

# **Does Pre-School Education Matter? Understanding the Lived Experiences of Parents and Their Perceptions of Preschool Education**

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## **Abstract**

According to the United States Department of Education, approximately 4,172,347 four-year-olds are eligible to attend publicly funded preschool programs. Of this number, only 1,709,607 of those eligible are enrolled in a publicly funded preschool program (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Because of a lack of quantitative and qualitative data regarding parents' positive and negative attitudes and beliefs about preschool, misconceptions arise regarding parental decisions to support or not to support their child's academic, social, and emotional development prior to kindergarten. In a large urban district in the southeastern part of the United States, this qualitative phenomenological study investigated the perceptions of 12 parents, six of who elected and six of whom did not elect to send their children to preschool, and the lived experiences that contributed to those decisions. Unanswered questions linger about why so few children attend preschool. Further, the study examined the relationship between parent attitudes and beliefs about preschool and whether or not their lived experiences contributed to their perceptions of the values of preschool.

Current research reveals that preschool programs have made a positive impact on early literacy, social emotional learning, and academic success (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2012; Cunningham, 2010; Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Invernizzi, Landrum, Teichman, & Townsend, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In 2004, the U.S. Department of Education conducted an Early Childhood Longitudinal Study that identified a 60% school readiness gap between preschool-aged children in the highest socioeconomic group and the lowest socioeconomic group, before entering kindergarten (Robin & Schulman, 2004). The

National Institute for Early Education Research (2015) confirmed that students who start school before kindergarten are more likely to do well academically and socially throughout their educational careers. Don Owens, Director of Public Affairs for the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYP) stated

It is not the same kindergarten we went to. It is not the same kindergarten it was ten years ago. Kindergarten used to be preparation for school, but now it *is* school. That is why school districts and boards of education are paying attention to what happens *before* the kids arrive at school. (2007, p. 1)

The skills obtained from preschool attendance include pre-reading strategies, such as oral language and phonological awareness, and pre-writing skills. Exposure to these skills and practice of them before kindergarten increased the possibility for students to have successful reading experiences in school (Barnett et al., 2012). Educators agree that children between the ages of three and five are in vital phases of academic and social-emotional development (Ahmad, 2015; Burchinal et al., 2010; Cunningham, 2010; Dearing et al., 2009). Additional research supports the focus of preschool programs to include activities that are predictors of future school success (Barnett, 2008; Weber-Stratton, Reid, & Stoolmiller, 2008).

Consequently, school leaders across the United States are looking for ways to promote the importance of getting children ready to learn before entering kindergarten and are seeking parents who have preschool-aged children with whom to share information about the benefits of preschool (Smart Beginnings, 2013; Williford, Downer, & Hamre 2014). Government officials, research companies, school districts across the country, and professionals in many disciplines have collected a myriad of data to support or reject the importance of mandating preschool attendance for all children regardless of economic, social, or racial background

(Cascio & Schanzenbach, 2013). This data has been used to examine the impact preschool has on student achievement, both short and long-term. Additionally, in his 2014 State of the Union address, President Obama called for expanding “high-quality” preschools to improve the outcome of learning and academic success (2014). Gordan et al. (2015) examined the benefits of attending several preschool programs and identified the following results: improves social and emotional development, increases school readiness, and raises school performance. Current research continues to suggest that the impact of preschool attendance on student achievement is significant and a priority for the United States of America to address.

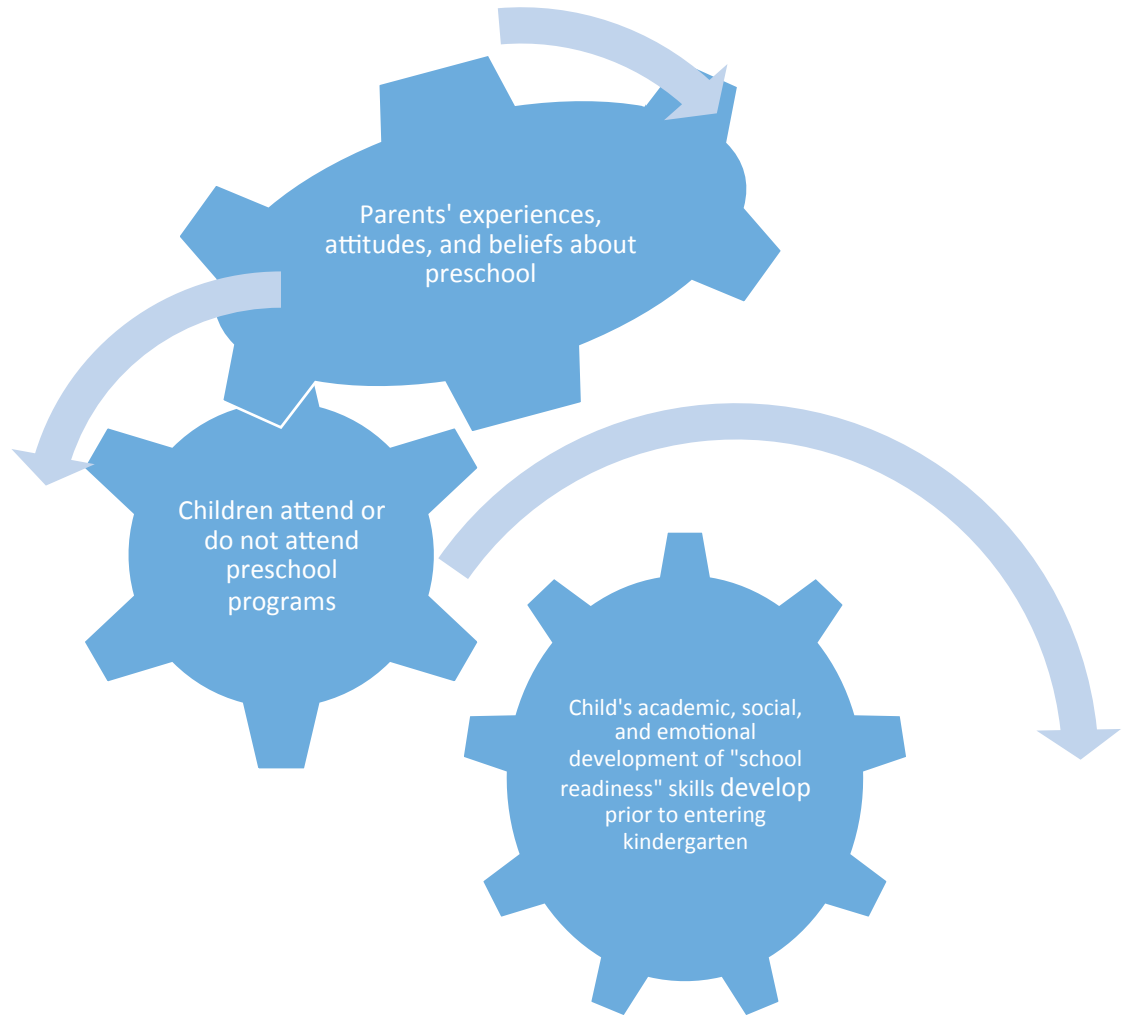
### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the work of Glasser (1998) about choice theory. Duncan, Ludwig, and Magnuson (2007) found that educators and parents are key components in determining the academic outcomes of children who are enrolled in preschool programs. Additional research conducted by Fan and Williams (2010) noted that parents who are actively involved and inspire their children to excel in academics feel more connected and have a sense of parental fulfillment as it relates to their child’s educational journey. Included in this concept is the parents’ ability to choose preschool because they do not feel competent in their young child’s quality world, which for this qualitative phenomenological study is discussed as a preschool learning environment. Glasser’s (1998) choice theory defines an individual’s quality world as a “small personal world which each person started to create and re-created throughout life through a small group of specific pictures” (p. 45). Ultimately, these pictures fall into three major categories, including “the people [they] want to be with, the things [they] want to own or experience, and the ideas and beliefs that govern [their] behavior” (p. 45). According to Glasser, “building strong relationships with individuals can only foster the quality world of a person”

(Allison, 2011, p.8). Glasser's theory also concluded that individuals were responsible for their own views and actions.

**Desire to own or experience things.** When children are born, parents immediately take possession of their children and become part of the experiences they choose to explore with their children. When parents are required to share their involvement with preschool programs, Glasser (1998) notes that feelings of invasion and the need to adapt to a new situation may “go against the basic wants and needs” (p. 51). In a preschool situation, parents must be involved in their child’s education, create a home environment conducive to learning, lose their learned behaviors, and partner with educators to whom they may not want to expose their educational shortfalls. In other words, feelings are perceived emotions that are stimulated by experiences that toggle between needs and wants. Therefore, the experiences of parents and their impact on decisions about preschool attendance add depth to the literature by disclosing why parents desire a preschool program for their child or not.

**Beliefs that govern behavior.** Glasser (1998) notes that an individual’s belief system governs who and what a person will or will not tolerate in his or her quality world “core of life” (p. 53). According to Glasser (1998), a person is more willing to believe and adapt to a situation when there is established a benefit for the individual. Otherwise, the person will reject the belief and abandon any behavior that will interrupt his or her quality world.



*Figure 1.* Conceptual Framework.

In summary, Glasser's (1998) concept of a quality world forms the conceptual framework for this study because Glasser's theory suggests that individuals choose to develop attitudes and beliefs based on lived experiences. Thus, parents' attitudes and beliefs about preschool may be determined by their experiences with the teaching staff, the preschool curriculum, or preschool educators. Glasser's (1998) concept of a quality world correlates to this study because the goal of this study is to understand how the lived experiences of parents influence their choices to allow their children to attend or not attend preschool.

### **Assumptions**

The goals of this phenomenological study are to examine the lived experiences of four parents who did not enroll their students in a preschool program and to describe the daily lived experiences of four parents who did enroll their child(ren) in a preschool program prior to enrolling their child(ren) in a public school kindergarten classroom. The study is based on the assumption that all parents who agreed to participate were open-minded and honest with their responses to the interview questions and were active participants of the focus group. Additionally, I assume that they will represent their point of view with truth.

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### **Delimitations of the Study**

Twelve participants were asked to participate in this study and give their perceptions about preschool. No teacher or educational leader input was sought because the researcher was

only interested in the attitudes and perceptions of parents. The targeted group is delimited because the participants were selected from the researcher's church in the Southeastern area of Virginia.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study is limited to parents who attend church in the Southeastern part of Virginia. Thus, the study will not be generalizable to other populations. Twelve parents who agreed to participate in one-on-one interviews with the researcher include six who elected to send their children to preschool and six who elected not to send their children to preschool, but eventually enrolled their child(ren) in a public kindergarten. Simon and Goes (2013) defined limitations of a study as anticipated limits that make it difficult to simplify the findings of the study because of possible weaknesses. Validation of these findings may be limited because parents may be motivated by experiences of other parents who sent their children to preschool, or they may lack the knowledge of what defines "preschool." Additionally, parents may not provide the truth in their responses, or they might not respond fully or at all.

### **Significance of the Study**

Parent involvement (PI) in education is associated with positive outcomes for students; however, little is known about how parents decide to be involved in the early years of their children's education prior to kindergarten. A lack of data exists among quantitative and qualitative data in regards to parents' both positive and negative attitudes and beliefs about preschool, preschool attendance, and parental involvement that is reflective of parents' lived experiences.

## **A Review of Literature**

### **The Evolution of Preschool Education**

In the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), President Johnson's "WAR on Poverty" provided additional funding for schools and funded the initial Head Start Program, an early intervention preschool program for economically disadvantaged students (USDOE, 2004). President Johnson stated, "It will offer new hope to tens of thousands of youngsters who need attention before they ever enroll in the first grade" (USDOE, 2004, p. 2). In 1994, Congress supported Goals 2000 by increasing funding to support school readiness (Gallagher, Clifford, & Maxwell, 2004). The goals for Early Intervention and Reading documented that all children would attend school and be eager and open to learning new skills and concepts that encourage and enhance critical thinking skills. Additionally, Goals 2000 sought for the United States to increase the graduation rate to 90%, and that the United States would rise to first in the world in the areas of science and math (Gallagher, Clifford, & Maxwell, 2004). Although these goals received wide approval and support, they were not able to be met due to lack of parental involvement and budgetary restraints.

Barnett (2008), a researcher for National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University, conducted several studies and completed numerous reports on Early Childhood and Preschool programs in America. In one of his reports, *Preschool Education and Its Lasting Effects: Research and Policy Implications*, Barnett (2008) indicated that ten percent of the nation's three and four-year-olds were enrolled in a preschool program in 1960. The findings from this report suggest that ninety percent of children eligible to attend a preschool program did not attend. Less than fifty years later, nearly seventy-five percent of children who were age four enrolled in preschool early learning programs. Fifty percent of children who were age three also enrolled in a preschool program. Barnett (2008) explains that the growth in



preschool attendance was caused by the “achievement gap.” Barnett, Hustedt, Robin, and Schulman (2004) presented significant differences between those students who attended preschool and those who did not.

Current trends in preschool early learning programs in the United States include the following: Pre-K, Kindergarten & Extended Day Kindergarten, and Preschool Children “at risk.” According to the USDOE (2011), all of these programs were developed as a result of the following initiatives that were passed by the federal government: HEAD START, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Title I, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Universal Pre-K, and Full-Day Kindergarten. Barnett (2008) claimed, “These trends have been accompanied by growth in private preschool education and child care, state-funded pre-K, preschool special education, and the federal Head Start program” (p. 3).

Over forty-five years ago, politicians were knowledgeable about the disparity between children from the middle class and children from low socio-economic backgrounds. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson used the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to establish the Head Start program (Kagan, 2002). This program served over 560,000 children across America. The administrations of President Nixon, President Carter, and President Reagan supported the Head Start initiative and continued the upward battle toward expanding preschool programs. In 2003, The USDOE described Title 1 preschool as a program that served children under age five who suffered from poverty. In 2004, NCLB forced state educational leaders to be accountable for meeting the needs of all students. This act was instrumental in focusing public attention toward underachieving students in kindergarten and forcing school leaders to attend to the achievement gap. Also, legislation required that children be proficient in reading and math by 2014 (NCLB,

2004). Arne Duncan (2013), United States Secretary of Education, stated that Universal Preschool gives equal access to all three and four-year-olds in America (Duncan, 2013).

In 2013, President Barack Obama encouraged an increased focus to be drawn to the investments in early intervention and high-quality preschool programs for all. In his State of the Union address, President Barack Obama stated, "I propose working with states to make high-quality preschool available to every child in America...Let's do what works, and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind. Let's give our kids that chance" (Obama, 2011, p.3). Many states agreed to implement President Obama's "Preschool for All" initiatives and volunteered to participate in grant programs like *The Race to the Top Challenge* to support early learning by increasing the number and percentage of enrollment in high-quality preschools. Awards for *Race to the Top* participants go to states that are ambitiously leading the way to developing plans for implementing coherent, compelling, and comprehensive early learning education reform efforts. Forty states participated in the first phase of implementation and more states are seeking to join the early education reform programs (USDOE, 2009).

### **Parent Attitudes and Beliefs about Preschool Education**

A study conducted by Keen (2005) found that parents' beliefs and expectations of their children's academic achievement were related to the level of education parents had achieved, as well as socio-economic factors. Across the globe, researchers gathered data to determine parents' views and beliefs about preschool. In Turkey, Şahin, Sak, and Şahin (2013) interviewed 35 parents whose children attended private preschool institutions to seek their views about early childhood education. Four themes emerged: (a) the importance of preschool, (b) age of preschool, (c) characteristics of preschool institutions, and (d) the expectations of parents. Şahin et al. (2013) concluded that the majority of the parents believed preschool improved their child's

social skills and understood the characteristics of preschool programs. They did not find a consistent view of the age at which a child should start preschool. Also, data from this study suggested that further research is needed to determine parent views about both private and public preschool programs.

Baroody & Diamond's (2013) qualitative study examined the relationship between parent and child characteristics, such as the parents' level of education as it related to children's literacy interest. Parents in this study indicated they wanted their children to succeed in school and to exhibit positive social behaviors. Parents of 61 preschoolers from predominately low-income families who were enrolled in local preschool completed questionnaires reporting their expectations of preschool. Parents' expectation of their child's achievement in school significantly correlated with their child's literacy interest. Saçkes et al. (2015) suggested that parental beliefs about children's literacy motivation are associated with their literacy practices at home. A sample of 315 parents of preschool-aged children participated in this qualitative study. The results revealed that parental perceptions of their children's literacy motivation were significantly related to their home literacy practices (Saçkes et al., 2015).

### **Opposing Views and Beliefs about Preschool Education**

Huang et al. (2011) investigated the differential and persistent effects of a state-funded preschool program. The study was conducted to determine whether or not preschool program Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) participants have a differential effect and whether or not the effect persists over time. A longitudinal sample cohort of over 60,000 students in 1000 schools from the beginning of Kindergarten through the end of 1st grade was included in the study. Two-level hierarchical logistical regression models revealed that attending preschool was beneficial. Students who attended preschool had a lower likelihood of repeating kindergarten. The largest

benefit of attending preschool was measured in the first half of the school year. However, Huang et al. (2011) also found that “by the end of first grade, the effects’ sizes in all ethnic subgroups were relatively smaller than those measured at the beginning of Kindergarten” (p. 42). This data suggests that over time, the effects of preschool begin to decrease and are not sustained. These researchers used the term “fading out” to label the claim that preschool has no measurable effect on children’s academic performance later on (Magnuson, Ruhn, & Waldfogel, 2007). Data from additional studies has revealed that the long-term effects of preschool appear to dwindle as children grow older (Bierman, Nix, Heinrich, Domitrovich, Geist, Welsh, and Gill, 2014; Barnett, 2008). Neither of these reports, however, explore parental beliefs regarding the consequences of preschool on long-term achievement.

### **Rationale and Purpose of This Study**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to investigate the perceptions of parents who have or have not elected to send their children to preschool and the lived experiences that contributed to those decisions. Further, the goal of this study is to explore the attitudes and beliefs of parents who did and did not enroll their child in a preschool program. Parental involvement must be an established principle in the influence of classroom and home environment developmental skills of preschool children (DeMulder & Stribling, 2012). This study is designed to capture the parents’ perceptions of preschool and to discover their reasons for sending or not sending their children to preschool school before entering kindergarten. Educators’ understanding of the perceptions, attitudes, and the role of parents is crucial in making decisions about future early learning literacy programs (Smart Beginnings, 2013). This study is designed to collect data to assist preschool leaders and policymakers in their understanding of parents’ involvement in the academic and social-emotional development of

their 3- or 4-year-old child(ren) enrolled or not enrolled in a preschool program. We intended to answer the following research questions:

*Research Question 1:* What do parents believe are the values of preschool?

*Research Question 2:* What lived experiences do parents indicate contributed to their attitudes and beliefs regarding preschool?

*Research Question 3:* What experiences determined whether or not parents enroll their children in preschool?

Research Question 4: Based on their lived experiences, what intrinsic values do parents reflect upon when enrolling their child in a preschool?

### **Method**

A qualitative research approach was followed for this study. The theoretical perspective most often associated with qualitative researchers is phenomenology (Bodan & Biklen, 2007). About the methodology of this qualitative study, the research design of phenomenology was selected as an appropriate method of inquiry because this research design emphasizes the exploration of human experience. According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenology is “the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one’s immediate awareness and experience” (p. 26). Therefore, during the data collection process, the researcher conducted an initial interview and follow-up interviews with twelve parents regarding their experiences related to preschool education.

Following the phenomenological approach, the researcher sought to understand meaning in events and human interactions (Creswell, 2013). This method required that the researcher attempt to achieve a sense of the meaning that others give to their situation (Creswell, 2013). The goal of qualitative research is to explore and interpret meaning (Merriam, 2009). A sample is chosen for this design based on the willingness and the proximity of the participants.

## **Instrumentation**

The researcher is often the sole person responsible for data collection in phenomenological research and the design of the instrument that was used to collect the data (Creswell, 2013). The wording or focus of the question determines what is primary in pursuing the topic and what data are collected (Moustakas, 1994). Rubin and Rubin (2011) suggested the use of interview forms or conversational guidelines to help keep the “interview focused and on track” (p.147). Qualitative interviewing “explores experiences and uncovers meaningful structures which can be obtained from participants by designing interview questions that are open-ended” (Hatch, 2002, p. 86). According to Weiss (1994), “interviewing is an especially important means for data collection because interviewing gives us a window into the past” (p. 1). Therefore, both initial and follow-up interviews were conducted for this study.

The interview questions that the researcher designed were based on the research questions, related to the conceptual framework, and aligned with the review of the research literature for this study. The purpose of the questions was to uncover parents’ attitudes and beliefs about preschool through the exploration of their experiences and decisions to send or not to send their children to preschool. A copy of the interview questions has been peer-reviewed and confirmed for having the clarity to ensure that the instrumentation was reliable.

The interview began by asking participants to state their age, ages of children, and the name of school district their children are zoned to attend. The school district was not used in the research but was identified so that the researcher could compare and look for similarities and/or differences in the experiences and perceptions of parents from different school districts. All interviews were recorded using a digital and a backup digital recorder. All dialogues were transcribed into a written document.

## **Participants and Context**

The study took place in a community centrally located in a large urban school district. The participants were solicited from a church population of approximately 1,200 that is located in the community. The Amen Church is the pseudonym that is used throughout the study to maintain the confidentiality of the church. The Amen Church has served the local community for over twenty years and currently provides day care and preschool services to children from birth to age four. Participants included six parents who did not send their children to preschool and six parents who did send their children to preschool. Participants varied in the number of children, ages, racial backgrounds, and socioeconomic status.

## **Data Sources**

Multiple data sources were examined for this study. Parents' lived experiences regarding preschool education were collected through qualitative initial and follow-up interviews. Each data source is described in further detail below.

***Initial Interviews.*** The initial interview began with the background questions related to the participant's demographics of the family. Nine of the initial interviews took place as scheduled. Three of the initial interviews had to be rescheduled due to the participant's personal emergency. The time span of the initial interviews varied from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours. Next, the researcher asked descriptive questions that had been designed to encourage participants to provide detailed information about their experiences. Participants were asked ten open-ended questions regarding their attitudes and beliefs towards preschool and reflections of how those lived experiences formed their attitudes and beliefs about their children attending preschool. Open-ended questions were asked by the researcher to allow the participant to expand on his or her responses. The interview questions asked allowed the researcher to gather information that described the

parents' understanding of the phenomenon of preschool. Then, the researcher asked questions that explored how the participants' experiences formed their attitudes and beliefs about preschool.

***Follow-Up Interviews.*** The purpose of the follow-up interviews was to allow participants the opportunity to ask any additional questions related to the study, as well as to disclose any additional information that would support the study. Questions for the follow-up interview allowed the participants to share additional information regarding their personal experiences with preschool education and the opportunity to confer any changes in their reflections about preschool. The time span of these interviews ranged from 10 to 20 minutes. The follow-up questions were recorded and transcribed into a written document in the participants' "own words." Participants reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy by way of the member-checking process.

### **Data Analysis**

The interview questions served as the primary source for interpreting and analyzing data. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a member-check is one trustworthiness technique the researcher may use to ensure that data collected during a qualitative study is reliable. Member-checks occur when the "the final report or specific description or themes" are given back to the participants for review (Creswell, 2009, p. 191).

Each participant had the opportunity to review his or her transcribed interview for accuracy before the researcher began to analyze the data. This procedure provided the researcher the immediate opportunity to reflect and make necessary corrections and ensure that the participant's words on the tape and transcript captured exactly what the participant wanted to convey to the researcher.



During the data analysis phase, the researcher used a modification of the van Kaam method of analysis recommended by Moustakas (1994) for phenomenological data. Before conducting the interviews, the researcher placed aside her personal prejudgments and preconceptions about preschool, using a process described by Moustakas (1994) as bracketing, which would “assist in the development of universal structures based on what people experience and how” (p.34). Using this method, the researcher described personal experiences. The researcher also identified and listed every significant statement relevant to the topic and gave them equal value, known as horizontalization. According to Seidmann (2006) a more conventional way of presenting and analyzing interview data is to organize excerpts from the transcripts into categories. Therefore, the researcher searched for linking threads and patterns.

The significant statements from the participants were clustered and organized into meaningful units and themes. Next, the researcher described the themes in forms that were both textural and structural. Finally, the researcher constructed a combined description of the meanings and the cruxes of the experiences.

### **Findings of the Study**

The nine themes identified in the data analysis address the four research questions previously discussed. The results are discussed below.

**Finding One. Participants believe that “academic readiness skills” are benefits of preschool.** Ten out of twelve participants identified the following elements of academic readiness skills: listening to reading, knowing how to write, and identifying letters and small words, like their name. From interview question one, all twelve participants mentioned that preschool has the potential to develop some form of academic readiness skills in children,

although six of the twelve participants did not send their children to preschool. The other half of participants who did send their children to preschool agreed that the foundation of early learning begins in preschool.

Five of the six parents who did not send their child to preschool indicated that preschool had academic benefits for those students whose parents cannot afford to stay home and teach their children, whereas all of the participants who did not send their child to preschool agreed that preschool supports children in learning appropriate school behavior.

From the follow-up interview responses, nine participants suggested that parents should send their children to preschool to learn basic concepts. Of those nine, six of the participants who did not send their children to preschool noted that parents should send their children to preschool only if they cannot afford to stay home and teach them. Petersen (2012) found that school readiness creates a strong foundation for learning.

Five of the six participants who did not send their children to preschool believed that the skills taught in preschool were redundant to the skills taught in kindergarten. These parents referred to those skills as a child being able to identify their ABC's and letter sounds, write their name, and count and identify numbers.

**Finding Two. Participants believed that preschool contributed to a child's social and emotional development.** All of the parents who sent their children to preschool and half of the parents who did not send their child to preschool agreed that children develop positive emotions about school. Most of the participants also believed that because positive emotions about school were developed, preschool supports a child's communication skills and the self-management of their emotions. One participant stated that their child did not become a "social butterfly" or begin to speak until their child attended preschool. Another participant felt that "preschool was "only

good for socialization” but made note that it would be good otherwise for “the parents who don’t have time to put into their kid’s education.” The participants in DeMulder and Stribling (2012) study identified the effects of social emotional development in the following themes: increased positive feelings, self-confidence and positive relationships. These data were reflected in the responses from the participants in this study. All parents who did not send their children to preschool noted that learning how to interact with others with positive emotions was the most important skill to learn in preschool. At the opposite position, all parents who sent their children to preschool noted appropriate social interaction among children as a second value in preschool. In fact, one participant indicated that a preschool is a place “where children learn to talk to each other in addition to learning how to act around other children.”

Table 1  
*Social Emotional Development as a Value of Preschool*

Categorical Variable	# of Participants	% of Participants
Get along/socialize/communicate with others	12	100%
Develop positive emotions about school	9	75%
Exposure helps ease feelings about transitions to kindergarten	3*	25%

\*6 of the 7 responses were from those parents who sent their children to preschool

**Finding Three. Participants identify either positive or negative effects preschool can have on children aligned to their decisions to send or not to send their children to preschool.**

Şahin et al. (2013) concluded that the majority of the parents believed preschool improved their child’s social skills and understood the characteristics of preschool programs. Most participants

agreed that a preschool is a place where children can attend to help prepare them with foundational skills for learning. All of the participants who sent their children to preschool indicated that reading, writing, and math skills were benefits of attending preschool. All twelve participants agreed that preschool provides some form of exposure to reading/literacy skills which are essential to the development of academic readiness in children.

Table 2

*Preparation for Kindergarten as a Value of Preschool*

Categorical Variable	# of Participants	% of Participants
Prepares children for academics	12	100%
Teaches children how to behave	7*	58%
Prepares kids to transition	8**	66%
Parental involvement in their child's preparation for school	12	100%

\*5 of the 7 responses were from those parents who did not send their children to preschool.

\*\*6 of the 8 responses were from those parents who sent their children to preschool.

**Finding Four. Past experiences were predictors of parents' attitudes, beliefs, and decisions**

**about preschool.** All twelve participants indicated that their personal satisfaction and disappointment with preschool/ kindergarten outcomes had an impact on their attitudes and beliefs about preschool. Although all twelve participants indicated that their children were successful in preschool and were prepared for kindergarten, six participants also identified disappointments with preschool as a result of negative past experiences with preschool teachers. One participant noted that their “preschool experience was horrible because the teacher was not teaching anything.” “My child was just coloring pictures of blocks.” One participant recalled negative experiences in preschool when “the nuns would bend my hand back and pop it with a

ruler if I got something wrong... man that hurt.” Kocyigit’s (2015) study supports these findings as it reveals parents’ frustration with the bad habits and negative attitudes of preschool teachers and administrators, frustration that derived from the parents’ own lived experience. Past experiences of attending or not attending preschool as a child did contribute to the decisions parents make about sending or not sending their children to preschool. Findings from this study suggest that feelings participants developed about preschool were based on prior experiences, influences from others, or negative preschool experiences affect their decision-making. Two of the twelve participants indicated that they started preschool for a short time but were pulled from the school in less than three weeks because their parents’ attitudes changed after seeing the inadequacies of their preschool teachers’ instruction and classroom management skills. Eight of the twelve participants in this study indicated that they did not attend preschool. Four of the participants who attended preschool for at least a year also sent their children to preschool. Four participants who had positive preschool experiences were receptive to sending their children to preschool. To the contrary, one participant who sent her child to preschool indicated that she did not go to preschool but recognized the benefits of preschool and decided to send her child.

Table 3

*Participants' Comments about Parents' Past Experiences of Attending or Not Attending  
Preschool*

Categorical Variable	# of Participants	% of Participants
Personal success attending childhood preschool motivated parents' decisions to send their child to preschool	4	33%
Personal success not attending childhood preschool, parents taught them at home	6*	50%
Did not attend childhood preschool but wanted child to attend	2	16%
Parents' past experiences influenced parents decisions about sending children to preschool	12	100%

\*6 of the 6 responses were from those parents who sent their children to preschool

**Finding Five. Participants believe that parental involvement is essential to their children's successful kindergarten outcomes.** All twelve participants believe that parental involvement with their children's growth and development at home contributed to their children's successful kindergarten outcomes. All twelve participants indicated that they read with their child. Saçkes et al. (2015) suggested that parental beliefs about children's literacy motivation are associated with their literacy practices at home, like storybook reading. Six participants who did not send their children to preschool indicated they wanted to take full responsibility for preparing their children for kindergarten; however, six participants who did send their children to preschool stated that responsibility for preparing children for school was shared with the preschool teacher. The six

participants who did not send their children to preschool indicated that parental involvement with their child's academic and social development is the reason why their children were well-rounded socially and did well in kindergarten, as well. Current research has demonstrated a lack of understanding between parents and preschool leaders in regards to the values of preschool and knowing what key elements to focus on when trying to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of all preschool-aged students (Fielding, 2009, Fielding et al., 2004, Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006). Research also supports the idea that relationships between the parent and the educator have an impact on a child's successful progression in preschool (Murray, McFarland-Piazza, and Harrison, 2015).

**Finding Six. Most participants believed that parents' trusting relationships with preschool teachers contribute to their beliefs about the value of preschool.** Seven out of twelve participants believed that partnerships with school leaders and educators also supported their children's achievement in school. Trustworthiness of teachers and school leaders also contributed to the decision of the participants to send their children to preschool. One participant who elected to send her child to preschool and another participant, who did not send his child to preschool, both believe that in order for early intervention to work, preschool teachers and school leaders must maintain open communication with parents and be willing to learn diverse ways of working with white and minority children who have a variety of learning styles and behavioral backgrounds (Murray, McFarland-Piazza, & Harrison, 2015).

**Finding Seven. Participants who sent their children to preschool believe the following factors influenced their decision: (a) social skills, (b) money (c) time (d) parent knowledge of readiness skills.** Evidence-based research confirms that parents play a major role in making decisions about preschool and early intervention (Zivotic, Tanasic, & Mikanovic, 2013). Most of

the participants indicated that they sent their children to preschool because of low socio-economic challenges, which included the feeling of being poor, lack of time to work at home with their children, being a single parent with only one income, family health issues, and inadequate funding for daycare or preschool. Four of the six participants noted that they receive state assistance to help alleviate the financial strain within the family. Half of the participants reported that they sent their children to preschool to prepare them for school and to provide them with the opportunity to get better jobs than their parents.

Participants in this study indicated that their lack of knowledge in regards to preparing their children for kindergarten contributed to their decision to send their children to preschool. Four of twelve participants noted that they did not have adequate skills to teach and support their children's learning. Hence, the participants sent their children to preschool in hopes of getting them ready for school. A participant, who is a single parent noted that she was "embarrassed that her daughter was not exposed to nursery rhymes and had a difficult time hearing and matching the ending sounds in words." This parent revealed that she was not told that reading rhymes and riddles at home could have assisted her child's development of language (Hart & Risley, 1995). Five of the twelve participants agreed that preschool teachers are trained to prepare children for kindergarten and are more knowledgeable about new instructional strategies. This data indicates that parents feel less prepared to meet the needs of their children than preschool teachers.

**Finding Eight. Participants who did not send their children to preschool disagreed with the idea that preschool teachers are skilled with adequate training to meet the needs of all students.** Four of these six participants reported that preschool teachers lack the intervention strategies required to support students who struggle with academics and behavior. Also, one of these six participants indicated that the requirements to be a preschool teacher are minimal. One



participant stated that the “parent’s role has been to do everything: to be the first teacher, leader, respondent to my children” and that “it is the parents’ responsibility to educate their children.” Another participant advised parents to “do the research so that it won’t be a waste of time...Don’t rely on someone else to do it for you. Pre-school teachers are not going to have the same level of engagement that you would have with your child.”

Three of the six participants noted that attending preschool was not necessary because what they believe is taught in preschool is repetitive to what is taught in kindergarten. However, five of the six participants who chose not to send their children to preschool indicated that they had to supplement their home instruction with opportunities outside of the home for their children to practice and learn how to socialize and communicate with other children their age.

**Finding Nine. Participants who did not send their children to preschool believed that parents are the first teachers and can best prepare their children with foundational skills at home.** Murray, McFarland-Piazza, and Harrison (2015) concluded that home educational activities were predictors of effective parental involvement and communication strategies for families and are consistent with the academic and social behaviors valued in preschool. Two of the participant who did not send their children to preschool noted that because they were “stay at home moms, they could teach their children themselves.” The two participants also pointed out that “not everyone can stay at home as most homes need two sources of income just to survive.”

### **Implications for Future Research and Practice**

This research permitted twelve parents to share both their positive and negative lived experiences and how those experiences led to their perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and decisions about preschool. This study also revealed the importance of listening to the voice of parents regarding how they came to value a preschool experience and understanding why the parents

who elected not to send their children to preschool have perceived preschool to be unnecessary or not useful.

**Implication One. Preschool leaders should provide support for parents of preschool-aged children.** Parent support may also promote positive social change because parents may feel more comfortable with sharing the trials and successes of supporting their children at home with preschools that are welcoming and promoting parents to get involved in the schools (Virginia Department of Education, 2013). Feedback from parents may assist school districts, private and public preschools, and community centers with the effective implementation parent programs that focus on essential “school readiness” skills. Most importantly, Konerza (2012) found that parents’ perceptions of their child’s school readiness skills were not consistent with the expectations of preschool education programs and recommended support for parents to learn more about school readiness.

The anticipated expansion of parent support programs could create positions within the school division for educators to become liaisons in the community. These supports may help inform parents of the expectations of kindergarten about a child’s social-emotional development and their reading, writing, and math skills (Center for Parent Resources, 2015).

**Implication Two. Educational leaders should increase partnerships between parents and preschool teachers/leaders.** This study contributes to the field of educational leadership as the study sought to explore the lived experiences of parents who elected to send or not to send their children to preschool and how those experience led to their decisions. Most decisions parents make not to send children to preschool are due to negative personal association with the school. Ways to negate this obstacle would be to send personal invitations, openly value parents’ input, and build on the strengths that are unique to each family. The findings from this study revealed a

need for educational leaders to provide resources for parents, so that parents are more equipped to help their children learn the key school readiness skills. Paulsell et al. (2015) affirmed that successful preschool outcomes are evident when all stakeholders value increased parent access to services, continuity of caregiving for children, and parental involvement in children's early learning.

Although all of the participants in this study indicated that parental involvement was essential, half of them noted a need for educational leaders to foster a preschool environment that encourages positive relationships between parents and preschool teachers/leaders, such as providing training for parents of toddleraged children (between two and four years of age) to acquaint them with strategies and expectations of the necessary "readiness skills for all subjects" (Peterson, 2012). This training may potentially support increased preschool attendance in all communities, regardless of their socio-economic status.

**Implication Three. Educational leaders should provide professional development opportunities for preschool teachers and elementary school principals to enhance their skills in understanding and evaluate "best practices" for literacy and language and social skills development in young children.** Professional development opportunities for preschool teachers regarding appropriate behavioral and academic intervention for all children are critical to the successful implementation and expansion of preschools. Leary (2007) suggested that the achievement gap exists when students start kindergarten. Therefore, at-risk students must be placed on a level playing field in preschool.

The Paulsell et al. (2015) study recommended "enhancing capacity to offer high-quality service options, develop strong partnerships, and increase staff professionalism" (p. 15). The findings of this study can support local policymakers such as school boards, superintendents, and

principals in the creation of preschool committees comprised of parents, community leaders, preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers, and elementary school administrators that focus on effective early intervention practices and training. Elementary principals also play an important role in the success of kindergarten students during their first year of school. Likewise, additional training may be provided to administrators to assist them in the guidance and evaluation of preschool and kindergarten teachers. Professional development courses that provide differentiated practices for social, emotional, and academic intervention for preschool-aged children can promote social change, and this training may allow educators to feel more confident and prepared to assess and teach all children the necessary readiness skills and meet their diverse needs. Current research (Ramey et al., 2011; DHHS & OHS, 2014; Paulsell et al., 2015) supports these findings as educators agree that further training is needed for preschool teachers in order to develop and sustain quality preschool programs (Barnett et al., 2012; Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; USDOE, 2014; National Institute for Early Education Research, 2015).

**Implication Four. Elementary school leaders should increase data collection from parents and community members regarding the expectations of preschool and kindergarten**

**through ongoing surveys and other feedback options.** Participants in the study noted that increased communication with and outreach toward parents and community groups are also essential to successful student outcomes in kindergarten. Administering surveys to parents every year to find out what their needs and expectations are for their children may inform elementary school leaders of parents' diverse needs in regards to their children's education. The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), also recommends collecting data from a range of respondents through surveys and qualitative interviews and focus groups

(Paulsell et al., 2015). With this information, preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers can participate in relevant training that will meet the diverse needs of parents and give parents strategies that can be used at home to support student learning (Gallagher, Clifford, & Maxwell, 2004). These levels of support and communication may also minimize potential disappointments and conflicts among parents, teachers, and community members regarding their knowledge of preschool and kindergarten readiness, as well as their attitudes and beliefs towards preschool (Kocyigit, 2015). These findings should be disseminated to community centers, family recreation centers, medical facilities, gyms, churches, and government resource facilities.

**Implication Five. School leaders should distribute most current information about school readiness skills and school expectations to parents.** Although parents who chose to educate their children, rather than send them to preschool, reported successful kindergarten outcomes, all of them mentioned teaching core competencies that included learning the alphabet, sounds, and number sense. The Office of Head Start (OHS) clearly outlines the social-emotional, and academic expectations for children who are 60 months of age-revealing the need for parents to be aware of the increased complexity of literacy, language, and emotionality of young children (Office of Head Start,2015). Therefore, additional information about what every preschool-aged child must acquire before entering school should be readily available to all parents. Sharing an overview of kindergarten curriculum/expectations and current research in regards to the impact of parental involvement may also be helpful to maintain smooth academic and social transitions into public school.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of parents who have or have not elected to send their children to preschool and the lived experiences that contributed to those

decisions. Further, the purpose was to examine the relationship between parent attitudes and beliefs about preschool and determine whether or not their lived experiences have attributed to what they have determined are the values of preschool. Findings from the study reveal that the participants have encountered both positive and negative experiences with preschool. Although some of their attitudes and beliefs differ about the benefits of preschool, all participants want their children to be successful in school and have made attempts to support their children's growth and development, both at home and at school.

Preschool is a phenomenon of study that continues to stimulate debates among educators, administrators, and policymakers since the 1800's. As current research reveals the implications of preschool, the findings from this study add to the existing body of research, which documents the successful outcomes that children obtain in kindergarten. Additionally, these results are attributed to learning the essential school readiness skills provided in preschool and in the homes where parents are actively involved in their child's social, emotional, and academic development. By developing supports for educators who teach preschool students and for parents of preschool aged children, leaders may increase preschool participation as school districts strive to provide clear expectations of kindergarten benchmarks. Additionally, by providing appropriate resources, educational leaders will supply parents and preschool teachers with the necessary skills to effectively prepare children for success in school.

The findings in this study and current research support the idea that early intervention in preschool matters. While no one place has been found in this study to prepare children for kindergarten, preschool does serve as an inclusive and consistent idea of schooling that links educational leaders, community members, educators, and parents. In a joint effort to close the achievement gap, these stakeholders play significant roles in increasing parental involvement,

improving school readiness skills, and nourishing social-emotional development in young children. By working together, children will not only be promised a great future, but also they will build an educational system where failure to read, write, and compute numbers in kindergarten will not be an option. As data from this study and current research reveals, this idea can become a reality with the support from a high-quality preschool for all children and effective early intervention programs for parents to attend and learn more about school readiness.

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