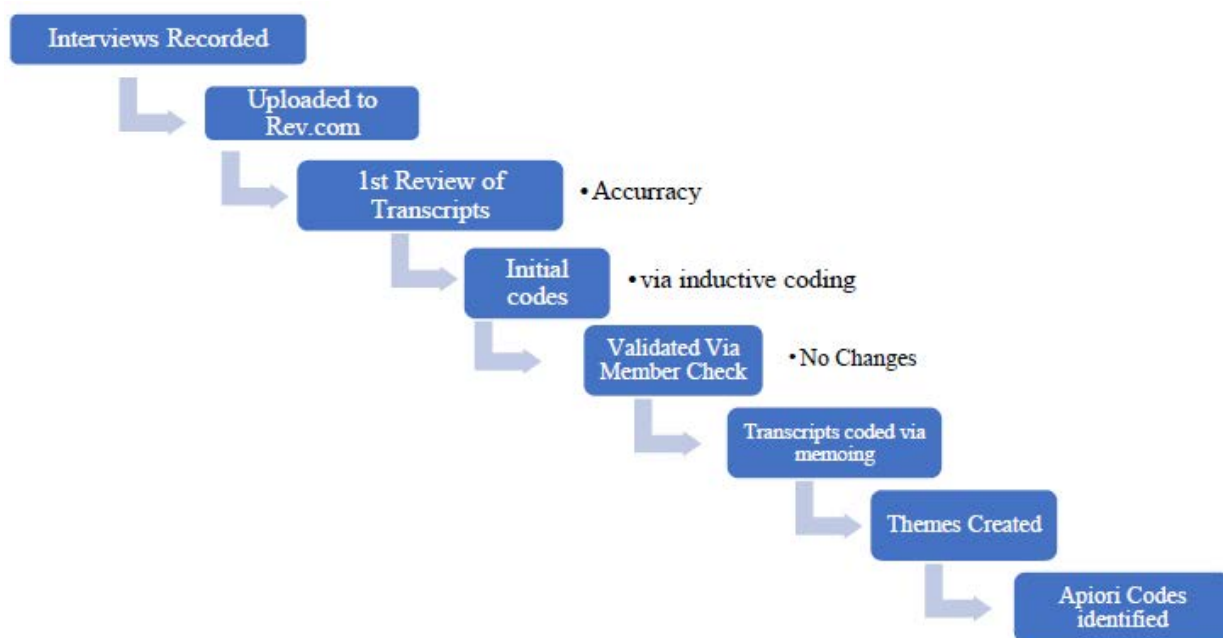
After the interviews, the recordings were uploaded to Rev.com™ for transcription purposes. After all interviews were transcribed, I first listened to the recorded interviews to determine accuracy of what participants said when compared to the actual transcription of each interview. To analyze the data from the individual interviews with the principals and the teacher focus groups, I structured my analysis to align with each of the research questions and the a priori codes of the conceptual framework (see Figure 1). To identify, analyze, and interpret specific patterns that emerged from the qualitative data, I utilized thematic analysis. In line with the approach supported by Braun and Clarke (2006), I organized my thinking around each of the research questions and developed specific themes. For that reason, the themes are similar for Research Questions 2, 3, and 4.

In the first phase of data analysis, transcripts were read and initial codes that stood out during the first reading were noted in a field notebook. I took reflective notes after each

interview to remind myself of specific thoughts or ideas that came to mind so they would remain fresh. Throughout the coding process, I used a memoing technique (Hesse-Biber, 2017) to identify specific themes as they began to emerge from the coding scheme. This memoing technique took place during the review of each transcript where specific codes and themes were noted by me directly on the transcript as they related to each of the research questions and the conceptual framework. Those codes were used to inform additional examinations and readings of each of the transcripts. It should be noted that throughout this process, I kept the research questions and a priori codes in mind to inform the development of specific themes. A theme that emerged from the focus group interviews that was unrelated to the actual research questions was the effect of the pandemic. Data that answered Research Questions 2, 3, and 4 resulted in four themes relevant to each of the research questions and the fifth theme that emerged was related to the pandemic effects. Figure 3 represents the data analysis described above.

Figure 3

Data Analysis Process for Interviews

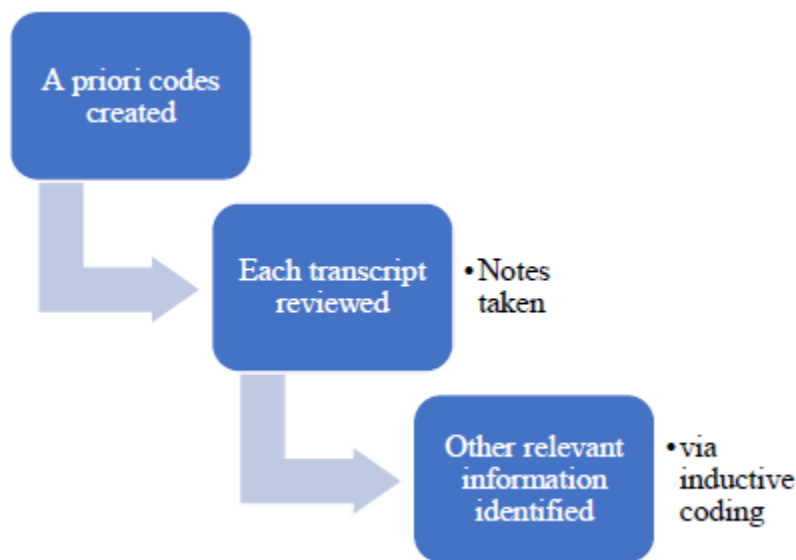


Note. This graphic illustrates the analysis process for interview data sets.

A priori codes were used to analyze each transcript. The a priori codes based on the conceptual framework were (1) how the administrator’s decision impacted teachers’ instruction, (2) how the administrator’s decision impacted the curriculum and scope and sequence, (3) how the administrator’s decision impacted the students’ academic success, and (4) how the administrator’s decision impacted the students’ social and emotional development. After the a priori codes were created, each transcript was reviewed and notes were taken. Additional relevant information was identified via inductive coding and noted. A visual representation of this process can be found in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Data Analysis Process for Transcript Analysis



Note. This graphic illustrates the analysis process for each transcript used for the study.

After the focus-group and individual interviews were analyzed, I conducted member checks to ensure the accuracy of my analysis. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that qualitative researchers “use member checks to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings by taking the final report or specific descriptions of themes back to participants and determining

whether the participants feel they are accurate” (p. 199). Additionally, member checks can include follow-up interviews to allow participants the opportunity to comment on the findings of the study. For this study, however, none of the participants indicated the need to adjust the accuracy of the identified themes; therefore, follow-up individual interviews were not deemed to be necessary. Inductive analysis was employed to identify the perceived impact on teachers and students based on the way students were placed in their kindergarten classrooms.

Positionality

For this qualitative dissertation study, I was the primary research instrument who collected and analyzed the data. My personal role in this study serves as a limitation to this study since I have been employed at the studied district for over 20 years. I spent eight years as a first-grade teacher with a focus on early childhood literacy. I bring practical knowledge about early literacy and early childhood education. However, as a teacher, the only practice in place for assigning students to a classroom was random assignment, based on grade level and program (English only, bilingual, dual language, and gifted and talented).

Currently, I serve as an elementary administrator at the studied district. One of my responsibilities is to oversee the kindergarten program at my elementary campus. Therefore, the creation of the research problem, research questions, selection of participants, and established interview questions may have been, in part, influenced due to my position as both a teacher and administrator, as well as any potential bias. I also have a vested interest in the outcome of this study due to the impact the findings could have on a campus instructional program, students’ success and their social and emotional growth, and future decisions concerning the kindergarten program at my campus and across the district.

Despite my current position as an assistant principal, I conducted interviews at campuses

where I do not serve as supervisor. Interviewing principals and teachers at elementary campuses other than my own facilitated a more open and honest discussion about the campus practices for kindergarten student assignments. My experience as an elementary administrator and as a first-grade teacher allowed me to probe teachers for more information throughout the focus interview process.

While my experiences cannot be separated from the study, they should not be viewed as a negative aspect to this research. My experiences helped to shape this study and enabled me to relate to both the teacher and administrator participants. These experiences created a more trusting environment for open and honest discussions throughout the interview process.

Limitations of the Study

Roberts (2010) explained limitations as particular features of a research study that may impact the results or the ability to generalize the findings. This qualitative study is limited in scope because only two campuses from the same district were used. This may affect the ability to generalize information gathered in the study to other schools and districts. The information gathered is limited to the participants' perceptions of the impact of an administrator's decision for how kindergarten classrooms are created. These perceptions may not accurately represent the reasons decisions were made by campus administrators. I did not consider factors that might have impacted student success outside of the decision made by the administrators to assign students to kindergarten classrooms.

Ethical Considerations

Because this study involves human participants, I followed all criteria set by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of North Texas. The IRB did approve my study. I completed an online course about protecting human subjects and received certification

from the National Institute of Health. Informed consent forms were obtained from the individual participants as well as from the school district. Prior to conducting the interviews with the principals and teachers, I explained the purpose of the study to each participant as well as why they were asked to participate. Participants were assured that their responses would be confidential, that transcripts of their interviews would be coded using pseudonyms so all identifiable information would be masked, and that data collected from their participation would be accessible only to me, as the researcher. Additional specifics related to confidentiality, permission to audio-record the interview, and other protections, assurances, and benefits related to their participation were reviewed. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form indicating they understood the role they would play in the study and all the protections to which they were assured. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative dissertation study was to understand how an administrator's decision on how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms impacts teachers and students on an elementary campus. The qualitative research design allowed me to gather data and analyze emergent themes relevant to the background and rationale provided by two administrators regarding their decisions as well as the potential impact of those decisions and teachers' perceptions of the impact of their administrators' decision on their instruction as well as their students. In this chapter, the research method is defined and procedures for data collection and analysis are described. Limitations of this study are identified and explained. Chapter 4 provides a thorough analysis of the data collected.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The work of education is divided between the teacher and the environment.

~Maria Montessori

The purpose of this study was to understand, from the teachers' perspective, the impact that administrators' decisions about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on (a) the classroom teacher's instructional planning and delivery of instruction according to the district's scope and sequence of the curriculum over time, as well as (b) their students' academic success and social and emotional growth. A secondary purpose was to understand, from the administrators' perspective, the background and rationale behind why one of the two assignment protocols was selected. In this study, I examined two ways in which kindergarten classrooms are created: (a) by random assignment or (b) knowledge of students' academic and behavioral performance based on information relevant to their pre-K experience.

Using a qualitative research design, the focus of this study was to understand the experience of teachers who taught under one classroom design for this study and to learn their perspective on the impact of those decisions on them and their students. Through a review of data gathered from focus group interviews with teachers and individual interviews with campus administrators, perceptions were explored to identify the rationale for the kindergarten class assignment and to understand the impact the decision had on teachers and students.

The research questions were based on existing literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and the purpose of the study addressed in Chapter 1. The following research questions guided this study:

1. From the administrators' perspective, what led to the decision for the assignment protocol chosen for their campus (rationale and background) and how did it impact their teachers and students?

2. From the teachers' perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator's decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their instructional planning and delivery of instruction according to the district's scope and sequence of the curriculum over time?
3. From the teachers' perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator's decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their students' academic success?
4. From the teachers' perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator's decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their students' social/emotional growth?

To answer the research questions, the findings of the study are organized by the research questions, based on the conceptual framework. Two different data collection methods were used: (a) focus group interviews with kindergarten teachers with a total of 10 participants and (b) two semi-structured individual interviews with the campus administrator at each participating campus.

Findings

Responses from administrators who participated in individual interviews provided the answers to Research Question 1. Responses from teachers who participated in focus group interviews provided the answers to Research Questions 2, 3, and 4. Through an analysis of the participants' responses, I was able to connect the impact an administrator's decision to assign students to kindergarten classrooms had on the teachers and students.

What follows is a presentation of themes that emerged as they align with each of the research questions in conjunction with the conceptual framework: the rationale and background that led to the administrators' decision for the selected kindergarten assignment protocol and how they believed their decision may have impacted teachers and students; the impact on teachers' instruction and curriculum/scope and sequence; and the impact on the students' academic success and social and emotional development. A visual representation of the

themes and subthemes identified is found in Table 2.

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes for RQ 2,3 & 4

Themes	Subthemes
Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher preparedness based on how students were placed • Teacher ability to deliver instruction based on classroom levels, student placement was a factor • Relied on team members or partner teacher to adjust instruction
Curriculum/Scope & Sequence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pacing based on student prior school experience • Classroom make-up impacted pacing (language, demographics, school experience)
Academic Success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Within class grouping to address gaps • Sharing students
Social and Emotional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be ready for anything • Prepare for what we know • Implement social and emotional curriculum
Pandemic Effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virtual learning • Accountability and parental support during virtual learning • Affect on pacing, achievement, and behavior

Next is a report of the findings for each research question.

Research Question 1

From the administrators' perspective, what led to the decision for the assignment protocol chosen for their campus (rationale and background) and how did it impact their teachers and students?

The first research question was designed to gain an understanding of the rationale and background for administrators' decisions on how they created classrooms for students entering kindergarten and the impact they believed their decision had on the teachers and students. Online individual interviews were conducted with two campus administrators who used different

methods to create kindergarten classrooms: Random assignment or use of student academic and behavior data.

At the time of the interview, the principal of Campus A (P1) had served her campus as principal for 4 years and the principal of Campus B (P2) was in the third year of serving as principal of her campus. Both principals had over 15 years of service to the district in a variety of roles, including teaching, district coordinator, interventionist, academic specialist, and assistant principal prior to their principalships. A visual representation of the background of both principals and the campuses they represent is provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Characteristics of Interviewed Principals

Campus A ((P1)	Campus B (P2)
4 th Year on campus	3 rd year on campus
15 th year in the district	15 th year in the district
2-way dual language program	Early exit bilingual program
83% economically disadvantaged	87% economically disadvantaged
17% overall population district staff members	

The interview questions asked of school administrators sought to understand their rationale behind their decisions in creating kindergarten classrooms as well as their perceived perspectives on how that decision impacted their teachers and their students. According to the principals, P1 assigned students to classrooms randomly while P2 assigned students based on student data including, but not limited to, academics, behavior, and student needs.

Campus A: Random Assignment

P1 chooses to assign students by random assignment. At the time of the study, there were seven kindergarten classrooms, six that paired classrooms and one that was self-contained.

Because this campus offered a two-way dual language program, a two-teacher model was used whenever possible, meaning one teacher was responsible for English instruction and the other was responsible for Spanish instruction, creating a paired teaching model. The classrooms were separate, but the two teachers worked together as a team for instruction and planning. The students would switch classrooms based on the language of instruction. In kindergarten, students spend 1 day in English, then switch classrooms and spend the next day in Spanish and vice versa. At this campus, there were seven kindergarten classrooms with three sets of pairs and 1 self-contained teacher. The self-contained teacher was bilingual and taught in both English and Spanish. The self-contained teacher followed the same language model (one day in English and one day in Spanish) but was responsible for teaching in both languages. Due to enrollment, she did not have a teaching partner.

Assignment of students in the kindergarten classroom at Campus A is a combination of random assignment and staff request, as children of district staff make up 17% of the overall population of the campus while the remaining 83% fall into the economically disadvantaged category. At the time of the study, 147 kindergarten students were enrolled. Of the 147 kindergarteners, 88 attended pre-K, meaning the campus teachers were familiar with the students, and the remaining 59 students were new to the campus, so the campus leaders had no information about them.

When assigning students to classrooms, P1 and her staff honor staff requests first, then assign any known behavior issues across the classrooms, then assign students randomly while making sure the male/female count in each classroom is evened out as much as possible. P1 noted that each teacher is aware they will be assigned 22 students. Prior to pairing the classrooms, however, the students learn the basic routines of the classrooms in their native

language. As stated by P1: “They do separate their classes for the first four days, so that students get all of the routines in rules in their native language or dominant language. So, I mean, they plan in advance in that way.” For students to be successful, the expectation is that teachers work in conjunction with one another so students can understand expectations and procedures no matter their native language. Thus, because students in paired classrooms are working with two teachers, both teachers who work with one another must agree to adhering to the same classroom practices. As P1 explained:

They also know that since they work with a partner teacher, that they have to mirror each other’s classroom in their practices, when it comes to rules, everything. Everything has to be identical for I guess, their team teaching to work.

The stated rationale for random assignment was as follows, as explained by P1: “I think it strengthens the team when it comes to their planning process because they’re all getting the luck of the draw really.” She further explained that this helps teachers work collaboratively and helps eliminate teachers from being able to use placement (“you have a better class than me”) as a barrier to learning and/or achievement.

Campus B: Based on Student Data

At the time of the study, P2 assigned students to kindergarten classrooms based on student data. P2 explained that the placement of students involves a holistic review of student data and is a team decision which includes the counselors, teachers, assistant principals, the academic specialist, and the interventionists. As a team, they review “everything they know about the student,” including behavior, background, academic ability, social and emotional needs, and any additional information pertaining to a student’s individual specific learning needs. This campus also has a medically fragile and active learning unit. These students have inclusion in kindergarten general education classes, and they are placed using the same holistic approach.

The team also considers the teacher personality in the placement of kindergarten students. P2 explained that she chose to utilize a holistic-review method to foster a “team approach.”

At my prior school, we did it based on who went to pre-K and who didn't go to pre-K. But sometimes, to me, and for our school, that's not always the case. You can't just do that. You need to look at so many different things. Family support, SEL needs, special needs, and so on and so forth. So is it collaborative team approach. And we want to be very holistic also, not just one thing. We want to look at the whole child and that's what our school is all about.

Thus, a holistic, collaborative approach to placing students aligned with P2's campus mission and vision statement.

Impact on Teachers

When addressing the impact of their decision on teachers' instructional design, P1 (Campus A) believed that with the combination of random assignment and paired teaching, teachers were still given some autonomy over student placement. As stated previously, since all but one teacher taught in pairs, the teachers' classrooms and expectations must mirror each other in their practices. For the first three weeks, teachers spend a significant amount of time acquainting students with their teaching routines and procedures in their students' native language. The third week of school, teachers are expected to start assessing students and have the autonomy to move students around within their two sections to create “color groups” that support their instructional needs. Interventionists help support the scope and sequence by closing gaps for students in need of additional learning support in terms of mastery and readiness (e.g., knowledge of letters and sounds and various types of tiered instruction). The principal explained the color groups this way:

So, we start intervention on the third week. And so, it's non-negotiable. There's a day on the calendar and they know that they have to start. So, what they do those first three weeks is they set routines, but they also assess the kids. So, this year we didn't have M-class ready in time, so we just used our traditional assessments. So, they do letters and sounds, and then our academic specialist and her para help assess for DRA, their DRA or

EDL level. Once they know that, what each teacher para has is 44 kids. This year, they had more than 44 kids. But what they do is they look, they create, they'll have two different colors, like a green and a purple group, but the green group will be the group that needs intensive intervention. And then, the purple group is the group that you can probably teach just tier one and extend and sometimes it's a little mixture. Because you might have some kids that need intervention in the higher group, and then we'll create our intervention schedule around it.

By doing this, the campus can maximize their support staff to help intervene and help teachers close academic gaps.

P2 (Campus B) involves the team in placement decisions so teachers can prepare for students before they even enter the school building. This can include reviewing and creating individualized learning plans for academics as well as behavior. P2 described how her teachers meet as a professional learning community (PLC) weekly to look at their students, look at the content, and plan for best teaching practices for upcoming standards in the curriculum. She believes the way students are placed in kindergarten classrooms fosters a community where "they are always thinking about what is best for kids, rather than what's wrong with a child. Instead of blaming kids, they look at their practices." The decision influences what they do as a team because they were always a part of the process.

Impact on Students

A visual representation of the perspectives of both principals and their responses is provided in Table 4. A narrative of each of the principal's perspectives and rationales for their selected approach to assigning students to kindergarten classrooms is separated, as well, according to (a) random assignment versus (b) use of student data.

Both principals believed their decision to place students in classrooms positively impacted students' achievement. At Campus A, P1 stated that the choice of randomly assigning students, while allowing for teacher autonomy within their two sections, allowed for students to

be better served by academic need and with the assistance of their interventionists. As previously stated by P1 regarding the impact of random assignment on teachers, intervention time is built into the master schedule; therefore, teachers can move students between groups to make sure their academic needs are met. On the other hand, P2 (Campus B) believed by having a team effort prior to students entering the building, achievement is positively impacted because there are multiple lenses being used to determine student assignments to classrooms. There isn't "one lens" on the students when creating classrooms.

Table 4

Administrator Perspective

Category	Campus A	Campus B
Placement	Random	Based on student data: background, behavior, academic ability, social and emotional needs, any specific learning needs, teacher personality
Rationale for choice	Equity, promotes collaborative teamwork, eliminates student placement as a barrier for achievement	Team approach, equity, collaborative, and holistic view of the student
Impact on Teachers		
Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Because teachers work in pairs, it requires them to mirror each other's classroom practices. Routines and expectations are taught in native language first Teachers create a tier one group and an intervention group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By involving the team, teachers can prepare for kids before they are even on campus. Teachers use PLCs to work collaboratively to support instruction and meet student academic needs.
Curriculum/ Scope and Sequence	The intervention groups receive intervention support from paraprofessionals. The tier 1 group can move faster.	Because they know their kids, teachers are able to prepare in advance and anticipate student learning needs and examine their practices.
Impact on Students		
Instruction	Because of the grouping, students can receive support from interventionists because it can be built into the master schedule.	Teachers work together as a collaborative community.

(table continues)

Category	Campus A	Campus B
Social/Emotional Learning	Teachers can regroup their students and help balance their groups to better support their high and low needs students.	Because teachers had a voice in the process, their attitude and approach toward a student with behavioral issues is different.

At each campus, the principal felt that their decision positively impacted the ability for the teacher to meet students’ social and emotional needs. At Campus A, P1 indicated that students’ social and emotional needs were served by having a variety of types of students in the classrooms: high achievers, students needing intervention, and students with a variety of behaviors. She said, “It helps bring your lower kids up and your higher students build leadership skills by helping.” At Campus B, P2 explained her belief that her placement methodology positively impacts students’ social and emotional needs. She explained that “because teachers had a voice in the process, their attitude with a student with behavioral issues is different.” Teachers no longer felt “stuck” with a student but saw opportunities to help the student because they had time to prepare for the student before they arrived in their classroom.

Research Question 2

From the teachers’ perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator’s decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their instructional planning and delivery of instruction according to the district’s scope and sequence of the curriculum over time?

The second research question was designed to understand, from the teacher’s perspective, what impact, if any, their administrator’s decision had on their kindergarten classrooms. My goal with this question was to understand how the decision impacted the teacher’s instructional planning and delivery of instruction, as well as the impact it had on the scope and sequence of the curriculum taught.

Instructional Planning, Delivery of Instruction, Curriculum and Scope and Sequence

Teachers at both campuses agreed that the placement of students into their classrooms

impacted their instructional planning and the delivery of instruction. They shared that whether students had attended pre-K impacted their pacing of the curriculum. The more students had a good understanding of school and foundational learning, the more quickly they could move through the curriculum. However, teachers at both campuses shared that with the pandemic, another layer impacted their ability to plan, deliver, and move through the scope and sequence of the curriculum.

Teachers from Campus A (random assignment) shared that while the students were randomly assigned to their classrooms, they had autonomy to move students within their paired classrooms. Because this campus has a two-way dual language program, a two-teacher model is used whenever possible, meaning one teacher is responsible for English instruction and the other is responsible for Spanish instruction, thus creating a paired teaching model.

Teacher 1 (T1) shared that her classroom was comprised mostly of district employees' children. Thus, the district employees' involvement impacted her pacing of the curriculum more than the way in which students in her classroom were assigned. She shared that the district employees who have children assigned to her classroom look at the curriculum being taught and the scope and sequence of how and when it is to be taught. This teacher noted, "If I do something differently, they want to know why, so it's a lot harder for me in that way." She continued that she felt an additional level of pressure to stay on track and not deviate from the district's scope and sequence because so many parents, as district employees, have a level of access to the scope and sequence documents that non-district level employee parents do not have.

The second largest impact on the instructional planning, delivery, and scope and sequence was students' language ability. Campus A is a two-way dual language campus and parents are not always forthcoming about their students' language ability in Spanish as it could

potentially impact their eligibility to attend pre-K. The classrooms might appear balanced, but once the students are in front of the teachers, T2 and T3 shared they sometimes realize that the language ability on paper does not accurately impact the student's actual ability in person. That language ability impacts the way teachers deliver instruction. When classes are lopsided with language abilities, the teacher must provide more vocabulary support which causes them to slow down the district pacing of the curriculum. Teachers shared that they can only prepare for students they know (attended pre-K on their campus) but they do not know a lot of the students coming to them. T4 talked about how, "without a voice, we don't know what is coming and there is less balance." T1 added, "When you don't know what kids are coming, you don't have anywhere to complain because everybody has kids that they don't know." In other words, when students are assigned randomly, teachers have less room to complain about bias when it comes to student assignments because none of them know who they are going to get.

Being a dual-language campus also allows for some flexibility for teachers to group students in different ability groups in some instances while, in other situations, enables them to find ways to "help them grow" through flexible grouping arrangements. As stated by T1,

It does make it a little bit easier because we do have some flexibility at the beginning of the year to move kids around. So, we do the first three days, we try to do as much assessment as we can, we look at where the kids are, and then we form two different groups, one with our higher group, so we can continue to build on them, and then we'll want. We call it the lower group so that we can take it more at their level and help them all grow rather than having such high kids in one group, and such low kids in another group.

This flexibility allows teachers autonomy and flexibility in spite of the administrator's decision to place students randomly because, even after initial placement, they can move students between at least two classrooms if they have a partner teacher.

The third impact on teacher pacing and instructional delivery was whether students

attended pre-K. T5 shared, “The majority of my kids did not go to pre-K, so we are having to take it a lot slower, and differentiate for the ones that did, already knowing their letters and sounds and are ready for the next step.” She continued, “In the past it was different, the majority of my kids attended pre-K so I differentiated for a small group that did not attend pre-K and moved along faster.”

Teachers from Campus B shared that since they used a variety of information for student placement, teachers had a good understanding of the needs of the students coming to their classrooms. Teachers receive information about their students on pink and blue cards that are used to sort their classrooms. These pink (girls) and blue (boys) cards contain a ranking of student academic achievement, behavior, who they should or should not be grouped with, and any special programs the student may participate in (special education, gifted and talented, 504, etc.). These cards also indicate if the students are being monitored for any reason, including future special education referral.

T7 said it is more challenging if students have not attended pre-K because often, they don’t know their letters or sounds, or how to write their name, which slows everything down when it comes to pacing in the curriculum. She shared that when they don’t go to pre-K, it “really changes how you’re going to teach students when they come in.” She explained that there are certain expectations for “for kindergarten that our students should know how to write their name, they should know at least a handful of letters and sounds.” However, for students who do not attend pre-K, “some of them don’t know anything.” As a result, she explained how the teachers must shift their instruction.

And so, you kind of have to change and start from the very beginning, and not just, “Oh, let’s do letters and sounds, because that’s what we do in kinder,” but how do you hold a pencil? Not just what are the letters in your name, but how do you put letters down on paper? So, you kind of have to bump down your instruction.

T9 shared that, on their campus, they routinely use the practice of small group instruction to differentiate for the needs of their students so they can meet all students where they are. According to T8, when students have not attended pre-K, they often must learn school in addition to the curriculum, so it makes it hard, and teachers must adjust their pacing and even lesson delivery. Students who did not attend school often require more instruction on how to do an assignment, such as “pick up your pencil,” how to hold the pencil, and how to write their name before they can begin to complete classroom work.

Pandemic Impact on Teachers

The pandemic created another group of students that teachers had not previously had to take into consideration. Academically, teachers had to consider students who did not attend pre-K, who attended pre-K in person, and those who attended pre-K online via Zoom. Teachers shared how students who attended online preschool had a range of support from their homes. Some had parents who were very involved in their learning, providing one-to-one support for their child, making them less independent, making independent working skills less than had the student been face-to-face. T3 stated, “It creates a big imbalance because even the ones who went to pre-K didn’t fully get the same education as they would have in a normal year due to those types of circumstances.” T7 added that the students who attended virtually were “almost as if they didn’t attend at all because pre-K is so hands on.”

Research Question 3

From the teachers’ perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator’s decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their students’ academic success?

The third research question was designed to understand, from the teacher’s perspective, what impact, if any, their administrator’s decision had on their kindergarten students’ academic

success. Teachers at both campuses shared similar responses to how the formation of their classrooms impacted student achievement. They shared that student grouping within their classroom had the biggest impact on their students' achievement.

At Campus A, teachers were allowed to make student classroom moves to their partner teacher's classroom. Teachers from Campus A expressed that due to this allowance, they could "access kids more where they are and move them around to meet their academic and instructional needs" (T1) by creating a higher and lower group of students. This way they could adjust the levels of differentiation needed in each classroom. This also had a large impact on their literacy-focused small groups. They could have students on similar reading levels grouped together to create three to five groups per classroom instead of seven or eight if they stayed with the original student grouping. Teachers at Campus A stated that the only information they receive about their students prior to the beginning of school is demographic information.

At Campus B, teachers similarly shared that student grouping is how they were able to meet the needs of their students. According to T7, for small group direct instruction, students were grouped into similar ability groups; however, when students worked in stations independently in groups, they were grouped in mixed ability so that students could help each other and learn from one another. She further explained, however, that even though her campus uses data to evenly place students, there are times when teachers are assigned to a class with a large number of students who did not attend pre-K, which makes it difficult for teachers. In T7's words,

I think that's the challenge for the lower grades, is making everything equal, because it really isn't. It's just, who you get is who you get. There's no rhyme or reason, other than the kids that already have been to pre-K.

T8 shared, "We get what we get. We don't share students amongst each other when the year

begins” and work in small groups to address any student deficits.

Teachers at neither campus gave quantifiable data about their students’ academic achievement. At the time of the study, there was no universal screening tool used to be able to compare data between the campuses. However, Campus A and Campus B were ranked by TEA’s accountability system as an A and B campuses respectively. Within the district, on district campus assessments, both campuses consistently scored within the top five of all elementary campuses in the district. While these data are not specific to kindergarten achievement, it does speak to the achievement of the campuses as a whole.

Pandemic Impact on Students

Teachers from both campuses shared how the COVID 19 pandemic had impacted student achievement. Teachers shared how students had a varying level of support, depending on if they attended in person, online, or not at all. Teachers saw students lacking in gross and fine motor skills because they had used a tablet or touch screen to access online learning. Both students that attended online or not at all during the pandemic lacked experience with school routines, expectations, and procedures, according to T3.

Research Question 4

From the teachers’ perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator’s decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their students’ social/emotional growth?

The fourth research question was designed to understand, from the teacher’s perspective, what impact, if any, their administrator’s decision had on their kindergarten students’ social and emotional learning/development. This included how classroom behavior impacted their classrooms, based on student assignment to their rooms.

Students Social and Emotional Growth and Behavior

Teachers from both campuses reported that student social and emotional learning and behavior were impacted by the way classrooms were created. At Campus A, teachers shared that due to the random assignment, teachers had to “be ready for anything” (T4). T5 shared if students attended pre-K on that campus, their pre-K teacher gave the next year’s teachers a “heads up” about students’ potential behavior and they were able to prepare in advance. In general, students who attended pre-K had more social skills than those who did not, according to T1 and T5. T3 further explained that once they have their students, assess them, and divide them according to color groups, the “higher group” has usually attended pre-K and has less behavior issues than the other group because they have a better understanding of school. She explained,

Since the kids who didn’t go to pre-K typically also are the ones who at least at the beginning, struggle more with behavior. That also tends to put a lot of those kids together so we can focus more on enforcing that or reinforcing the rules and expectations at the beginning of the year, even more with them than we have to with the other group, if it ends up being that most of the kids in one went to pre-K and most of the other didn’t. So, that also balances out a little bit too.

With the ability to intensely focus on behavior, she explained that the groups balance out more quickly.

Teachers from Campus B said that even though they use behavior as a way of placing students into classrooms, sometimes it is still the “luck of the draw” (T7). Teachers on this campus use small groups and stations and teach procedures to manage behavior expectations during learning time. P7 said, “pre-K is important to the development of social emotional well-being of kids in general.” When students attend pre-K, teachers find they spend less time teaching coping strategies. Overall, teachers stated that since the pandemic, their campus has focused on explicitly teaching social and emotional well-being lessons to all students on campus to help manage behaviors in the building.

Pandemic Impact on Behavior

Teachers on both campuses reported that since the pandemic they have dealt with an increase in student behaviors and that therefore impacted instruction. As stated by T9, “The dynamic to balance classes is different since the pandemic because now you have to take into account if they were face-to-face, virtual, or if they attended school at all.” T7 reported that because of the pandemic, the teachers must now teach kids to do things oppositely of what they would normally. For example, usually in kindergarten, teachers teach students how to share; however, due to the pandemic regulations, they had to explicitly teach students not to share. T7 explained,

Things have really changed this year on that aspect alone, of social, emotional wellbeing, just because we are telling kids to go against what we’ve always told them to do. You see kids trying to... they want to share their snacks, which they’re not supposed to do ever, but especially this year, they’re not supposed to even share materials.

Because fewer students had traditional school experience for pre-K, behavior impacts instruction more negatively than it did prior to the pandemic. Students also struggle to sit and attend for periods of time as compared to pre-pandemic. In addition, students are struggling to control their feelings, leading to an increase in counselor visits. T9 gave the following example about an only child who had not attended pre-K and was used to getting his own way:

Socially, he just is not there at all. He’s an only child. He hasn’t been to pre-K. And so, he is learning a lot socially, but when he does not get his way, he has temper tantrums. He starts crying. If I ask him to go to his desk, he throws his chair. He wipes everything off his desk. He hits people. He just will kick things. It’s just... He just lashes out because he doesn’t get his way, and he doesn’t understand why he can’t get his way.

As a result, the teachers were having to teach the student specific strategies and maintain a level of vigilance to intervene when necessary. T9 continued, explaining about the challenges in working with students who did not attend pre-K:

And so, we’ve had to work on it and talk about the breathing techniques and walking

away. And the other day on the playground, is a good example. Somebody grabbed his jacket, and I ran over there because I was like, “Okay, I need to stop this before he goes and punches this child.”

And I went over there and I was like, “Okay, stop real quick.” And I said, “What can you do right now?” I said, “What is the best thing to do?” He said, “Take a deep breath.” I said, “Okay, let’s do that.” I said, “Now, what’s the second thing you should do?” He said, “I should walk away.” I said, “See, you know what to do.” I said, “So let’s do this together.” And then he did. And then he was able to get back and go play and it worked. So, he has the capacity to do it.

Finding ways to get certain students to this point, especially for a 5- to 6-year-old student, as explained by T9, represented an additional layer of challenges that were exacerbated by the pandemic:

It’s just getting there. That’s hard for a five-year-old to do instead of just react, but that’s how he reacts. But there’s a lot of kids that are doing that now. It’s just like, they don’t think about their actions, which five- and six-year-olds don’t in general that much, but more of the children that are a little bit more mature can think it through a little bit better.”

These students were two and three when the pandemic began so their social and emotional growth was impacted because they were not exposed to typical situations that they would normally be exposed to.

Teacher Recommendations and Preferences

At the end of each focus group interview, teachers were asked if they had any information that they would like campus administrators to know or if they had any recommendations they would like to share with their administrators. Each group shared open and honest feedback for future administrators.

Campus A

At Campus A, P1 assigns students at random, even though teachers can move students around with their paired teachers. T1 asked that their principal allow teachers to have a voice,

and above all else, she would like to “have an equalness of behavior and academics” as well as evenly distribute district employees’ students to kindergarten classrooms in their school. T4 recommended “an equaling out of the language ability before they group the kids.” T6 echoed T1’s request for more variety in the classroom: “It was so much easier when we had one roster that was all Spanish speakers and one roster that was all English speakers and they actually all were.” Thus, T1 and T6 wanted to see a closer and more authentic match between the students’ language demographic information and their actual spoken language ability.

Random assignment, however, does not necessarily make allowances for such requests or arrangements. T5 said, “I know some schools will have kindergartners just come in and they’ll have a week to see how they are, who are the behaviors, especially the unknowns, and they group their homerooms. I like that.” By doing this, she shared how teachers can get to know the student and where the students are, both academically and behaviorally. After a set amount of time of one to two weeks, students should then be assigned to homerooms for the remainder of the year. The overarching recommendation was for equality in placement of students in the kindergarten classrooms.

Campus B

Overall, teachers from Campus B admitted that behavior concerns trumped academic concerns, as stated by T7: “Behavior concerns outweigh academics.” T9 agreed with T7’s comments and requested that students with behavior issues be distributed evenly. T7 continued, “Administrators should be all-hands-on-deck when helping those lower grade teachers with behavior because you can set your class up for failure or for high achievement depending on how your kids act.” T10 asked for support to be provided for students with behavioral concerns and students with special needs. T8 stated that classrooms should have a good balance of all levels,

which is supported by looking at the whole child when placing students into kindergarten classrooms. Teachers from Campus B felt that their administration took lots of things into account when placing students and their overall biggest request was to limit class sizes, ideally to 16, as recommended by T7, T8, T9 and T10.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand, from the teachers' perspective, the impact that administrators' decisions about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms has on (a) the classroom teacher's instructional planning and delivery of instruction according to the district's scope and sequence of the curriculum over time as well as (b) their students' academic success and social/emotional growth. An additional purpose was to understand, from the administrators' perspective, the background and rationale behind why one of two protocols for assigning students to kindergarten classes was selected. In this study, I examined two ways in which kindergarten classrooms are created: (a) by random assignment or (b) assignment based on a given assessment/evaluation by teachers. Participants selected for this study worked at campuses where students were assigned to classrooms in one of the two ways explored in this study within the same Texas school district. An analysis of qualitative responses from the campus principal individual interviews and the kindergarten team focus group interviews provided insight on both the administrator and teacher perceptions of the administrator decision and its impact on instruction, student achievement, and social and emotional growth of students. The data were collected and analyzed, and transcripts were coded based on the research questions and the conceptual framework for the study. Through the data analysis process, the themes of behavior and equity were a focus for teachers in the formation of kindergarten classrooms. After the inception of the research project, a global pandemic impacted the way teachers taught and

students learned. Teachers shared their insight on how things had changed and how that impacted instruction, student achievement, and social and emotional growth.

Chapter 5 includes a review of the study including the problem statement, research questions and methodology. The chapter also includes a discussion of the results, conclusions, and implications for practice, and suggestions for further research based on the findings of this study.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our care of the child should be governed, not by the desire to make him learn things, but by the endeavor always to keep burning within him that light which is called intelligence.

~Maria Montessori

Chapter 5 includes a summary of the descriptive qualitative study with an overview of the research study, including a brief review of the problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, and methodology. The results of this study were obtained through a qualitative research design described in Chapter 3 and this chapter provides important conclusions drawn from data in Chapter 4.

Chapter 5 next offers a discussion of the findings, how these findings align and address the four research questions, and the correlation of the findings with prior research. The chapter concludes with implications for current and future practice, recommendations for future research, including the need to further examine the potential impact on how kindergarten classrooms are created. Researcher reflections serve as the conclusion.

Overview of the Study

The problem of practice that called for this study was the way students were being placed in kindergarten classrooms and the perceived impact those placements had on kindergarten classrooms throughout the district. At the time, the district encouraged schools to use knowledge of a student's attendance in pre-K as a deciding factor on kindergarten classroom placement. A review of the literature highlighted the positive impact that attendance in pre-K programs has on long-term student success and shows there is a dearth of research literature related to the ways in which administrators determine kindergarten classroom assignments and the impact the selected assignment has on each of these areas. Therefore, older studies were reviewed that delved

specifically into this topic, as well as more current studies that related to assessment-based classroom placement in kindergarten and student grouping within the classroom.

In Texas, the compulsory attendance age for school is six years old, meaning that students often do not begin school until kindergarten. Opportunities for students to receive an early childhood education at no cost, provided by the state of Texas, are generally based on income level, native language, or residence status (e.g., homeless, foster care, or active military). Students whose family circumstances do not meet these criteria are limited to tuition-based preschool programs. This creates an imbalance of preparation due to access to school preparation programs. Students starting school, therefore, come to school with a variety of skills and preparation for school readiness.

Increased access to preschool programs has been found to impact positively the future capability for educators to close the achievement gap and increase long-term student success (Highscope, 2018). Because access to these programs is limited, students who do not attend preschool are sometimes at a disadvantage. The gaps between the students, how they are placed in classrooms, and how it impacts the teachers and students is why the way students are placed in kindergarten classrooms needed to be explored in this study.

Teachers are tasked each year with meeting the needs of their students and meeting achievement goals that impact campus achievement ratings, all while supporting students' social and emotional growth. To investigate how administrators can best support the teachers, I investigated two different ways students are placed in kindergarten classrooms, explored administrators' rationale behind their decision, and analyzed teachers' perceptions behind how their administrator's decision impacted their ability to serve students and the ability for students to achieve.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand, from the teachers' perspective, the impact that administrators' decisions about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms has on (a) the classroom teacher's instructional planning and delivery of instruction according to the district's scope and sequence of the curriculum over time, as well as (b) their students' academic success and social and emotional growth. Students who participate in preschool programs are expected to come to school with higher levels of knowledge and experience about school. Typically, as is true in the studied district, there are two ways in which kindergarten classrooms are created: (a) by random assignment or (b) knowledge of students' academic and behavioral performance based on information relevant to their pre-K experience. The type of assignment to classrooms that administrators' make and how students are then distributed to the classroom based on their assignment can affect students' school experience as well as their overall success. Therefore, a secondary purpose was to understand, from the administrators' perspective, the background and rationale behind why one of the two assignment protocols was selected and the level of impact they believe their decision had on teachers and students. The research questions follow:

1. From the administrators' perspective, what led to their decision for the assignment protocol chosen for their campus (rationale and background) and how did it impact their teachers and students?
2. From the teachers' perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator's decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their instructional planning and delivery of instruction according to the district's scope and sequence of the curriculum over time?
3. From the teachers' perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator's decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their students' academic success?

4. From the teachers' perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator's decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their students' social and emotional growth?

Review of the Methodology

My goal in conducting this qualitative study was to understand how an administrator's decision to place students in kindergarten classroom impacted teacher's instruction, curriculum, and scope and sequence, as well as to understand the impact on students' academic achievement and social and emotional growth. Individual administrator interviews allowed me to understand the rationale behind the administrator's decision, while the teacher focus group interviews allowed me to understand teachers' perceptions of the administrator decisions, as well as understand the impact that decision had on their instructional design, students' achievement, and students' social and emotional growth.

Discussion of Findings

Chapter 4 presents findings about administrators' rationale for their decision for how they place students in kindergarten classrooms and teachers' perspective of how that decision impacted their instruction and scope and sequence as well as how it impacted their students' academic achievement and social and emotional development. This section provides a comprehensive summary of these perspectives and impacts. The results of this summary are aligned to the research questions and conceptual framework and are applicable to the research design and related literature.

In this research study, I documented and analyzed the impact an administrator's decision had on teachers and students from the teachers' perspective from two different ways of placement: (a) by random assignment or (b) knowledge of students' academic and behavioral performance based on information relevant to their pre-K experience. During this study, a global

pandemic occurred which allowed teachers to share additional struggles that did not exist in research prior to or at the beginning of this study. This section is organized by research question with an additional section about the impact of the pandemic.

Research Question 1

An administrator's level of involvement in class creation impacts students and teachers and can impact the campus culture (Monk, 1987), how teachers respond to their classrooms (Monk 1992), and potentially, teacher evaluations (Burns & Mason, 1998). The level of involvement and philosophy of the administrator is impacted by the level of tenure (Monk, 1987). Principal participants confirmed that their perspective of how the kindergarten placement decision was made impacted their perspective of fairness. Some teacher participants felt their class was unfairly loaded with a certain type of student, based on the way the administrator decided to place students.

The principal (P1) with the most experience chose random assignment for her campus, while P2, the principal with the least experience, chose to use knowledge of students' academic and behavioral performance based on information relevant to their pre-K experience to make kindergarten placement decisions. Both principals cited "equity" and "fairness" as a reason for the choice they made for their campus. From P1's perspective, she believed random assignment strengthened her team because everyone received students "at the luck of the draw," while from P2's perspective, the use of the "team approach" allowed teachers and interventionists all to have a voice in student placement so they could "know everything about the student" that they could before receiving them the following year. While each had a different approach, both principals were considered to have a high level of involvement when it came to classroom placement, meaning they were actively and directly involved in the decision and placement of students.

Both types of student placement impacted teachers and students. Teachers who worked at the campus where students were assigned randomly were paired. They were allowed some autonomy after the randomization to move students within their two classrooms after they had completed beginning-of-the-year testing. This allowed teachers to better support students' social and emotional needs and meet academic intervention needs, much like the findings of Msyzak and Conn-Powers (2008). When planning for their students' academic success, teachers who worked at the campus where student data were used to place students indicated that by using this method, they were less likely to place blame on their students. Instead, they focused more on examining their practices, which allowed them to service both the academic and social and emotional needs of the students. At both campuses, the principals felt that students' needs were being met.

Research Question 2

Random Assignment- Instructional Planning, Delivery of Instruction, Curriculum and Scope and Sequence

In 2014, 67.9% of principals strongly opposed random placement of students and suggested that random assignment of students did not allow for balanced classrooms (Paufler & Amrein-Beardsley, 2014). In that study, most principals (48%) believed that random assignment of students in elementary schools was impractical or detrimental, citing the potential for inequity in the classrooms. Still, some principals stated they believed that random assignment is the most important process because it does not consider other factors, believing it to be the most equitable.

In the current study, the teacher respondents tended to agree with the philosophy found in the Paufler and Amrein-Beardsley study (2014). By randomly assigning students, teachers in the current study sometimes felt their class was unfairly stacked. One teacher stated that their assigned class had too many district employees' children, which increased the scrutiny of her

teaching. Another teacher spoke about the imbalance of true language ability in a two-way dual language program that existed in their classroom. By perceiving that their classrooms were not balanced, these teachers had to find creative solutions around the randomization. In this case, teachers were paired and given the autonomy to move students within their two classrooms to make meeting the students' academic needs easier for the teacher. However, allowing teachers to balance their own classrooms after randomization was limited as it was only between the two classrooms. By having a variety of students' academic needs in their classroom, it made the ability for within-class flexible grouping a high-yield instructional strategy, which was much more difficult for teachers. This problem was found in the Stenbergen-Hu et al. study as well (2016).

Assignment Using Student Data- Instructional Planning, Delivery of Instruction, Curriculum and Scope and Sequence

In 2014, Paufler and Amrein-Beardsley discovered that 98% of classroom assignments were non-random. Principals took a variety of background information into consideration when making placement decisions, including academic achievement, behavioral issues/needs, language proficiency, student interactions with peers, and student/teacher personalities, including instructional and management styles. In their study, principals reported providing guidelines for teachers to create balanced classrooms using specific criteria. By using student information, principals strive to find balance for classrooms and by including the teachers, they hope to increase teacher investment in student academic and social and emotional success. Participants in the current study agreed with their research findings. In the current study, teachers felt that by their administrator requiring a "whole-student" approach, classrooms were able to be more balanced and every teacher felt as if they were getting their fair share. Teacher participants did not believe that one classroom was built to be better, or higher or lower than another, and, as a

team, they were able to look for ways to approach instruction for their students. As a grade level team, teachers could more easily move through the district level curriculum and adjust instruction based on their students' needs. They used within class groupings to target academic deficits and close gaps, as suggested by McCoach et al. (2006).

Research Question 3

Random Assignment

By randomly assigning students to classrooms, academic ability within the classroom was not predictable prior to starting school. McCoach et al. (2006) suggested that teachers use high yield instructional strategies such as within-class grouping; however, in the current study, the number of groups varied because the placement of students was random.

Teacher participants reported using readiness assessments to help move students within their teacher pairings. This action allowed them to decrease the range of academic groupings within their classrooms to better serve their students and provide intervention strategies in reading and mathematics, which aligns with the recommendation suggested by Stenbergen-Hu et al. (2016).

Assignment by Student Data

Using student data to make placement decisions helps teachers serve students and therefore increases students' achievement (Conn-Powers & Peters, 2006). By evaluating student academic knowledge prior to placement, teachers can create targeted instruction to increase student achievement. Teachers can use a mix of homogeneous and heterogeneous groups within the classroom to create flexible learning plans for students. Ability grouping can "affect students' experiences in school, including the courses they take, the curricula they receive, the peers with whom they learn, and the teachers who provide instruction" (Stenbergen-Hu et al., 2016, p. 852).

Teacher participants in this study agreed that by knowing student data, they could focus on the best learning plans for students and increase student achievement. They used both ability grouping and flexible grouping to meet students' needs within their classrooms and address any academic deficit. They felt they were able to manage student learning targets and students were able to meet their goals. This finding correlates with what McCoach et al. (2006) found in their study.

Research Question 4

One aspect that is not commonly assessed but should be considered when making student recommendations for kindergarten is how students interact in real-life situations and information on physical, social, emotional, and cognitive developmental domains (Powers, 2000). While researchers have not always agreed that this information should be used for placement, they do agree it should be used when assigning students to kindergarten classrooms. Unfortunately, there are no real universal screening tools that exist for this type of testing, as found by Msyzak and Conn-Powers (2008). Assessments are often created by teachers, campuses, or districts to screen students instead of through a nationally normed test.

Participating teachers in this study agreed that social and emotional development impacted the classroom. Teachers from the campus with random assignments felt like they had to "be ready for anything" and never knew what to expect. If they were receiving a student with "big behaviors," they could not prepare until the student arrived, because the teacher did not know the student's history. However, teachers at the campus where student data were used for placement felt more prepared to address students' social and emotional needs before they entered the classroom, as suggested by Msyzak and Conn-Powers (2000). They could have behavior

plans and individualized incentive plans in place that were previously successful so the students could “pick up where they left off.”

Pandemic Impact

During this study, a global pandemic occurred causing schools to shut down and, without warning, find a way to remotely teach and serve students. During this time, principals and teachers reported the deep impact the pandemic had on kindergarten students. Students who were in kindergarten at the time of the shut-down missed the end of the kindergarten year. Those who were in pre-K when schools shut down had to attend kindergarten virtually and missed out on a lot of socialization, especially if they did not attend pre-K the year before. Because students did not always attend Zoom learning sessions with fidelity, academic learning also suffered. Students without parent support at home struggled with the technical aspects of learning online, in addition to their academic learning. Teachers reported that when students returned to in-person learning, they struggled with gross and fine motor skills (because they had been online), lack of stamina, understanding of school routines and procedures, and an overall greater gap of academic achievement among all students. This impacted classroom placement even more as it was harder to know anything about students for a few years.

Implications for Current and Future Practice

The findings from this study could assist educational leaders in developing systems for placement of students in kindergarten classrooms. These findings add to the current research literature in terms of specific studies designed to understand the best way to place students in classrooms for kindergarten instruction. By becoming cognizant of what teachers’ perceptions are and how the principal’s decision impacts their instructional planning and curriculum pacing, as well as how their perceptions on how that decision impacts student achievement and social

and emotional learning, administrators might be able to make placement decisions that positively impact teacher morale, student achievement, and the ability for teachers to close learning gaps. Principals need to realize that this decision impacts the overall campus and the ability to serve students with equity.

As referenced in Chapter 4, the teachers at both campuses provided specific preferences and recommendations that are applicable to elementary school administrators who are tasked with assigning students to kindergarten classrooms. Therefore, these recommendations for current and future practice are worth repeating:

- Teachers asked to have a voice in the decision-making process.
- Teachers asked for equal distribution of academic levels and behavior issues.
- Teachers suggested that principals not assign classrooms until a week (or so) after getting to know their students so current teachers can assess where students are academically and behaviorally.
- Teachers requested smaller class sizes to be able to better address academic gaps and behavioral issues.
- Overall, teachers felt that students with behavioral issues should be given placement preference over academic issues.

Above all, teachers want transparency, clarity, understanding, and voice when it comes to how students will be placed in their classrooms.

Recommendations for Future Research

For this study, only two school principals and two kindergarten teams of teachers in one district were interviewed. Based on the teachers' reported perceptions, they all believed their student achievement was high, but their input on the student placement decision-making process was different. A future study with a larger sample size of participants could result in additional

findings about the impact an administrator's decision to place students in a kindergarten classroom has on teachers and students.

This study could be expanded in several ways. First, the study could be replicated to compare different school districts or add additional ways that administrators use to place students in kindergarten classrooms. One concern about this study was that the number of ways students are placed in kindergarten classrooms was not large enough. Additionally, the methodology could be altered for replicating this study. A quantitative evaluation of student achievement based on universal screeners, recommended by the state and used at the campus level, could allow a researcher to compare the actual achievement of students at different campuses instead of relying on teacher perception of student achievement.

Further, an additional layer could be added to this study, including adding individual teacher interviews, or interviews of a district representative who oversees best practice recommendations for campus principals when it comes to student placement in kindergarten classrooms. This representative could be an early childhood director or any other administrator, such as the school superintendent, depending on who is responsible for the district-level decision making.

Researcher Reflections

What I hoped to find when I began this study changed when suddenly the world was impacted by a global pandemic. The way we planned and executed instruction, the way students attended and participated in school, and the way we conducted research all changed overnight. No one had any experience in what we faced in our new normal and this study and what I learned evolved because of the pandemic.

Motivation for Conducting the Study

I was motivated to conduct this study based on my own personal experiences as a campus administrator. Kindergarten students in the studied district, at the time, were placed in kindergarten classrooms based only on whether they had attended pre-K or not. The students who did not attend pre-K were required to be placed in a classroom with a kindergarten “master teacher.” This teacher was then expected to modify the district curriculum and scope and sequence to a pace that helped close the gap for these students. I watched master teachers struggle to help students in classrooms without peers of varying academic abilities to learn from as none of them had attended school previously. This meant that they were learning school and academics at the same time. These master teachers were tasked with having to focus more time on socialization skills than their counterparts, yet all teachers were expected to reach the same student achievement success, as set by the district, by the end of the year even though at least two teachers on each team were beginning behind the starting line. While I believe the intent was good, I wanted to know from the teachers’ perspectives how much an administrator’s decision to place students in kindergarten classrooms impacted them as well as their students.

What I Expected to Discover

When I began, I assumed I would find one clear way of placing students in kindergarten classrooms that was superior to the other. I wanted to know from teachers which way was best so I could implement the same strategy on my campus and positively impact teacher workload and student achievement and social and emotional growth. I wanted to find the best way to positively impact a teacher’s ability to successfully design instruction and implement the district scope and sequence while helping students achieve and develop their social and emotional growth. The teacher workload is heavy and finding a balance is always hard.

My Role as a Parent

Since beginning this study, I became a parent. The impact of the study will now affect me personally in just two short years. My child has already begun pre-K 3 and I know that the experiences he has now will forever shape the way he experiences school in the future. I know that how he is placed in his kindergarten classroom will begin his official school trajectory for formal learning. The autonomy his teacher has to make instructional decisions and meet his academic needs will affect his future ability to achieve and have success in life. Currently, he is a student who is at or above grade level and has met all his growth and development milestones. He does not struggle in school; but, based on what I know about students in kindergarten now, I worry. Will his teacher have time to meet his average to above average needs or will they need to focus so much on closing gaps that he will just “get by” because his needs may not be as great as others?

The Effects of the Pandemic

When I began this study, there was no way I could predict a global pandemic, nor could I predict what impact that would have immediately on classrooms or in the immediacy as we attempt to recover from the pandemic. Teachers in this study shared their experiences and how it impacted their practices. These are the issues that resulted from the pandemic.

- Another group of learners was created to consider - that of virtual learners.
- Teachers had to consider what level of support they had at home.
- Since pre-K is so hands-on, several teachers commented that when virtual learners returned to class, it was like they had not been in school at all.
- Students lacked fine and gross motor skills when they returned to school in person.
- Students returning to in-person learning had varying levels of stamina.

- Students returning in person lacked experience with school expectations, routines, and procedures.
- An increase in behavior issues has been observed.
- Students struggle with what would be considered normal social situations because of isolation during the pandemic lockdown.

Fast forward two years and what I have observed as an administrator is that we are dealing with completely different groups of students with all the same achievement expectations. We have students who all have varying levels of equity when it comes to educational access during the pandemic and it created large learning gaps. At the time of publication (2023), the educational world declared the pandemic to be “over” so everything should be “back to normal” and achievement should resume as before with no consideration of the large gaps that still exist. Teachers, administrators, and school districts are all being held to pre-pandemic achievement standards by state and federal stakeholders. It is unreasonable.

Another impact from the pandemic is teacher burn-out and teacher retention. According to the U.S. Department of Education, every state in the U.S. experienced a teacher shortage in one more area during the 2022-2023 school year and this shortage continued into the 2023-2024 school year, creating major challenges for school district across the nation (Forsht, 2023), Larger class sizes and additional duties were assigned to teachers, and many teachers who were hired are not certified or fully qualified to fulfill their roles as classroom teachers. Currently, the teacher pool is much smaller than it used to be, requiring school districts to be much more creative on how they fill positions.

In the district studied, there are three levels of teachers, and all are held to the same requirements but are paid at different levels. The first is fully certified teachers. The second is an interim teacher who has a degree of some sort and passed at least one or more certification test. The third is an uncertified, non-degreed teacher with some college hours working toward their

teaching certificate/degree. This is now another level of consideration for how students are placed in classrooms and how students are matched up with teachers and why the use and implementation of professional learning communities (PLC) is so important for supporting students and teachers as PLCs are an ongoing process developed to help teachers work collaboratively to better meet students' needs while helping to develop and refine the teachers' craft.

Learning How to “Do School”

In a newly post-pandemic world, administrators need to consider that teachers are dealing with more than just students who have never been to school. They are dealing students who have never been to school and students who have to learn how to “do school” and have “normal” social human interaction again. Teachers are having to undo the lessons taught during social distancing, such as no sharing, practices which were necessary for the sake of safety, but now are necessary again for the sake of getting along. Teachers must teach all the little things we once took for granted: how to stand in a line, be respectful of others, stamina, how to be inquisitive and investigative in person and not just simply be entertained by a screen.

Professional Considerations/What I Learned

I have not yet had the opportunity to be the person to make the decision about how kindergarten student placement is made, but I am in the position to help influence those decisions. Through this study, I learned that what is most important to teachers is to have a voice and for their administration to provide transparency throughout the classroom placement process. They wanted to know that there was equity in decision-making and that everyone shares in similar struggles and successes. They wanted to be able to prepare for their classrooms in advance and be aware of any possible struggles in advance. This dynamic seems to bring a

tighter sense of unity among a team and a more positive outlook for success. What I realized is that a seemingly small decision can have a big impact for both teachers and students.

Conclusion

An administrator's decision to place students in kindergarten classrooms impacts both teachers and students. Understanding what students need (Msyzak & Conn-Powers, 2008) and allowing teachers the flexibility to be able to respond to their needs allows for maximum success. Principal involvement in the creation of classrooms is important (Paufler & Amrein-Beardsley, 2014). As Monk (1987) found, principals' involvement and philosophy impact both teacher success and student achievement. Most principals support the purposeful placement of students to promote equity and fairness (Paufler & Amrein-Beardsley, 2014). In this study, teacher participants who had balanced classrooms felt that they could better manage student instruction and support student behavior. When students are assigned randomly, while it may seem fair, it eliminates the opportunity for teachers to know information about their students prior to arriving in their classrooms. This information was important for teachers in their preparation for both academic and behavioral support. Implications from this study suggest that when teachers know more about the students they are receiving, they feel better prepared to teach and feel better prepared to manage student social and emotional growth. When teachers feel prepared, they are more confident in their ability to serve students, close academic gaps, and respond to students' social and emotional needs to achieve the optimal learning environment for all.

APPENDIX A
INDIVIDUAL IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Research Questions

1. From the administrators’ perspective, what led to the decision for the assignment protocol chosen for their campus (rationale and background)?
2. From the teachers’ perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator’s decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their instructional planning and delivery of instruction according to the district’s scope and sequence of the curriculum over time?
3. From the teachers’ perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator’s decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their students’ academic success?
4. From the teachers’ perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator’s decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their students’ social/emotional growth?

School Pseudonym		Principal Pseudonym	
Location		Date	

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself. (background)
 - a. How long have you been the principal?
 - b. How long have you taught kindergarten?
 - c. How long have you worked in this district? On this campus?
2. Tell me about the make-up of your kindergarten classes. (RQ 1)
3. How did you make the decision about how you would place students in kindergarten classrooms? (RQ 1)
4. How does this process of creating the student list for your classroom impact your teachers’ overall instructional practices? Probe: Share specific examples. (RQ 2)
5. How does the process of creating the student list overall impact student achievement in on your campus? Probe: Share some specific examples. (RQ 3)
6. How does this the creation of your classroom impact your teachers’ literacy instructional practices? Probe: Share some specific examples. (RQ 2)
7. How has this way of grouping of students impacted student behavior on your campus? Probe: Share some examples. (RQ 4)

8. How has this way of grouping of students impacted your teachers' ability to differentiate instruction in your classroom? Probe: Provide examples. (RQ 2)
9. How has this way of grouping impacted student social development with their peers compared to other ways students are grouped on your campus? Probe: Provide examples. (RQ 4)
10. What differences in behavior or social emotional development have you observed using this sorting method versus another sorting method to place students in your kindergarten classrooms? Probe: Provide examples. (RQ 3 & 4)
11. What, if any, concern does this policy used for kindergarten classroom creation cause for your teachers? Probe: If you do, explain those concerns. (RQ 1, 2, 3, & 4)
12. Has this policy positively impacted you or your students and campus? Probe: If so, explain. (RQ 1, 2, 3, & 4)
13. How does the policy on your campus/in your district differ from other experiences you had on another campus? Probe: Give specific examples. (RQ 1, 2, 3, & 4)
14. What information would you like to share with another administrator making this decision for their campus?
15. Is there anything else you might tell me that would help with my study?

APPENDIX B
FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain an understanding about how an administrator’s decision to create kindergarten classrooms impacts a kindergarten teachers’ instructional practice, students’ academic success, students’ social and emotional development, and classroom behavior. I will begin the interview by introducing myself and stating the purpose of the interview. Consent will be obtained, and confidentiality of participation will be reinforced. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym to protect each participants’ identity. Participants will be informed that the interview will be recorded, with their permission, and can be stopped at any time. The following research questions will be used to conduct the study:

1. From the administrators’ perspective, what led to the decision for the assignment protocol chosen for their campus (rationale and background)?
2. From the teachers’ perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator’s decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their instructional planning and delivery of instruction according to the district’s scope and sequence of the curriculum over time?
3. From the teachers’ perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator’s decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their students’ academic success?
4. From the teachers’ perspective, what impact, if any, did their administrator’s decision about how to assign students to kindergarten classrooms have on their students’ social/emotional growth?

School Pseudonym:		Date:	
Location		# of Participants	

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself. (background)
 - a. How long have you been teaching?
 - b. How long have you taught kindergarten?
 - c. How long have you worked in this district? On this campus?
2. Tell me about the make-up of your kindergarten class. (background)

3. How does your campus/district determine kindergarten class placement for your students? (background)
4. How does this process of creating the student list for your classroom impact your overall instructional practices? Probe: Share specific examples. (RQ 2)
5. How does the process of creating the student list overall impact student achievement in your classroom? Probe: Share some specific examples. (RQ 3)
6. How does the creation of your classroom roster impact your literacy instructional practices? Probe: Share some specific examples. (RQ 2)
7. How has this way of grouping of students impacted student behavior in your classroom? Probe: Share some examples. (RQ 4)
8. How has this way of grouping of students impacted your ability to differentiate instruction in your classroom? Probe: Provide examples. (RQ 2)
9. How has this way of grouping impacted student social development with their peers compared to other ways students are grouped? Probe: Provide examples. (RQ 4)
10. What differences in behavior or social emotional development have you observed using this sorting method versus another sorting method to place students in your kindergarten classroom? Probe: Provide examples. (RQ 4)
11. Do you have any concerns about the policy used for how your class student list is created? Probe: If you do, explain those concerns. (RQ 2, 3, & 4)
12. Has this policy positively impacted you or your students? Probe: If so, explain. (RQ 2, 3, & 4)
13. What impact does the class creation policy have on your instructional team? (RQ 2, 3, & 4)
14. How does the policy on your campus/in your district differ from other experiences you had teaching kindergarten, if any? Probe: Do you have a preference as to the way your students are assigned to your classroom? Give specific examples. (RQ 2, 3, & 4)
15. What information would you like to share prior to an administrator making this decision for their campus?
16. Is there anything else you might tell me that would help with my study?

APPENDIX C
FOCUS GROUP INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose, benefits, and risks of the study and how it will be conducted.

Title of Study: The Impact of Kindergarten Classroom Assignment on Classroom Teachers and Student Achievement

Student Investigator: Angelica Fountain, College of Education, angelicafernandez@my.unt.edu

Supervising Investigator: Dr. Barbara Pazey, College of Education, Barbara.Pazey@unt.edu

I agree to participate in this study about the impact on instruction, student achievement, and student behavior made by an administrator's decision on how kindergarten classrooms are created. This study is being conducted by Angelica Fountain, an educational leadership doctorate student at the University of North Texas and has been reviewed by the faculty of the College of Education and the university Institution Review Board. I understand that my participation will involve answering a series of questions in an approximately one-hour-long focus group interview.

I understand that this study is being conducted for research purposes only and that all data are confidential and that at no point throughout my participation in this study will any personally identifying information be requested. I also understand that in dissemination of findings, no personally identifying information will be released.

I also understand that the data obtained from this study will be safeguarded, and only those authorized persons will have access to it: Angelica Fountain and Dr. Barbara Pazey. Audio recordings and all data related to this study will be stored in a locked cabinet. Audio-recordings will be destroyed at the close of the study. Transcribed responses will be preserved for at least three years as specified by the American Psychological Association and then be disposed of by shredding and deletion of all electronic data. The results from this study may be used in future presentations or publications.

I am aware that my participation in this study is completely voluntary. I have the right to refuse to answer any question and the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Please check one of the following:

_____ I agree to participate in the study described above.

_____ I do not agree to participate in the study described above.

Name (please print): _____ **Date:** _____

Signature: _____

Consent for audio recording: Please initial here if you consent. _____

For general questions/concerns contact the student investigator at angelicafernandez@my.unt.edu or the primary supervisor at Barbara.Pazey@unt.edu.

APPENDIX D
INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW INFORMED CONSENT

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose, benefits, and risks of the study and how it will be conducted.

Title of Study: The Impact of Kindergarten Classroom Assignment on Classroom Teachers and Student Achievement

Student Investigator: Angelica Fountain, College of Education, angelicafernandez@my.unt.edu

Supervising Investigator: Dr. Barbara Pazey, College of Education, Barbara.Pazey@unt.edu

I agree to participate in this study about the impact on instruction, student achievement, and student behavior made by an administrator's decision on how kindergarten classrooms are created. This study is being conducted by Angelica Fountain, an educational leadership doctorate student at the University of North Texas and has been reviewed by the faculty of the College of Education and the university Institution Review Board. I understand that my participation will involve answering a series of questions in an approximately one-hour-long individual interview.

I understand that this study is being conducted for research purposes only and that all data are confidential and that at no point throughout my participation in this study will any personally identifying information be requested. I also understand that in dissemination of findings, no personally identifying information will be released.

I also understand that the data obtained from this study will be safeguarded, and only those authorized persons will have access to it: Angelica Fountain and Dr. Barbara Pazey. Audio recordings and all data related to this study will be stored in a locked cabinet. Audio-recordings will be destroyed at the close of the study. Transcribed responses will be preserved for at least three years as specified by the American Psychological Association and then be disposed of by shredding and deletion of all electronic data. The results from this study may be used in future presentations or publications.

I am aware that my participation in this study is completely voluntary. I have the right to refuse to answer any question and the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Please check one of the following:

_____ I agree to participate in the study described above.

_____ I do not agree to participate in the study described above.

Name (please print): _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Consent for audio recording: Please initial here if you consent. _____

For general questions/concerns contact the student investigator at angelicafernandez@my.unt.edu or the primary supervisor at Barbara.Pazey@unt.edu

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