

AN EXAMINATION OF KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF READINESS
AND THEIR UTILIZATION OF SOUTH CAROLINA'S KINDERGARTEN READINESS
ASSESSMENT DATA TO INFORM LITERACY INSTRUCTION

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Though *kindergarten readiness* is a concept that has existed for decades, it was not specifically identified as an educational goal until the 1990s. Several years later, the government promised funding to states that would implement a kindergarten readiness assessment (KRA), prompting numerous states—including South Carolina—to add a KRA to their arsenal of assessments. However, for these government initiatives to be effective, the readiness perceptions and assessment practices of those on the frontlines must be considered.

This study is a thematic analysis of South Carolina kindergarten teachers' perceptions of readiness and their use of KRA data to inform their literacy instruction. Their perceptions of readiness are analyzed through the lenses of historical bodies (i.e., the skills students already possess) and readiness discourses. To identify teachers' expectations for students' historical bodies, teachers' comments are aligned with one of four categories of skills: social-emotional, behavioral, academic, and self-help. These same comments are further aligned with one or more of three readiness discourses: maturation, skills mastery, and sociocultural. Additionally, teachers' perceptions of South Carolina's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (SC-KRA) are explored to determine the impact of the SC-KRA on their literacy instruction.

The findings clearly reveal not only the variety of perspectives teachers hold regarding students' readiness but also a high level of frustration with the SC-KRA—particularly the amount of time it requires and the lack of educational impact. Though kindergarten teachers are the focus of this study, these findings have the potential to impact numerous stakeholders,

including teachers, school principals, district officials, and state officials. Most importantly, South Carolina's kindergarten students could benefit from improved assessment practices, thereby resulting in more personalized and effective literacy instruction.

Keywords: *kindergarten readiness, kindergarten readiness assessment, maturation discourse, skills mastery discourse, sociocultural discourse*

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Statement of the Problem

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), the average elementary classroom in the United States contains 21.2 students. Though that number might seem manageable, each student has unique abilities, experiences, and interests. In addition, factors such as students' culture, language, socioeconomic status, and literacy exposure impact their readiness *for* school and success *in* school. In light of this diversity, how do teachers—specifically kindergarten teachers—determine and meet individual student needs? One potential method is effective assessment.

According to Hustedt et al. (2018), kindergarten teachers are growing in their awareness of the need for assessments. Hustedt et al.'s (2018) survey data indicated that assessment information was deemed more necessary by teachers in 2011 and 2013 than in 2000. Interestingly, this finding held true for every domain: “academic, language, social, and physical” (Hustedt et al., 2018, p. 61). However, when teachers were asked to rate which skills are most important in kindergarten, the researchers found that teachers value social-emotional skills over academic skills. Kindergarten classrooms today are more rigorous academically than in previous years. Despite the increased rigor, kindergarten teachers tend to value children's behavior, social-emotional skills, and self-help skills over academics (Hustedt et al., 2018).

The issues, therefore, are two-fold: disagreement and/or misperceptions regarding kindergarten readiness itself and, more specifically, issues with kindergarten readiness assessments, including concerns such as the time required to administer them, their equity, and the teachers' use of the data to inform their literacy instruction.

Kindergarten Readiness

What is kindergarten readiness? What characterizes a child who is ready for kindergarten-level instruction? Is readiness the responsibility of the parent, the teacher, the school, or a combination thereof? These questions represent just a few of the issues surrounding this crucial component of K-12 education.

Kindergarten Readiness Defined

A single definition of kindergarten readiness has not been developed, but numerous states have adopted their own (Pierson, 2018). The fact that numerous definitions exist begs the following question: how should kindergarten readiness be defined? Should it simply be defined as a certain age that is required to enter kindergarten, or should skills also be part of the equation?

Age is an objective way to measure readiness, but objective does not always equal accurate. The typical requirement is that a child reach the age of five by a certain date in order to be permitted to enter kindergarten. However, not every five-year-old is at the same developmental level (Bernstein et al., 2019; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Numerous factors—such as home environment, socioeconomic status, preschool experience, and disability—contribute to a child’s readiness for school.

Another potential measure of readiness is skill (Bernstein et al., 2019), but educators sometimes disagree over what skills are needed. Wesley and Buysse (2003) found that necessary entry-level skills were determined by exit expectations. In other words, the more rigorous the expectations at the end of kindergarten, the higher the expectations at the beginning. Behind each of these perspectives lies various readiness discourses, which will be explored in sections 1.6 and 2.4.

The New First Grade

According to Wesley and Buysse (2003), “Kindergarten today has become academically oriented to such an extent that it now more often resembles first grade” (p. 353). Could this increased rigor be contributing to readiness expectations? Tensions arise when state expectations require teachers to utilize what they deem as developmentally inappropriate practices (Wesley & Buysse, 2003).

Readiness of Schools

Some researchers argue that a student is not the only entity that should be ready for kindergarten; the school should be ready as well (Gill et al., 2006; Hustedt et al., 2018; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). This readiness could, in essence, require schools to improve in areas such as “the physical environment, instructional strategies, staff knowledge of early childhood development, and awareness of the social and cultural contexts of individual children and families” (Wesley & Buysse, 2003, p. 363). Though readiness should begin in the home, this perspective places the onus on schools as well, relieving pressure from parents who are not able to build in their children the readiness skills deemed necessary by school, district, and/or state policies.

Kindergarten Readiness Assessments

The Race to the Top initiative by the U.S. Department of Education promised funding for states that utilize a specific type of assessment—a kindergarten readiness assessment (KRA). That money could then be used by the states to support early childhood education (Schachter et al., 2015). Clearly, policymakers believe that assessments are beneficial. Researchers seem to agree. According to Regenstein et al. (2018), “Some leaders have found that kindergarten

readiness assessments—used regularly, but without high stakes—can support joyful, playful learning and inform state-level decision making” (p. 36).

Researchers have found that teachers understand the need for KRAs and are willing to administer them (Jacobs et al., 2009; Schachter et al., 2015). However, willingness does not equal effectiveness. Teachers dutifully administer KRAs as required by state law, but do they find the investment of time beneficial? Are the data helpful—particularly when planning literacy instruction? Though teachers might desire to improve instruction and achievement through data use, they often do not have the training or administrator support needed to do so successfully (Jacobs et al., 2009; Schachter et al., 2015; Schachter et al., 2020).

Issues with Kindergarten Readiness Assessments

Kindergarten readiness assessments have the potential to effectively inform teachers’ instructional practices—specifically in the literacy domain. Unfortunately, several potential issues detract from the perceived benefits.

Time. Schachter et al. (2015) surveyed 150 principals and kindergarten teachers to learn their perspectives on Ohio’s revised KRA after the first year of its use. One of the primary concerns shared by the teachers was the time required to implement the KRA. The beginning of the school year is vital for establishing routines, clarifying expectations, and building relationships. Unfortunately, teachers are expected to utilize much of this valuable time for assessment. Of the teachers who were surveyed, half spent 30 hours or more completing the KRA. Approximately one-third devoted nearly one hour per student.

The Ohio Department of Education did strive to improve the revised KRA by decreasing the number of questions and increasing those that could be assessed via an iPad. Though one-

fourth of the teachers surveyed noticed the improvements, they still viewed the KRA as time consuming, according to a study completed by Schachter et al. (2020).

Little et al. (2020) conducted a similar study of North Carolina's Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA) and determined that the time required for the assessment was one of the teachers' primary concerns. According to their research, "time, along with the number of other demands placed on teachers, comprised the two areas with the most negative commentary from our participants" (Little et al., 2020, p. 807).

Outdated Data. Researchers have found that teachers understand the importance of the KRA and are willing to implement it (Jacobs et al., 2009; Schachter et al., 2015), but, often, the outdated nature of the data prevents teachers from utilizing them to improve instruction. For example, in Little et al.'s (2020) study, teachers reported that, by the end of the 60-day testing period at the beginning of the academic year, kindergarten students had already advanced beyond many of the skills being assessed, thereby causing the data to be useless. Teachers who participated in Schachter et al.'s (2020) study also "reported that the content of the KRA quickly became irrelevant to their teaching" (p. 15).

According to focus group data gathered in one South Carolina school district, kindergarten teachers do not receive KRA data until spring. At that point, most students have surpassed the skills that were assessed during the first 45 days of school. Even teachers who desire to use the data and are trained to do so are hindered by the lack of relevance. Furthermore, when results are communicated to parents, confusion occurs. Parents might note on the report that their child is behind in a vital skill, while simultaneously observing their child's successful acquisition and use of that skill. Teachers, then, surrender valuable time reassuring parents that their children are fine.

Equity. Due to the prevalence of diverse students within classes, another potential issue with the KRA is equity. Assessments are effective if they truly analyze students' skills, which is only accomplished if the student is proficient in the dominant language and familiar with the dominant culture. Publishers of the KRA must ensure that it is accessible to all students, regardless of their language, culture, or disability. Additionally, teachers must ensure that the test is administered by someone who speaks English as well as the language of the child being assessed (Regenstein et al., 2017, p. 7).

Data Misuse. Researchers have found three potential misuses of KRA data. First, children's performance on the assessment should not determine their admittance to kindergarten. KRAs were designed to inform teachers' instruction rather than to reject students who desperately need that instruction (Regenstein et al., 2017).

Second, KRA data should not be used to assess the effectiveness of an early childhood program. Again, KRAs were not designed for that purpose. The National Education Goals Panel stated the following:

Before age 8, standardized achievement measures are not sufficiently accurate to be used for high-stakes decisions about individual children and schools. Therefore, high-stakes assessments intended for accountability purposes should be delayed until the end of third grade (or preferably fourth grade). (as cited in Regenstein, et al., 2017, p. 24)

As stated above, assessments intended to hold programs accountable are considered high-stakes and, therefore, need to be conducted consistently to ensure reliability and validity. Though teachers are typically trained in the administration of the KRA, states would need to provide consistent training as well as safeguards to prevent teachers' intentional inflation of the data (Regenstein et al., 2017).

Finally, teacher effectiveness should not be determined by KRA data. Teacher effectiveness is best determined by the academic progress of the students. KRAs assess students at one point in time and are not designed to measure progress. In fact, any attempt to measure progress could result in misleading data. For example, since the KRA is not designed to measure growth beyond a certain level, a student who does poorly on the KRA at the beginning of the academic year might show significantly more growth later in the year than a student who initially does very well on the KRA, even if the higher-performing student grew at the same, or better, rate (Regenstein et al., 2017).

Data Use. When analyzing Ohio’s revised KRA after its first year of implementation, Schachter et al. (2015) found that “teachers and principals did not seem to view the KRA as particularly beneficial for practice” (p. 8). Schachter et al. (2020) conducted a similar but expanded study after the second year of implementation and noted the same findings regarding data use. After year two, between 3% and 39% of the teachers surveyed reported utilizing the data for instructional purposes. Literacy instruction was more likely to be informed than other domains—particularly for teachers working one-on-one with a student. In Little et al.’s (2020) study, only 25% of the teachers reported utilizing the data when planning instruction. All three studies identified training and support as vital elements for teachers’ successful use of KRA data to inform instruction (Little et al., 2020; Schachter et al., 2015; Schachter et al., 2020).

Though Jacobs et al. (2009) did not specifically focus on the KRA, they also determined that teachers need additional training and support in the effective use of data. Datnow et al. (2007) utilized a different approach in their study. They focused on schools that are successful in their use of data and found several consistent characteristics, including administrative support. However, they did not analyze specific teaching practices derived from the data. They also

admitted that not every teacher or school is effectively utilizing data, and even the successful schools they analyzed had room for growth.

The KRA is, in theory, a useful tool. It is supported by various policymakers, researchers, school principals, and teachers. According to Schachter et al. (2020), “At least 40 states are either in the process of developing or implementing a KRA” (p. 3). Is the popularity and prevalence of the KRA due to its usefulness or due simply to the desire for federal funding? Regardless of the motivation, the decision makers who are requiring teachers to administer the KRA would like stakeholders to see the benefits. However, research demonstrates that these benefits are not consistently realized. Teachers must receive substantive training and support in the effective use of KRA data so that the ultimate beneficiaries—the students—receive the individualized literacy instruction they so desperately need for success in school and life.

1.2 Personal Connection to the Problem

After graduate school, I entered my first teaching job with confidence. I had a bachelor’s degree in elementary education and a master’s degree in special education. I was, in theory, equipped to meet all my students’ needs. Then I began working with real students. The reality that every student is different quickly set in. The more I taught, the less I seemed to know. Though I had taken all the necessary classes—including more than one assessment class—I was not truly prepared to effectively assess my students. I could administer the assessments, but I was unsure how to utilize the data.

As my career evolved, so did its focus. I became more involved in the world of literacy—specifically working with students who had diagnosed learning disabilities. I enjoyed my small reading groups and saw some growth in my students’ skills. The parents were grateful, but I

knew that I needed to be doing more. Unfortunately, I had no idea where to begin to truly meet my students' needs and to see the kind of growth I was desiring.

When I would begin working with a new student, I would administer an informal reading inventory. This assessment gave me a general idea of the student's strengths and weaknesses. Beyond that, the assessment was pointless because I was unaware of how best to utilize the data. Then our very small special education department purchased a large assessment tool that had been recommended. I dutifully administered it to each student. The process was interesting but seemed like waste of time and money. I did my best to blindly meet each student's needs. Thankfully, the students did grow in their literacy skills, but I often wonder how much more they would have progressed if I had been better prepared to use the assessment data I faithfully collected.

The frustration I experienced is what I am hoping to prevent in my university students. Most new teachers quickly discover that they have much to learn, but they need to be equipped with foundational knowledge upon which they can effectively build. Though it is humanly impossible to prepare my students for every future situation, my goal is to share my own passion for effective assessment, provide that vital foundational knowledge, and instill in them a desire for lifelong learning.

1.3 Purpose and Significance of the Study

My role as a literacy educator is to prepare college students to be successful classroom teachers. As such, I must be aware of current issues and trends in the field. *Assessment* is an important element of education in general and, more specifically, the world of literacy and is often a controversial topic. To fully prepare *my* students to effectively meet the needs of *their* future students, I need to be current in my knowledge of the types of assessments used in

literacy, their pros and cons, and how best to use assessment data to inform literacy instruction. This research into teachers' perceptions of readiness, South Carolina's KRA (SC-KRA), and teachers' use of assessment data will inform my own teaching and better equip me to convey the importance of assessment-driven instruction to my students.

However, college students are not the only students who could benefit from this research. My desire is that this research also results in improved literacy instruction at the kindergarten level. South Carolina law demands that students be proficient readers by the end of third grade. If literacy instruction is improved at the kindergarten level, students will be better equipped to reach the third-grade milestone. Unfortunately, the transition to virtual instruction throughout the pandemic negatively impacted numerous students. Now, more than ever, teachers need to be capable of administering assessments to determine specific student needs and of then utilizing that assessment data to inform their literacy instruction.

Additionally, teachers and elementary school principals will benefit from this kindergarten readiness research. Though kindergarten teachers are typically trained in the administration of the SC-KRA, they are not trained in the effective use of the data. They also need to be supported by their school administrators throughout the process of administering the SC-KRA. This research could simultaneously identify potential gaps in training and/or support and open the eyes of elementary school principals to the concerns of their teachers, thereby enabling the principals to better meet their teachers' needs. Principals might even feel empowered to appeal to the district for needed SC-KRA improvements.

However, for the SC-KRA to truly be successful, the district must be aware of the benefits and concerns. The quantitative and qualitative data gathered through this research could ultimately effect a change at the district or even state level.

1.4 Research Questions

As my understanding of qualitative and quantitative research developed, my research questions also evolved. I began with a narrow focus on the KRA—specifically teachers’ use of the KRA data to inform their literacy instruction. I then expanded my focus to include teachers’ perceptions of kindergarten readiness in general. This evolution led to the development of the following research questions:

- How does a focus group of kindergarten teachers perceive kindergarten readiness in general?
- How do these kindergarten teachers utilize data from a statewide kindergarten readiness assessment tool to inform their literacy instruction?

1.5 Local Context

This study is situated within one school district in the Upstate of South Carolina for multiple reasons, the first of which is a practical one: my proximity to the research setting. I live within this district and am a substitute teacher. Additionally, the university at which I teach places teacher education students in district schools for their junior practicum and senior clinical practice experiences. As a result, I have built relationships with administrators and teachers throughout the district. Many of the teachers are former students of mine.

Additionally, the elementary schools throughout the district represent students and teachers in a variety of settings, from urban to suburban to rural, as well as various socioeconomic situations. Though I cannot guarantee that the perceptions of the teachers in one district mirror the perceptions of kindergarten teachers throughout the state, I believe their opinions will matter to district—and even state—officials.

As a result of the reasons stated above, I developed research questions specifically focused on the perspectives and experiences of a small group of teachers within the district. I then crafted focus-group questions that would not only generate authentic, organic conversations among the participants but also provide rich data. Finally, I facilitated a focus group at two different elementary schools, both of which are in approximately the same region of the district. Neither school was identified as a Title I school throughout the 2021-2022 academic year. The schools' demographic data can be found on Table 1.1, and their free and reduced lunch percentages can be found on Table 1.2.

Table 1.1

Enrollment on 135th Day of School March 29, 2022									
	Black		Hispanic		Other		White		Total
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
School 1	48	8.2	68	11.7	64	11.0	402	69.1	582
School 2	101	13.4	54	7.2	103	13.7	494	65.7	752

Table 1.2

Free and Reduced Lunch May 31, 2019				
	N	% Free	% Reduced	% Free and Reduced
School 1	637	32	6	38
School 2	780	16	2	18

1.6 Theoretical Framework

Conflicting Discourses Around Reading Readiness

Throughout the decades, teachers' and researchers' perceptions of kindergarten readiness have shifted, resulting in multiple, sometimes overlapping, discourses. To answer the first research question—regarding teachers' perceptions of readiness—the following readiness discourses have been identified and explored: maturation, skills mastery, and sociocultural.

These discourses are described in even more detail in section 2.4.

Developmental Age and Maturation Discourse

Based on research from the early 1900s, the maturation discourse is tightly connected to children's developmental age. In other words, students are simply not ready for reading instruction until they reach a certain point in their development. In the 1930s, Morphett and Washburne decided to further explore this notion and ultimately determined that students should not be taught to read until 6 years, 6 months of age. They believed that children would be harmed if taught to read before they were developmentally ready (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). This perspective led to the concept commonly recognized today as "reading readiness" (Crawford, 1995, p. 72).

Though this discourse might seem outdated, elements of it are still prevalent in today's classrooms—particularly in readiness assessments and teachers' use of assessment data. According to Wohlwend (2009), "In maturation discourse, teachers identify 'developmental delays' and forecast a child's potential to 'catch up' during the remaining months of kindergarten" (p. 344). However, children develop at different rates; therefore, some "children whose development is well within the normal range may be erroneously characterized as inadequate" ("School Readiness," 1995, p. 2). This tension requires teachers to meet their students' individual needs without undue pressure, while simultaneously equipping them with the skills mandated by state standards and grade-level expectations (Wohlwend, 2009).

Skills and Skills Mastery Discourse

In essence, the skills mastery discourse is the result of a shift in perspective from simply waiting for children's mental maturation to pushing them toward state-mandated academic standards. According to Wohlwend (2009), "Skills mastery discourse circulates through government mandates for accountability and standardization, requiring teachers to evaluate and

rank students according to the degree to which learners' skill performances adhere to mainstream norms" (p. 344). In other words, teachers are expected to produce students who fall within mainstream expectations, regardless of the students' capabilities. As a result, teachers sometimes resort to practices that they would ordinarily deem inappropriate for students' developmental levels (Wohlwend, 2009).

This emphasis on reading skills dates back to the 1960s and 1970s when reading instruction began to change, due in part to works such as Rudolph Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read* and Jeanne Chall's *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. These well-known researchers noticed that American students were not learning how to read and began to explore the cause. Ultimately, they determined that students were not being taught the skills needed to read, thereby leading to a renewed emphasis on basic skills such as phonics (Schugurensky, 2004; "Why Johnny Can't Read," n.d.). Though reading skills, such as phonics, are vital, overemphasizing a prescribed set of skills expected at each grade level can downplay—or outright ignore—literacy skills and practices that children already possess.

Literacy Practices and Sociocultural Discourse

According to Mills (2016), "The distinguishing feature of a socio-cultural literacy approach is the emphasis on describing and validating the varieties of literacy practices that are shared within and between communities, including communities of practice in schools and other institutions" (p. 38). Students enter kindergarten with a range of literacy experiences. Some students come from what society would consider *mainstream* homes—those filled with rich literacy experiences such as shelves of books, trips to the library, read-alouds at local bookstores, and a wealth of technology. Other students enter with literacy experiences that are just as rich,

though not as mainstream. Therefore, their experiences are often overlooked, downplayed, or completely ignored.

Are the unique literacy experiences of all students acknowledged and built upon? Are teachers equipped with the data needed to meet the individual needs of their students? Viewing kindergarten teachers' perceptions of readiness as well as kindergarten readiness assessments through a sociocultural lens will begin to answer these vital questions.

Sociocultural theorists posit that educators are striving to teach a discourse that is often completely disconnected from students' home discourses (Mills, 2016), resulting in a narrow definition of literacy. In other words, traditional reading and writing instruction based solely on that of the dominant culture is not enough. This "universalist view" (Mills, 2016, p. 25) ignores the various types of literacies students bring to the classroom based on their own sociocultural experiences. Rather, these literacies must be viewed as a vital part of the students' prior knowledge, as assets rather than deficits, and as a foundation upon which to build additional literacy skills.

Sociocultural theory has been heavily researched. Mills (2016) cited numerous studies that delve into the various nuances of the theory such as discourses, broadened definitions of the term *language*, and multiliteracies. However, research has yet to determine the perfect balance between home discourses and societal discourses (i.e., school, work, community, etc.). Is this perfect balance even possible? How do educators acknowledge and build upon students' home discourses while simultaneously equipping them for college and/or careers in a specific culture? According to Kinloch (2010), "One's choice in language use, conscious or unconscious, can either allow or restrict entrance into certain conversations and communities" (p. 106). Gee (1989) noted, "Discourses are intimately related to the distribution of social power and

hierarchical structure in society” (p. 19). This realization places enormous pressure on today’s educators to fully equip students for life in their homes and communities alongside life in society at large.

As with most assessments, the primary goal of kindergarten readiness assessments is improved instruction resulting in academic growth. According to Schachter et al. (2020), “The underlying premise posits that if teachers were equipped with the right kind of data about their students, then instruction could be tailored to and thus better support the individual learning needs of students” (pp. 2-3). Evaluating this assessment through a sociocultural lens, alongside teachers’ perceptions of readiness, will help to determine whether it is accurately assessing students and providing data that will allow teachers to meet each student’s individual literacy needs.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

This study is situated within one school district in South Carolina. Though this district contains schools in rural and urban settings and is diverse in nature, I cannot guarantee that the perspectives of kindergarten teachers in this district represent the views of kindergarten teachers throughout the state.

Additionally, due to the qualitative nature of the study, I only worked with a small number of teachers. The two focus groups I facilitated provided a wealth of data, but I again cannot guarantee that the perspectives of these teachers are representative of teachers throughout the district or state.

Finally, the schools with which I worked were not as diverse as I was hoping. The vast majority of the students were from the dominant culture, and neither school was a Title I school.

1.8 Background, Positionality, and Role of Researcher

Background

My personal educational background is quite different from the settings in which my research is situated—local, public elementary schools. From K5 through 7th grade, I attended a private, religious school in a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The school was extremely small—approximately 100 students from K5 through 12th grade. Needless to say, my class was also quite small; as such, many classrooms had two grades in one room. For example, I was in the same room with the same teacher for 1st and 2nd grade, then moved to a different room with a different teacher for 3rd and 4th grade. Though our school was not wealthy and did not have the resources other private schools are often afforded, I received an excellent education, particularly in literacy and mathematics skills.

I then attended a different private, religious school in Indianapolis, Indiana, for 8th through 12th grade. Compared to public schools, it was still small, but to me it was enormous. I went from a class of five in 7th grade to a class of twenty-two in 8th grade. After high school, I once again attended a private, religious school—this time for college and graduate school.

Though I am exceedingly grateful for the excellent education and opportunities I was afforded throughout life, those opportunities did limit my diversity experiences. Most of the families in the schools I attended were not wealthy; they worked hard and made great sacrifices for their children to attend those schools. They were, therefore, heavily invested in their children's education—financially, spiritually, emotionally, and academically. Most were White European families, though other ethnicities were represented. Most were traditional, two-parent homes. These families were certainly not perfect, but they did their best to set their children up for success in life.

Since that time, I have had numerous public-school experiences—from my junior and senior field experiences in college, to teaching summer school for those students who were identified as likely to be retained, to substitute teaching. These opportunities have allowed me to work with students of various ethnicities, languages, cultures, and disabilities. I have seen students from wealthy homes and others who are given a backpack of food, so they have something to eat over the weekend. I have seen students whose parents are heavily involved in the school's Parent Teacher Organization (PTA) and others whose parents do not have the resources to be involved. These experiences have opened my eyes to needs and opportunities and have given me renewed appreciation for the public-school educators who are on the front lines every day.

Positionality

My positionality as a researcher was two-fold: that of an outsider and an insider. I am an *outsider* because my experiences are primarily in private, religious educational environments. I have never taught kindergarten, nor have I administered a kindergarten readiness assessment. I am an *insider* because I live in the same school district as the teachers who assisted me with this research. I am a substitute teacher in the district and even had the opportunity to teach summer school at one of the participating schools. Additionally, many of the college students who sat in my university classroom are now teachers in this district.

Role

My primary role as a researcher was to listen, learn, and share my findings with district and state officials. The research participants were very passionate about kindergarten readiness and, in particular, the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment they are required to give. They were

eager to share their opinions, and I had the unique opportunity to give them a voice. I assured them of confidentiality in order to gain their trust and transparency.

1.9 Definition of Relevant Terms

Kindergarten Readiness

At this point, *kindergarten readiness* does not have a single definition that has been developed for use nationwide; as such, many states have adopted their own definition (Pierson, 2018). Because this study is situated in South Carolina, I used the definition adopted by the South Carolina legislature. South Carolina defines *school readiness*, which is synonymous with *kindergarten readiness*, as the following:

“School readiness” means the level of child development necessary to ensure early school success as measured in the following domains: physical health and motor skills; emotional and social competence; language and literacy development; and mathematical thinking and cognitive skills. School readiness is supported by the knowledge and practices of families, caregiver, healthcare providers, educators, and communities. (South Carolina Code of Laws Unannotated, n.d., section 59-152-25)

KRA: Kindergarten Readiness Assessment

A kindergarten readiness assessment is a tool used by educators either before kindergarten begins or during the first few weeks of school. According to Pierson (2018), not every state utilizes a KRA, but those that do use the data for one or more of the following reasons:

- To inform classroom instruction, curriculum planning, and professional development needs
- To identify students in need of specialized supports or interventions

- To provide a statewide snapshot of what children know when they enter kindergarten, monitor changes over subsequent kindergarten cohorts, and inform public policy and public investments in early childhood. (para. 6)

South Carolina's KRA evaluates students in four domains: language/literacy, mathematics, social foundations, and physical well-being/motor development. In each domain, kindergartners are identified as either *demonstrating readiness*, *approaching readiness*, or *emerging readiness*. The assessment is scripted, and teachers work with children individually. For some items, teachers have the option of utilizing a group setting. The assessment has been designed to accommodate all learners including English language learners and students with disabilities ("Ready for Kindergarten," n.d.).

Discourse

According to Wohlgend (2009), "A *discourse* is a way of using words and actions that indexes a set of beliefs and an affiliation with a particular social group" (p. 342). Throughout this study, kindergarten teachers' words were used to identify various discourses that impact their perceptions of kindergarten readiness and their use of assessment data to inform their literacy instruction.

1.10 Organization of the Study

Study Design

As noted above, my research questions are as follows:

- How does a focus group of kindergarten teachers perceive kindergarten readiness in general?
- How do these kindergarten teachers utilize data from a statewide kindergarten readiness assessment tool to inform their literacy instruction?

To answer these questions, I utilized a sociocultural framework through an Activity Theory model on early literacy (Wohlwend, 2009) that allowed me to view the various discourses embedded in the teachers' perceptions of kindergarten readiness and kindergarten readiness assessments (Crawford, 1995). For example, how does a maturation discourse manifest itself in teachers' perceptions as well as the SC-KRA? Are teachers and the SC-KRA expecting students to display certain state-mandated, mainstream literacy skills? Further, how do teachers' perceptions and the SC-KRA align with the environment—acknowledging the literacies children bring with them to kindergarten?

The data were drawn from two focus groups, both of which were conducted in the spring of 2022 at local, public elementary schools. I then conducted a thematic analysis of the data, specifically looking for evidence of three discourses—maturation, skills mastery, and sociocultural. This discourse analysis was interpretivist, rather than critical: I was seeking to learn their perspectives to get a richer picture and took the teachers' words at face value rather than analyzing underlying “societal discourses by tracing patterns of repetition of words, synonymous phrases, or other linguistic features” (Wohlwend, 2021, p. 67).

Dissertation Design

Throughout chapter 1 I have sought to explain the purpose of this study by examining the issues at hand as well as my own experience and positionality. The literature review in chapter 2 provides a more comprehensive look at current research that, ultimately, proves the need to further examine teachers' perceptions of kindergarten readiness and their use of kindergarten readiness assessment data.

My methodology is discussed in greater detail throughout chapter 3, followed by a description of the context—specifically South Carolina's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment—

in chapter 4. Chapter 5 provides a detailed, thematic analysis of the teachers' comments throughout the two focus group discussions. Finally, in chapter 6, I draw conclusions, discuss the implications, reflect on the research process, and make suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Why are educators and researchers alike so focused on kindergarten readiness? Crawford (1995) beautifully answered this question in the following statement: “The call for readiness could be construed as a call for creating environments and providing guidance to support children as they develop into real readers and writers” (p. 84). Though experts often disagree on the various nuances of readiness and readiness assessments, they likely would agree on one aspect—the ultimate goal of proficiency in students’ literacy skills, thereby enabling them to succeed in school and life. To that end, this literature review explores the research on readiness to better understand researchers’ and educators’ perspectives.

Current and seminal studies on readiness and readiness discourses were primarily drawn from Google Scholar and Education Research Complete (EBSCO), identified through search terms such as the following: *kindergarten readiness*, *kindergarten readiness assessments*, *maturation theory*, *sociocultural theory*, *teachers’ perspectives on readiness*, and *data literacy*.

A thorough review of the research revealed three themes:

1. Kindergarten Readiness
2. Kindergarten Readiness Assessments
3. Readiness Discourses in Literacy

This chapter first presents the origins and definition of *kindergarten readiness*, leading to an analysis of what counts as readiness. Questions such as the following are answered: Should a child’s age be the determining factor, or should skills also be considered? Should *students* be ready for school, or should *schools* be ready for students? Why is readiness important, and what are teachers’ perceptions? Next, the chapter provides an overview of kindergarten readiness

assessments, including the purpose and limitations, along with the types of assessments that are commonly utilized. A brief overview of South Carolina’s Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (SC-KRA) is also provided before delving into teachers’ use of assessment data to inform their literacy instruction. Finally, the chapter describes three readiness discourses in literacy—maturation, skills mastery, and sociocultural—before providing a connection between the three themes presented above and the present study.

2.2 Kindergarten Readiness

Origins of the Concept

In 1994, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act was signed into law by President Bill Clinton (“Goals 2000 and ESEA,” n.d.). As indicated by the name of the act, these educational goals were to be reached by the year 2000. Congress identified eight goals, the first of which was *school readiness* (Schugurensky, n.d.), hereafter synonymous with *kindergarten readiness*. Though the Goals 2000: Educate America Act might have brought the idea of readiness to the forefront of educators’ and researchers’ minds, Crawford (1995) noted that “the concept of readiness has roots that extend far deeper into America’s education past” (p. 71). For example, for many years children have been required to reach a certain age before entering kindergarten. Even this simple, commonly accepted requirement is rooted in an educational theory that supports one readiness argument. As theories have progressed, so have views of readiness. However, some original readiness perspectives are still evident in modern kindergarten classrooms (Crawford, 1995). Two of these theoretical perspectives—sociocultural and maturation—are discussed in section 2.3. However, to lay the groundwork for a better understanding of readiness discourses, the term itself must first be defined.

Kindergarten Readiness Defined

South Carolina's definition of kindergarten readiness (as noted in section 1.9) outlines general categories of readiness and acknowledges the groups of people who have the most impact on a child's readiness for school, yet it simultaneously leaves much room for interpretation. How are children accurately deemed ready for kindergarten-level instruction? Is this determination based solely on age, as noted above, or should skills also be considered?

Age might be an objective and efficient method of identifying children who are ready for kindergarten, but it is not necessarily the most accurate, evidenced by the fact that the age cut-off has been adjusted. Today's kindergarten students must reach the age of five earlier than students in previous generations. Bernstein et al. (2019) posited that this shift could be due to more rigorous academic requirements in traditional kindergarten classrooms or to the desire of schools and districts to improve the scores earned by kindergarten students on state-required assessments.

Additionally, the age method assumes that all children develop at the same rate, but experience with children belies that assumption. The flip side of the argument is that all teachers will be equipped to meet the needs of the students who are old enough for kindergarten—regardless of their developmental levels. Either approach is erroneous and unrealistic in its expectations.

Perhaps, then, *skills* should be viewed as the determining factor rather than age, but what skills are needed? According to Wesley and Buysse (2003), teachers typically value social skills over academic skills. Other researchers have found the opposite—that teachers value academic skills over social skills, possibly due to the pressure they feel to adequately prepare their students for state-required assessments (Bernstein et al., 2019). Despite the apparent disagreement,

Wesley and Buysse observed that “there is growing consensus that [readiness] can be viewed as multi-dimensional, highly variable, and culturally and contextually influenced over time” (p. 353).

Ready Schools

Typically, when educators and researchers discuss kindergarten readiness, the implication is that the *students* must be ready for kindergarten-level instruction. However, do *schools* have any responsibility to be ready to meet the needs of the wide variety of students entering their kindergarten classrooms? In their research, Wesley and Buysse (2003) studied perceptions of preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers, administrators, and parents of kindergarten students. All four groups identified areas in which they believed schools could be more ready to effectively teach kindergarten students. Not surprisingly, administrators focused on broader issues such as teacher certification, teacher salaries, and facilities. Teachers, however, had more of a sociocultural perspective. They desired more time to get to know the students prior to the beginning of school. They also felt parents needed a better understanding of how best to help prepare their children for kindergarten.

The concept of *ready schools* has sociocultural roots: since today’s students come from a variety of backgrounds and with variation in experiences and skills, schools must be ready to meet their individual needs (Graue, 2006; “School Readiness,” 1995; “Where We Stand on School Readiness,” 2009). In other words, “the school must take into account individual differences in language, culture, and prior experience” (“Where We Stand on School Readiness,” 2009, p. 2). This sociocultural approach is discussed further in section 2.3.

How, then, do schools determine if they are ready to meet the diverse needs of kindergarten students? As a result of the Goals 2000: Educate America act noted above, the

National Education Goals Panel was developed to determine characteristics of ready schools. The panel consisted of eight state governors, the Secretary of Education and his senior advisor, two United States senators, two United States representatives, and eight staff members of the panel. Additionally, a Ready Schools Resource Group was formed, led by two university professors, with fifteen additional members from a variety of settings such as universities, K-12 schools, and foundations (Shore, 1998). The panel outlined ten characteristics of ready schools:

1. Ready schools smooth the transition between home and school.
2. Ready schools strive for continuity between early care and education programs and elementary schools.
3. Ready schools help children learn and make sense of their complex and exciting world.
4. Ready schools are committed to the success of every child.
5. Ready schools are committed to the success of every teacher and every adult who interacts with children during the school day.
6. Ready schools introduce or expand approaches that have been shown to raise achievement.
7. Ready schools are learning organizations that alter practices and programs if they do not benefit children.
8. Ready schools serve children in communities.
9. Ready schools take responsibility for results.
10. Ready schools have strong leadership. (Shore, 1998, p. 5)

Clearly, academic skills are implied in this list along with school accountability.

However, sociocultural perspectives are also evident, a concept that is expanded in section 2.4.

Benefits of Readiness

Though definitions of readiness vary, educators and researchers tend to agree on one idea: readiness is beneficial (Gill et al., 2006; Kinkead-Clark, 2021; Wesley & Buysse, 2003; Wright et al., 2000). This perspective once again has sociocultural roots. Gill et al. (2006) found that students who are ready for kindergarten-level instruction are ultimately more successful throughout school and in their careers and communities, while those “who are not ready at school entry are more likely to repeat a grade, need special education services, and leave school prior to graduation” (p. 214). Wesley and Buysse (2003) focused specifically on the connection between success with literacy skills and success overall in school, while acknowledging the fact that children are perhaps being required to learn to read at too young an age, an issue that is discussed in the next section, *The New First Grade*. In their study of children from low-income environments, Wright et al. (2000) found that a lack of early experiences leading to a lack of school readiness ultimately perpetuated poverty from one generation to the next. Though these researchers’ conclusions might seem foreboding, their point is clear: school readiness is vital not just for kindergarten, but also for success throughout the remaining school years and into adulthood.

The New First Grade

Increased academic expectations at the kindergarten level have led some researchers to view kindergarten as “the new first grade” (Kinkead-Clark, 2021; “School Readiness,” 1995; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). According to Brown et al. (2021), “Kindergarten can no longer be framed through the traditional vision of a garden that nurtures children for school” (p. 132). For example, learning through play is often no longer the emphasis. Rather, teachers feel pressured

to effect a greater level of achievement in their students, which then leads teachers to utilize practices that are not, in their opinion, developmentally appropriate (Wesley & Buysse, 2003).

The impact of this hurried approach affects more students than those deemed behind developmentally. Even students with rich literacy experiences prior to kindergarten are sometimes not developmentally ready for the pace set by their teachers, thereby causing frustration for everyone involved and potentially leading to dire, long-term consequences (“School Readiness,” 1995).

Teachers’ Perceptions

In their study of readiness amongst low-income kindergarten students, Wright et al. (2000) interviewed kindergarten teachers to determine their perceptions. The teachers noted multiple readiness skills they deemed necessary for students’ success in kindergarten; these skills were then placed by the researchers into the following categories:

- Academic skills
- Attention skills
- Children’s independence
- Language
- Literacy
- Motor skills
- Name
- Self-esteem
- Social skills (p. 104)

Interestingly, four of the categories—*academic, language, literacy, and name*—have an overall connection to literacy. For example, the teachers who were interviewed believe children

should be exposed to literacy before entering school. They should have books in their homes, should be read to by their parents, and need to understand that print has meaning. They should also be familiar with letters and the sounds letters make. Children need to recognize their first and last names and need to be able to communicate their needs. Finally, as a result of their experiences prior to entering school, children should be aware that literacy activities can be enjoyable (Wright et al., 2000).

Jarrett and Coba-Rodriguez (2019) also researched readiness perceptions in low-income communities. The kindergarten teachers they interviewed identified social-emotional and academic skills as important, particularly stressing literacy skills such as phonics, comprehension, writing, and communication. They tended to place a heavier emphasis on academics, however, with the assumption “that academic rigor allowed low-income African American children to catch up with their middle class, White peers” (pp. 27-28).

Though literacy skills are crucial components of readiness, the debate centers around whether academic skills should be deemed the most important aspect (Hustedt et al., 2018; Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2019; Kinkead-Clark, 2021). Hustedt et al. (2018) found that teachers are not as concerned about academic skills. In their study, they gave kindergarten teachers a list of skills and tasked them with selecting the five most important readiness skills and ranking them from the most important to the least important. Only 22% of teachers placed academic skills in their top five; most teachers selected skills that were self-help or socio-emotional in nature. Kinkead-Clark (2021), on the other hand, found that teachers tend to *prioritize* academic skills. In fact, this prioritization led the teachers in this study to deemphasize play, a vital component of early childhood education. These studies beg the following question: Why does this level of discrepancy even exist?

One potential reason for this disconnect in teachers' perspectives is the lack of a clear definition of readiness, as noted above. Kinkead-Clark (2021) found that “teachers have individual perspectives of what readiness looks like, based on their individual contexts and personal expectations” (p. 271). Unfortunately, curricular requirements can also influence teachers' readiness perspectives. When readiness is determined by the curriculum—or the assessment derived from that curriculum—students who do not meet the pre-established mainstream expectations are identified as lacking readiness skills, even if they bring other crucial skills to the table.

Though the lack of clarity in the kindergarten readiness construct might seem daunting, the problem is not insurmountable. Kinkead-Clark (2021) emphasized “the need for a broader interpretation of readiness” (p. 272), positing that the parents are not the only entities responsible to ensure children are successful in kindergarten. Schools can shoulder that responsibility alongside the parents by ensuring that they are ready to educate these students—regardless of their pre-existing readiness skills.

2.3 Kindergarten Readiness Assessments

Readiness Assessment Goals

The name *kindergarten readiness assessment* implies a tool that is utilized to determine whether a child is ready for kindergarten; however, in most states that is not the case (Bernstein et al., 2019). According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), children who have reached the legal age for schooling should be educated—regardless of their abilities (“Where We Stand on School Readiness,” 2009). They further state that “the use of readiness tests to exclude children from school or to make other high-stakes

decisions is indefensible” (“Where We Stand on School Readiness,” 2009, p. 2) due to the fact that delaying school does not guarantee greater success the following year.

Why, then, do so many states mandate the use of kindergarten readiness assessments? The motivation has roots in a very basic incentive: funding. Under President Barak Obama, the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge was developed to incentivize states to improve their early childhood education programs. Part of the initiative included extra funding for states that implemented a kindergarten readiness assessment (Harvey & Ohle, 2018; Little et al., 2020; Schachter et al., 2020), which has been described by the U.S. Department of Education as a tool that “should be used to inform efforts to close the school readiness gap at kindergarten and to inform instruction in the early elementary grades” (as cited in Harvey & Ohle, 2018, p. 4). However, according to Schachter et al. (2020), this two-fold goal is not always being reached. One potential reason for a disconnect between policy goals and actual implementation is that “assessments, student tests, and other forms of data are only as good as how they are used” (Coburn & Turner, 2011, as cited in Little et al., 2020, p. 797).

Researchers have identified multiple purposes for KRAs, but most agree that the primary one is to note the developmental levels of students and support their growth (Bernstein et al., 2019; Little et al., 2020; Regenstein et al., 2018). Maxwell and Clifford (2004) support this overarching goal of KRAs; however, they additionally outlined five potential purposes for KRAs:

- Improve learning.
- Identify children with special needs.
- Evaluate programs.
- Monitor trends over time.

- Use for high-stakes accountability. (pp. 3-4)

Student learning is improved when teachers administer assessments in authentic ways, such as through observation of students and analysis of their work. These observations and analyses are more effective when teachers capture data multiple times across a variety of contexts, rather than attempting to gather all data at once. Ideally, the data reveal information about students' strengths and weaknesses, thereby allowing teachers to tailor instruction to meet each students' individual learning needs (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004; Regenstein et al., 2017; Regenstein et al., 2018). A further analysis of teachers' use of data to meet students' needs is included below in the section titled *Data Literacy*.

As noted above, KRAs are not utilized to prevent a student from entering kindergarten. In fact, many states do not administer the KRA until school has begun. Therefore, students with unidentified special needs will likely be scattered throughout general education classrooms. The administration of the KRA could help teachers identify students who are behind developmentally, thereby allowing those students to be further evaluated and receive the assistance they need to be successful in school (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004; Regenstein et al., 2017).

Using KRA data to evaluate the effectiveness of early childhood programs has merit. Teachers and administrators of preschool programs can analyze the data and adjust their instruction accordingly to better prepare their students for kindergarten (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004). Regenstein et al. (2017) noted that these data would be especially useful for Head Start programs, allowing them to fulfill their requirement of establishing goals for readiness. However, they also admitted that this approach has flaws, as noted in section 1.1.

Another potential benefit is that schools, districts, and states can track KRA data year after year to focus on trends in students' readiness, again providing data on the effectiveness of early childhood programs. These data provide a broader picture; rather than focusing on each early childhood program individually, school districts, policy makers, and even parents can determine whether a state's overall early childhood programming is meeting students' developmental needs (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004).

The final purpose of KRAs as identified by Maxwell and Clifford (2004) is that of "high-stakes accountability" (p. 4). However, they cautioned schools against this approach since assessments of young students have simply not been designed to support this level of accountability. Regenstein et al. (2017) agreed, positing that states would need to develop more reliable tools and better train teachers in the administration of the tools before utilizing the data in high-stakes decision making.

To summarize, when used correctly, KRAs have the potential to inform teachers' instruction, allowing them to meet students' academic and developmental needs more effectively. They also can provide useful information for programming—when the pressure of high-stakes accountability is removed—thereby enabling *early childhood* programs to better prepare students for kindergarten instruction and enabling *kindergarten* programs to be ready for their incoming students (Regenstein et al., 2018).

Assessment Types

According to Maxwell and Clifford (2004), two types of KRAs exist: "naturalistic" and "standardized, norm-referenced" (p. 7). Those that are naturalistic in nature are more authentic. Skills are assessed in the context of the activities in which the student would already be participating, allowing the routine to be uninterrupted and giving the teacher multiple

opportunities to observe the skill in action. Though this type of assessment would more effectively capture one child's abilities, it would be time consuming for the teacher. Additionally, bias and reliability might be factors—particularly if data are being used for program or policy decisions (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004).

Standardized KRAs eliminate some of the risk of bias and help ensure reliability; they also allow student scores to be compared. However, they are not authentic in nature and are, therefore, not as accurate when considering each student individually—particularly students who do not fall neatly into mainstream expectations (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004).

Unfortunately, neither approach has been identified as the best. Both have merit, so the approach is determined by the type of data desired. Another consideration is the importance of gathering information from multiple sources. “Families, for example, have a perspective on their children's skills from experiences at home that may differ from how teachers see children in a group, classroom setting” (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004, p. 7). Tapping into families as a source of information connects to the sociocultural perspective as discussed in section 2.4.

Limitations of Kindergarten Readiness Assessments

Though KRAs are sometimes used to evaluate the effectiveness of preschool programs, this goal cannot accurately be reached without a similar evaluation at the preschool level that would provide data for the purpose of comparison. Therefore, as mentioned above, this approach is flawed and can lead to misuse of KRA data (Bernstein et al., 2019).

Additionally, the development of a KRA is based on the designer's definition of *readiness*. However, as previously discussed, no single definition exists; rather, each state is responsible to determine its own definition. Therefore, states must identify a definition and then select an assessment that supports that definition (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004).

Finally, “assessments are only as good as the people conducting them” (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004, p. 6). Because KRA data are often used for instructional and programming decision making, training must be provided to ensure that teachers are conducting assessments accurately (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004).

South Carolina’s Kindergarten Readiness Assessment

South Carolina’s KRA (SC-KRA) evaluates students in four domains: language/literacy, mathematics, social foundations, and physical well-being/motor development. In each domain, kindergartners are identified as either *demonstrating readiness*, *approaching readiness*, or *emerging readiness*. The assessment is scripted, and teachers work with children individually. For some items, teachers have the option of utilizing a group setting. The assessment has been designed to accommodate all learners including English language learners and students with disabilities (“Ready for Kindergarten,” n.d.).

South Carolina views the assessment as valid and reliable as well as beneficial to every group involved in the process. Based on teachers’ use of data, students receive more personalized instruction. Teachers are trained and are provided the materials needed for the assessment. They are also supported throughout the process. Parents receive valuable information about their children, and technology tools enhance the experience for teachers and families. Those in leadership positions in schools and communities are better equipped to make decisions regarding programming, training, and funding (“Ready for Kindergarten,” n.d.).

Though the SC-KRA is viewed by the state as beneficial, not everyone agrees. During a focus group discussion, one teacher noted that she was initially trained via a 1-hour online module. Her school’s administrators are extremely supportive of the annual assessment process—to the point of hiring substitutes to give the teachers time to focus on the assessment.

Each student's assessment requires approximately 25 minutes. Unfortunately, the teachers do not receive any results until the spring semester. At that point, the results are already out of date and cause confusion among the parents. The teachers find other assessments far more useful when planning literacy instruction. Clearly, this teacher's perspective does not match the perspectives of policymakers at the district and state levels.

Teachers' Data Literacy

Though teachers dutifully administer KRAs, is the investment of time and money worthwhile? Are teachers utilizing the data to inform their literacy instruction? In their research on data literacy, Jacobs et al. (2009) outlined six findings they identify as "conceptions" regarding teachers' use of assessment data:

1. Data use requires ongoing attention to multiple sources of data
2. Data use focuses teachers on individual students' needs
3. Data use creates a sense of urgency and serves as a catalyst for action
4. Data use leads to changes in professional practice
5. Data use requires sophisticated professional knowledge
6. Data use requires a culture of support (pp. 44-49)

Unfortunately, the KRA provides only one data source, but it does potentially allow teachers to identify the unique strengths and weaknesses of each student ("Ready for Kindergarten," n.d.). While this knowledge could be the driving force behind teachers' instruction, is that the reality?

Schachter et al. (2020) found that teachers do not typically use KRA data to inform their instruction. Thankfully, in this particular study, the teachers' *literacy* instruction was informed more than other domains, but only 39% of teachers reported using the data when working on

literacy with students one-on-one. One potential reason for this disconnect between assessment data and literacy instruction is lack of training. According to Regenstein et al. (2018),

Successfully implementing kindergarten readiness assessments for any instructional purpose requires ongoing training and support for teachers conducting the assessment. To be effective, teachers need to be trained on how to administer the tool and on how to then use the data to support children’s learning and development. (p. 42)

In their study of North Carolina’s kindergarten entry assessment, Little et al. (2020) found similar evidence. Though teachers could gather and even analyze the data, they were not given clear direction from the state on how best to apply that data to their instruction. In fact, only 25% of the teachers who participated in the study were making instructional decisions based on the assessment data.

Besides training, teachers also need the support of school personnel. Jacobs et al. (2009) stated, “In addition to noting support from the principal, teachers acknowledged the important role that school-based subject area and general curriculum coaches played in promoting a school culture that emphasizes data use” (p. 50). In essence, effective data use is a team effort. Teachers must be trained and supported in the administration of the assessment and the use of data to inform literacy instruction. When those crucial elements are missing, the effectiveness of the KRA is greatly diminished.

2.4 Readiness Discourses in Literacy

Developmental Age and Maturation Discourse

The *maturation discourse* has roots that date back to the early 20th century, originating with the work of a doctor named Arnold Gesell. He theorized that children mature mentally as they grow physically. This process cannot be hurried; it will happen when biology dictates

(Crawford, 1995; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Gesell's premise was that "readiness to read was the result of neural ripening. The mental processes necessary for reading would unfold automatically at a certain point in development" (Teale & Sulzby, 1986, p. ix). Therefore, teachers must not teach students to read until they are biologically read to learn (Crawford, 1995; Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

Out of Gesell's work sprang research conducted by Morphett and Washburn in the early 1930s. They tested first graders to determine the mental age at which children would be ready for reading instruction. Their results seemed to indicate that 6 years, 6 months of age was the earliest that reading instruction should begin. Interestingly, they also believed that children would be damaged if taught to read prior to that age. This theory was accepted until the 1950s (Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Tracey & Morrow, 2012).

The maturation lens popularized the concept of *reading readiness*. "Readiness was seen as something that could be rationalized, measured by tests, and brought about by simply waiting for nature to take its course" (Crawford, 1995, p. 73). Additionally, reading readiness tests became widely accepted during this time as a method for determining whether a child was mentally ready for reading instruction. However, as teachers began implementing these assessments, they learned that the data could be used for far more than determining readiness; it could also be used to plan instruction for students who needed intervention, thereby causing a shift in perspective from *waiting* for students to be ready to *enabling* them to be ready (Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

Though the maturation discourse was only popular from the 1930s until the 1950s, evidence of its use still exists in 21st century classrooms. According to Wohlwend (2009), "Traces of maturation discourse still linger in early childhood practice, particularly evident in

kindergarten entrance screening and grade-retention policies” (p. 344). Even a policy as straightforward as a minimum age requirement for kindergarten is based on a maturation discourse, acknowledging the fact that age and development often go hand in hand (Bernstein et al., 2019; Kinkead-Clark, 2021).

What this perspective overlooks, however, is that children develop at different rates and are afforded varying experiences; as such, not all children will be equally ready for kindergarten instruction (Gill et al., 2006; “School Readiness,” 1995; “Where We Stand on School Readiness,” 2009). The maturation discourse inevitably makes a dangerous assumption: “that the home and community resources are of high quality, that what is slowed is the pace of development” (Graue, 2006). Unfortunately, when students’ readiness is measured against an arbitrary standard rather than acknowledging varying developmental rates and experiences, this discrepancy in readiness skills can lead to the over-identification of students with special needs (Kinkead-Clark, 2021). This danger is another motive for the *ready schools* premise discussed earlier. Schools—and teachers—must be prepared to meet students’ needs, regardless of their diverse developmental levels.

Skills and Skills Mastery Discourse

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as The Nation’s Report Card, is administered to 4th, 8th, and 12th graders to assess their skills in various subjects such as reading (NAEP, 2022). When comparing the 1980 to the 1971 NAEP scores, Chall (1983) noted a significant increase in 4th graders’ performance in all four areas of reading: Total Reading, Literal Comprehension, Inferential Comprehension, and Reference Skills (p. 4). She attributed the improved performance to a greater emphasis on basic reading skills, as evidenced by the following statement:

I would like to propose that the gains and losses in reading achievement on the NAEP tests, and on others, reflect the changes in reading instruction that began in the late 1960s and that have been continuing in the 1970s and the early 1980s—changes largely brought about by the research and development efforts in literacy and directed more to younger children than to older ones. These included an earlier start, more and earlier phonics, harder basal readers grade for grade, more home instruction, more help to those who needed it, and the like. (Chall, 1983, p. 5)

These changes in reading instruction throughout the 1960s and 1970s were likely due to Chall’s own research, outlined in her well-known book *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, along with other research such as Rudolph Flesch’s *Why Johnny Can’t Read*. In these seminal works, Chall and Flesch identify the lack of basic reading skills as a root cause of reading difficulties in American students and propose a greater emphasis on foundational skills such as phonics (Schugurensky, 2004; “Why Johnny Can’t Read,” n.d.).

In today’s classrooms, skills are still heavily emphasized—due in part to state standards and grade-level expectations. This emphasis, unfortunately, places pressure on teachers to ensure all students meet the standards, regardless of their developmental levels. As a result, teachers sometimes utilize teaching practices that are developmentally inappropriate for the students (Brown et al., 2021; Wohlwend, 2009). Additionally, an overemphasis on skills ignores the needs of children as whole beings. In their study on school readiness, Brown et al. (2021) noted the danger of simply rushing kindergarten students from one skill to the next, while ignoring other needs. This “current focus on academics ignores the whole child and subsequently may negatively impact kindergartners who are being and becoming as students and future citizens” (p. 131). They further identified the skill deemed most important by stakeholders: reading. Teachers

feel pressured to teach prescribed reading skills in kindergarten due to academic standards as well as a sense of responsibility to their colleagues who teach at other grade levels (Brown et al., 2021).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) identified this emphasis on skills as problematic, noting the following:

Expectations of the skills and abilities that young children bring to school must be based on knowledge of child development and how children learn. A basic principle of child development is that normal variability includes a wide range of competence within an age group. (“School Readiness,” 1995, p. 1)

NAEYC further posited that skills do not need to be learned in a prescribed sequence. For example, young students who are learning letters and sounds can simultaneously be taught to comprehend. An educator who delays the teaching of more advanced literacy skills while focusing on basic literacy skills “often squelches [students’] burgeoning interest in reading and writing, and deprives children of the meaningful context that promotes effective learning” (“School Readiness,” 1995, p. 2).

While students’ proficiency with basic literacy skills has been proven by research to predict their future reading abilities (Paris, 2005), all students develop at a different rate. Therefore, students cannot be expected to progress through prescribed literacy skills at the same rate. Rather, schools must view students through a sociocultural lens, acknowledging and building upon the literacy practices and skills students already possess.

Literacy Practices and Sociocultural Discourse

In her article, “A Different Kind of Word Gap,” Orellana (2016) brings the reader face to face with a common stereotype: that children from certain walks of life are sorely lacking in their

vocabulary exposure. However, educators are typically not aware of the “word wealth” (Orellana, 2016, para. 6) these children have. Unfortunately, even children who have magnetic letters on their refrigerator are not necessarily guaranteed a literacy-rich environment. In essence, educators cannot assume that one group of students has had exposure to literacy, while another has not (Orellana, 2016). This perspective matches what da Silva Iddings and Reyes (2017) noticed in their preservice teachers: “Some of the preservice teachers held preconceived ideas about what should constitute a rich language and literacy learning environment in the homes. The ideas sometimes reflected a deficit orientation by privileging English and print literacy” (p. 41). In essence, teachers must view *all* students from an asset perspective rather than a deficit perspective (Gill et al., 2006).

While Orellana (2016) referenced a *word* gap, the reality is that another type of gap exists—a *readiness* gap—“denoting the wide variation in knowledge, skills, and behaviors that exists among young children at kindergarten entry” (Schachter et al., 2020, p. 778). An awareness of this gap led to the development of the government initiatives noted above, including the funding incentivizing states to evaluate the readiness of students entering kindergarten. However, the readiness gap begs the following question: *Why does this gap even exist?* The issue is two-fold: variation in children’s experiences (Gill et al., 2006; “School Readiness,” 1995; “Where We Stand on School Readiness,” 2009; Wright et al, 2000) and a disconnect between their home and school discourses (Crawford, 1995).

Gill et al. (2006) noted that readiness expectations are primarily determined by skills that White, middle-class children exhibit, thereby implicitly labeling children not in the mainstream as lacking readiness. Though this perspective is narrow and skewed, in some instances, socio-economic status (SES) does indeed impact readiness. In their study of low-income students,

Wright et al. (2000) found that children living in poverty often do not have the literacy-rich environments of their counterparts. The parents do not always understand the benefits of early literacy exposure, preferring instead to rely on the teachers to provide all academic content and experiences. Maxwell and Clifford (2004) found that poverty is not the only sociocultural factor that impacts readiness. Children “living in a single parent home; having a mother with less than a high school education; and having parents whose primary language is not English—had lower skills when they entered school” (p. 5). Additionally, they noted that certain ethnicities are more likely to lack readiness skills. Unfortunately, in today’s society, not every child has equal access to experiences that pave the way to mainstream kindergarten readiness expectations. As such, “the meaningful question is not *whether* a child is ready to learn but rather *what* a child is ready to learn” (Stipek, 2002, as cited in Gill et al., 2006, p. 221). Teachers need to be willing to identify the skills that children *do* bring with them to kindergarten—regardless of how mainstream those skills are—and build on that foundation.

Closely connected to children’s experiences is the concept of home and school discourses. Crawford (1995) posited that “children’s primary discourses embody not only the language, but also the behaviors, values, and beliefs of the cultures, and serve to identify them with particular social groups” (p. 82). When entering school, many students face a disconnect between their primary (home) discourse and a new secondary (school) discourse. This disconnect manifests itself as a lack of readiness skills and impacts the students’ ability to grow in their skills—particularly their *literacy* skills. When teachers find a way to bridge the gap between discourses, literacy learning increases (Crawford, 1995).

2.5 Relationship Between Themes and Present Study

This literature review highlights and develops three themes—kindergarten readiness, kindergarten readiness assessments, and readiness discourses in literacy—that directly relate to the present study, providing a foundation on which new research can be laid. In this study, kindergarten teachers in one South Carolina school district were given the opportunity to share their perceptions regarding kindergarten readiness and the SC-KRA. Regarding *kindergarten readiness*, their responses were analyzed through three readiness discourse lenses: maturation, skills mastery, and sociocultural. A summary of these readiness discourses can be found in table 2.1. Additionally, the teachers’ perceptions were compared to those identified in the literature, such as the importance of academic versus socio-emotional skills and the negative impact of the lack of a clear definition of readiness. Regarding the *Kindergarten Readiness Assessment*, their responses were analyzed to determine the following how teacher utilize SC-KRA data to inform their literacy instruction.

Table 2.1

Summary of Readiness Discourses			
	Maturation	Skills Mastery	Sociocultural
Readiness Indicator	Developmental age	Proficiency level	Literacy practices in context
Goal	Mental maturity	Meet state standards and grade-level expectations	Acknowledge and build upon literacy skills and practices students already possess
Assessment	Readiness assessment to determine mental maturity	Skills assessment to compare to mainstream expectations	Qualitative assessment (e.g., observation, interview, interest inventory, etc.) to identify current literacy practices

2.6 Conclusion

Research on teachers’ perceptions of kindergarten readiness and kindergarten readiness assessments has been situated in locations such as Alaska (Harvey & Ohle, 2018), Delaware

(Hustedt et al., 2018), North Carolina (Little et al., 2020), Ohio (Schachter et al., 2020), Pennsylvania (Gill et al., 2006), and Jamaica (Kinkead-Clark, 2021). However, a review of the literature did not reveal any similar studies situated in South Carolina. Therefore, a thematic analysis of the perceptions of kindergarten teachers in South Carolina will add to the readiness literature while simultaneously allowing South Carolinians' voices to be heard.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this thematic analysis was to explore kindergarten teachers' perceptions of kindergarten readiness and to describe their use of kindergarten readiness assessment data to inform their literacy instruction. Throughout this study, *kindergarten readiness* was defined as the academic, behavioral, social-emotional, and physical/motor skills deemed necessary for success with kindergarten-level instruction.

The following research questions provided the framework for this study and aligned with the themes as described in section 3.7:

- How does a focus group of kindergarten teachers perceive kindergarten readiness in general?
- How do these kindergarten teachers utilize data from a statewide kindergarten readiness assessment tool to inform their literacy instruction?

3.2 Qualitative Research Approach

This study was conducted with an interpretivist, thematic approach to gathering and analyzing data. According to Nickerson (2022), "Interpretivism is an approach to social science that asserts that understanding the beliefs, motivations, and reasoning of individuals in a social situation is essential to decoding the meaning of the data that can be collected around a phenomenon" (Summary section, para. 1). In other words, data are more easily interpreted when situated within the context of the study's participants and setting. As such, an interpretivist approach is essential when seeking to determine teachers' perceptions of this study's phenomenon—kindergarten readiness. As data were analyzed, teachers' perspectives emerged to determine the themes for analysis rather than forcing their perspectives into a priori themes. Data

in this study were gathered in the context of two focus groups and were analyzed through a sociocultural lens. The goal of this triangulation of data was to determine themes within teachers' perceptions.

Another characteristic of this research is that of insider versus outsider perspectives. These kindergarten teachers are the insiders and, as such, were able to authoritatively reflect on their own culture's beliefs and practices. Though the number of participants was small and was merely a subset of all kindergarten teachers throughout South Carolina, it, nonetheless, allowed me to tap into the insider perspectives of kindergarten teachers concerning readiness and readiness assessments. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), once the [insider] perspectives are gathered, the researcher "synthesizes the data filtering it through...[outsider] scientific perspective to develop an overall cultural interpretation" (pp. 91-92). This *cultural interpretation* was the ultimate goal of the study—a thematic analysis of teachers' perceptions to determine the current state of kindergarten readiness and their use of kindergarten readiness assessment data to inform their literacy instruction—and was achieved by analyzing the teachers' comments through the lens of current research on kindergarten readiness in general and, more specifically, kindergarten readiness assessments.

3.3 Role of the Researcher

The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions. As such, my role as the researcher was straightforward: to gain the trust of the teachers and listen attentively to their perspectives. I first crafted focus group questions that would provide the data needed to answer my overarching research questions. As my research progressed, my focus shifted from gathering data to analyzing data. Each step of this process required an objective, unbiased approach,

whereby I took teachers' perceptions at face value rather than overlaying them with my own research-based perspectives.

Throughout our focus group conversations, I was respectful in tone, honoring the teachers' perspectives. To avoid a potential imbalance of power (e.g., kindergarten teacher versus researcher and/or kindergarten teacher versus college professor), I sought to quickly establish rapport with them as a substitute teacher in the same school district and a member of the community at large. I demonstrated an interest in their perspectives by asking questions and acknowledging their frustrations and concerns. I assured the teachers that their responses would be confidential and valued, and I communicated the findings in a manner that is clear to all interested parties such as teachers, school principals, and district officials.

3.4 Context of the Study

Due to my proximity to the research setting, I situated this study within one school district in the Upstate of South Carolina. This district is not just where I reside; it is also where I work in the sense that I help train future teachers, many of whom find employment within the district. Each semester, I teach a university course in which I partner with a nearby elementary school. My college students have the privilege of assessing and tutoring elementary students in a one-on-one setting; the elementary school's faculty, in turn, provide professional development sessions, enabling my students to gain experience and training in an actual school context. Additionally, I am a substitute teacher in the district and even had the opportunity to teach summer school at one local elementary school. These partnerships and experiences have enabled me to meet and build relationships with teachers and principals, making this district the logical location for my research.

My research was limited to one school district, but this district represents students and teachers in a variety of settings, from urban to suburban to rural, as well as various socioeconomic situations. Though I cannot guarantee that the perceptions of the teachers in one district mirror the perceptions of kindergarten teachers throughout the state, I believe their opinions will matter to district—and even state—officials.

As a result of the reasons stated above, I developed research questions specifically focused on the perspectives and experiences of a small group of teachers within the district. I then crafted focus-group questions that would not only generate authentic, organic conversations among the participants but also provide rich data. Finally, I facilitated a focus group at two different elementary schools, both of which are in approximately the same region of the district.

3.5 Study Participants

The study participants were kindergarten teachers at two public elementary schools in one South Carolina school district; therefore, several assumptions about the participants can be made. They all had a college degree and were state certified to teach in South Carolina. They all earned a similar income, though variations existed due to years of experience and/or advanced degrees. All participants were familiar with the term *kindergarten readiness* and had administered the SC-KRA at least one time. Teachers who began teaching kindergarten in the 2022-2023 academic year had only administered the revised KRA; therefore, they were unable to compare it to the previous version. All other participants were equipped to compare the previous and revised versions.

The purpose of the study was to analyze kindergarten teachers' perceptions of readiness and their use of KRA data to inform their literacy instruction, and the research questions were developed based on that purpose. Because the study participants were current kindergarten

teachers, they were well suited to provide the data needed to answer the research questions and achieve the overarching goal of the study.

3.6 Data Collection Procedures

Throughout this study, data were collected in the context of two focus groups. The first focus group took place in the spring of 2022. Questions were pre-planned and were made available prior to the meeting, providing time for preparation; however, the pre-planning did not result in a stilted conversation. Rather, follow-up questions were adjusted as the discussion progressed. The focus group lasted approximately 45 minutes and was beneficial in multiple respects. First, it informed changes, deletions, or additions to the prepared questions. Second, it provided rich data for analysis. As such, potential codes began to emerge.

The second focus group was conducted at a different local, public elementary school a few weeks after the first focus group. Again, the questions were pre-planned and sent to the teachers prior to the discussion, thereby accomplishing two goals: the teachers were equipped to provide more thorough answers and time was saved. The focus group was held during one planning period, so time was of the essence. Once everyone arrived, approximately 35 minutes remained for teachers to share their perspectives. The discussion was beneficial in that the resulting data supported the data gathered in the first focus group. In other words, patterns in kindergarten teachers' perspectives continued to emerge in a consistent fashion.

The data collection methods described above clearly support this study's research questions. First, kindergarten teachers were given the opportunity to share their perceptions regarding kindergarten readiness. Additionally, they were asked questions directly relating to the SC-KRA, including their use of the data to inform their literacy instruction.

3.7 Data Analysis Procedures

This study is a thematic analysis of teachers’ perceptions of kindergarten readiness and their use of kindergarten readiness assessment data to inform their literacy instruction. As such, two initial codes—Kindergarten Readiness and KRA Usefulness—were pre-determined based on my research questions. Though helpful, the initial codes were far too general. After the first focus group, my analysis of the data allowed me to develop expanded codes, each of which was aligned to one of the initial codes. These expanded codes were then narrowed down to final codes, from which two specific themes were determined (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2):

- Current State of Kindergarten Readiness
- Informed Literacy Instruction.

These two themes, while similar to my initial codes, were more specific, thereby enabling me to better align them to my research questions. Additionally, they informed the entire data analysis process, as evidenced in sections 5.2 and 5.3.

Figure 3.1: Theme 1

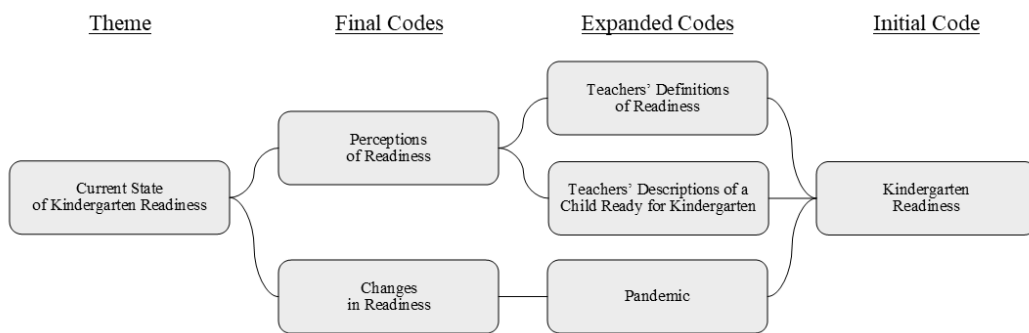
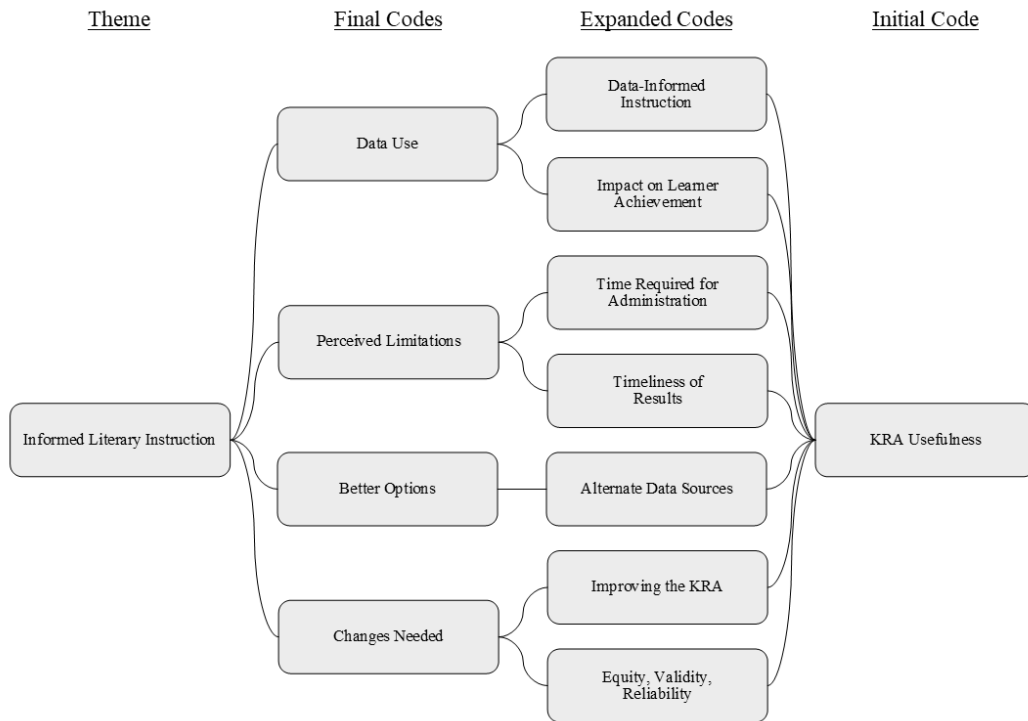


Figure 3.2: Theme 2



Code Names

Through research, I identified some potential code names prior to the first focus group. In fact, the information I had already gathered even informed my pre-determined focus group questions. Therefore, most of my code names were developed a priori. When I began coding the transcript, these a priori codes effectively guided the process.

As I worked my way through the first focus group transcript, however, I realized that additional codes were needed to thematically analyze information that surfaced as the conversation evolved. As a result, I incorporated emergent codes into the a priori codes. In essence, research informed the a priori codes and focus group questions but could not account for

the organic nature of focus groups. The conversation evolved, revealing information that I had not previously considered.

A few of the codes were developed in vivo, but most were my own descriptions based on existing literature. For example, the impact of the pandemic on kindergarten readiness was noted, so I added a *Pandemic* code. My prior research revealed that SC-KRA data are not received in a timely manner, so I included a code titled *Timeliness of Results*—based on research but not directly quoted from it.

The research is consistent: researchers and educators tend to agree on the pros and cons of the KRA. Therefore, a priori codes based on existing literature were easy to develop. However, I also needed to keep my mind open to other perspectives; as a result, emergent and in vivo codes were added. The combination of a priori, emergent, and in vivo codes was logical due to the nature of this study.

Coding for Theme 1

For Theme 1, Current State of Kindergarten Readiness, the teachers' comments were analyzed based on the following final codes: *Perceptions of Readiness* and *Changes in Readiness*. The teachers' perceptions of readiness were determined based on their definitions of *readiness* as a construct and their descriptions of a child who is ready for kindergarten-level instruction. Changes in readiness primarily revolved around the impact of the pandemic. These expanded codes enabled me to identify comments that directly related to one of the initial codes, thereby supporting theme 1 (see Figure 3.1).

The final code *Changes in Readiness* was rather straightforward. Any comments related to the pandemic were noted and evaluated. However, the final code *Perceptions of Readiness* was much more intricate. Teachers' definitions and descriptions were not just identified; they

were also analyzed through two lenses as described below: historical bodies and readiness discourses.

Historical Bodies

Theme 1 was first analyzed through the lens of teachers' expectations for kindergarten students' historical bodies. Wohlwend (2021) defined *historical bodies* as "automatic practices and engrained expectations that represent lived experience" (p. 255). In other words, what do kindergarten teachers expect their students to be able to do when the school year begins? I aligned teachers' comments with the following categories of expectations:

- Social-emotional (e.g., working with others, separation from parents)
- Behavioral (e.g., sit and listen, follow one-step direction, transition)
- Academic (e.g., colors, letters, letter sounds)
- Self-help (e.g., getting hand sanitizer independently)

The teachers in the focus groups quickly identified social-emotional skills as more important than academic skills for students entering kindergarten, which mirrored the findings of Hustedt et al. (2018) in their study of the readiness perceptions of kindergarten teachers in Delaware. The participants' readiness expectations were in accord with a traditional school discourse that identifies certain behaviors as automatically acceptable or unacceptable, while often failing to acknowledge the unique abilities and experiences each student brings to the classroom.

Readiness Discourses

Theme 1 was further analyzed as teachers' expectations were aligned with one or more of the following readiness discourses: maturation, skills mastery, and sociocultural. In other words, do teachers identify kindergarten students as incapable of certain skills, simply due to their age? Are teachers pushing students to demonstrate skills that are required by the state, regardless of

the students' developmental capabilities? Are students' current literacy practices acknowledged and built upon? Teachers' comments throughout the focus groups were analyzed to determine if any readiness discourses were evident. Comments that revealed a particular discourse were placed in the appropriate category, while acknowledging that some statements aligned with more than one discourse. I was then able to determine which discourse was most prevalent among teachers and the impact the discourses, or lack thereof, had on kindergarten-level instruction.

Coding for Theme 2

The purpose of Theme 2, Informed Literacy Instruction, was to determine whether teachers use SC-KRA data when planning their individualized literacy instruction. The complexity of this theme resulted in four final codes and seven expanded codes (see Figure 3.2). As I coded teachers' comments, I utilized the following final codes: *Data Use*, *Perceived Limitations*, *Better Options*, and *Changes Needed*. The expanded codes helped me identify comments that aligned with one or more of the final codes, each of which is described in greater detail below.

Data Use

Data use is the core issue when considering teachers' perceptions of the SC-KRA. In other words, do they utilize the data when planning their literacy instruction? Further, does the SC-KRA have any impact on learner achievement? When asked these questions, the teachers gave very definitive answers, nearly in unison at times. Though their comments revealed a negative perception of the SC-KRA, the teachers also expressed a desire to make better use of an assessment that requires so much time, money, and effort. Any comments they made that mentioned KRA data or learner achievement were coded under *Data Use*.

Perceived Limitations

Prior to the focus groups, research had already revealed that two primary concerns of teachers are the amount of time required to administer the KRA (Little et al., 2020; Schachter et al., 2015) and the delay in receiving the results (Little et al., 2020; Schachter et al., 2020). Therefore, any comments teachers made regarding these two issues were coded under *Perceived Limitations*.

Better Options

Whether or not these teachers utilize the SC-KRA when planning their literacy instruction, I was curious to learn if they find other data sources equally beneficial—or *more* beneficial. As such, alternate data sources noted by the teachers throughout the two focus groups were coded under *Better Options*.

Changes Needed

The focus group participants were quick to identify areas in which the SC-KRA could be improved, providing data for one aspect of the final code *Changes Needed*. However, to further explore this topic, I also asked questions regarding the equity, validity, and reliability of the assessment.

3.8 Validation Strategies

Creswell and Poth (2018) defined validity in qualitative research as “an attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings, as best described by the researcher, the participants, and the readers (or reviewers)” (p. 259). They provided nine validation strategies, three in each of the following categories: Researcher’s Lens, Participant’s Lens, and Reader’s or Reviewer’s Lens. Further, they recommended that qualitative studies utilize a minimum of two validation

strategies. For purposes of this study, I chose the following strategies, as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018):

- Researcher’s Lens: “Corroborating evidence through triangulation of multiple data sources (p. 260)
- Participant’s Lens: “Collaborating with participants” (p. 262)
- Reader’s or Reviewer’s Lens: “Generating a rich, thick description” (p. 263)

Corroborating Evidence Through Triangulation of Multiple Data Sources

Data were triangulated in two ways. First, data were compared throughout the two focus groups. Alignment of responses among participants provided evidence of the validity of the study. Second, data were compared between participants’ responses and scholarly research in the field of kindergarten readiness and kindergarten readiness assessments. For example, as I developed codes based on teachers’ perceptions of readiness, I compared my codes to those developed by Hustedt et al. (2018) in their research on the readiness perceptions of kindergarten teachers in Delaware. These two levels of triangulation provided the corroborating evidence needed to substantiate the validity of the study.

Collaborating with Participants

My collaboration with the study participants was minimal, but, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), even minimal collaboration is sufficient: “The degree to which participants are involved can vary along a continuum from minimal to extensive” (p. 262). The first stage of research was a focus group, throughout which I built rapport, tested my pre-planned questions, and used those questions as a springboard for further discussion. Our time together informed the next research stage—another focus group—during which I accomplished the same objectives noted above.

Generating a Rich, Thick Description

I have thoroughly described the study participants and the location in which the study was situated. Additionally, I provided rich descriptions of the participants' perceptions of readiness as well as their use of assessment data to inform their literacy instruction (see sections 5.2 and 5.3). Though data from one school district are not necessarily representative of other districts or the state at large, these rich descriptions will allow stakeholders to identify similarities to their own settings. Therefore, "because of shared characteristics" (Erlandson et al., 1993, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 263), this study will allow stakeholders to generalize the findings to their own practice.

3.9 Structure of Findings

I aligned my findings to the research questions and data analysis procedures noted in sections 3.1 and 3.7, respectively. The first research question asks the following: "How does a focus group of kindergarten teachers perceive kindergarten readiness in general?" The topic of this question became Theme 1, Current State of Kindergarten Readiness. To answer the research question, I explored teachers' definitions of *readiness*, their descriptions of a child who is ready for kindergarten-level instruction, and their perceptions of the impact of the pandemic on students' readiness. First, I categorized the expectations teachers have for students' historical bodies in order to identify the skill(s) teachers view as most important for success in kindergarten (e.g., social-emotional, behavioral, academic, and self-help skills). Next, I analyzed their perceptions through three readiness discourse lenses: maturation, skills mastery, and sociocultural. Finally, I identified comments regarding the impact of the pandemic. The data is primarily provided in three tables. Tables 5.1 and 5.2 are organized by category, whereas Table

5.3 is organized by teacher. Each table is followed by a short narrative, describing and analyzing the findings (see section 5.2).

The second question asks, “How do these kindergarten teachers utilize data from a statewide kindergarten readiness assessment tool to inform their literacy instruction?” This question became Theme 2, Informed Literacy Instruction, and was answered by examining the teachers’ perceptions of the SC-KRA (e.g., data use, perceived limitations, other potential data sources, and changes needed). The findings are presented in four tables—each of which aligns to one of the final codes—and are organized by teacher. Each table is again followed by a description and analysis in narrative form (see section 5.3).

3.10 Outcomes and Significance

The purpose of this study was to analyze kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of readiness and their use of kindergarten readiness assessment data to inform their literacy instruction. In my review of the literature, I discovered that researchers have conducted this type of study in multiple locations, but never in South Carolina. Despite the variety of research settings, the findings were consistent. As such, I was not surprised when the outcomes of this study mirrored the findings of previous studies. In essence, teachers have varying perceptions of readiness based on their own beliefs and experiences. Regarding skills needed for success in kindergarten, teachers tend to view social-emotional and behavioral skills as more important than academic skills (i.e., teachers’ expectations for students’ historical bodies). Some teachers believe that students are simply not ready for certain skills and/or concepts (i.e., maturation discourse), while others are determined to successfully reach grade-level expectations, regardless of students’ developmental levels (i.e., skills mastery discourse). Some teachers value the skills students already possess; others do not (i.e., sociocultural discourse). These perceptions shine through in

teachers' definitions of readiness and their descriptions of a child who is ready for kindergarten. Additionally, teachers are concerned about the impact of the pandemic on students' readiness (see section 5.2).

These focus-group participants do not consider SC-KRA data when planning their literacy instruction. Rather, they view the assessment as a necessary evil—something they are required to administer and desire to complete as quickly as possible. They find other data sources far more informative and have multiple recommendations for improving the SC-KRA (see section 5.3).

Teachers shoulder the burden of administering the SC-KRA and are, therefore, one of the primary stakeholders, but are their perceptions considered? This study demonstrates the significance of their perceptions and the impact those perceptions have on their mindset. As such, administrators and district officials should not only acknowledge and act upon teachers' concerns, but also ensure teachers understand the purpose and benefits of the SC-KRA.

CHAPTER 4 CONTEXT

4.1 Introduction

South Carolina's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (SC-KRA) exists due to an early learning grant awarded to Maryland and Ohio in December 2011. The funds were used for several projects, including the Ready for Kindergarten Early Childhood Comprehensive Assessment System, which was developed in conjunction with multiple partners such as Johns Hopkins University Center for Technology in Education as well as WestEd, the publisher of the assessment. One component of the assessment system is the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) used, not only in Maryland and Ohio, but also in South Carolina (WestEd, 2015). Since the fall of 2014, the South Carolina legislature has required all kindergarten students in public schools to be assessed. Kindergarten teachers administer WestEd's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment to every student sometime during the first forty-five days of the academic year ("Kindergarten Readiness Assessment," n.d.).

According to WestEd (2015), "The purpose of the KRA is to provide information to stakeholders at the local, regional, and state levels about how well prepared children are for kindergarten" (p. 1). The goal is for parents and teachers to learn more about students in order to better target the students' strengths and weaknesses, thereby more effectively meeting their social and academic needs. On a broader scale, districts and states can use KRA data to make decisions regarding programming and funding. For example, data can be disaggregated to identify which segments of the population might need additional assistance to better prepare their children for kindergarten-level instruction. Additionally, data can be tracked over time to identify trends, thereby resulting in more informed decision-making (WestEd, 2015; WestEd, 2021).

The focus of this study is teachers' perceptions of kindergarten readiness and their use of SC-KRA data to inform their literacy instruction. As such, this chapter provides an in-depth exploration and analysis of the SC-KRA to better contextualize the findings.

4.2 Development

Throughout the process of developing the KRA portion of the Ready for Kindergarten Early Childhood Comprehensive Assessment System, WestEd (2014) utilized three strategies: cognitive interviews, a pilot test, and a field test, each of which is described below.

Cognitive Interviews

Researchers worked with 28 kindergarten students—14 from Maryland and 14 from Ohio—to evaluate “students’ understandings of task expectations; their levels of mastery of the content; and the reasoning processes, problem-solving strategies, and adaptive skills students use when answering test question” (WestEd, 2014, p. 5). The students were interviewed individually, were told they were helping the researchers develop a game, and were rewarded with stickers. The students were asked to verbalize their thoughts as they completed the various KRA tasks. Researchers carefully noted the students’ thought processes and effort in order to determine the appropriateness of each item. In the language and literacy domain, only three skills were included in the items that were tested: students’ knowledge of basic vocabulary, their knowledge of the names of shapes, and their “ability to understand spoken language” (WestEd, 2014, p. 6). Data from the cognitive interviews confirmed that the item types were appropriate for kindergarten students (WestEd, 2014).

Following the students’ cognitive interviews, researchers conducted teacher focus groups to gain their insights into the KRA items. The focus groups included 12 teachers from Maryland, 13 teachers from Ohio, and a principal from Ohio. Again, the items were determined to be

appropriate. However, the teachers did recommend a few minor edits. Their perspectives were not unanimous when asked if the KRA items were appropriate for English language learners or students with disabilities. The consensus was that each student is unique, so the effectiveness of the KRA is dependent on factors such as the students' level of English proficiency or the type of disability (WestEd, 2014).

Pilot Test

The data from the cognitive interviews and focus groups enabled researchers to develop and conduct a pilot test. Their purpose expanded from merely evaluating item types to additionally examining the feasibility of administration (WestEd, 2014).

The participants in the pilot test included 36 schools, 49 teachers, and 212 kindergarten students, once again situated in Maryland and Ohio. Each participating teacher was identified as a test administrator and was required to assess five students. The students needed to speak English and, as much as possible, were to represent the class as a whole demographically. The pilot test was comprised of three parts: assessment items that required teachers to interact with students, assessment items that allowed teachers to simply observe, and a questionnaire that teachers completed at the end the assessments (WestEd, 2014).

The findings again confirmed that the KRA items were appropriate for kindergarten students. The teachers also approved of the directions, illustrations, and manipulatives provided for the students. Regarding the format of the assessment items, data indicated that teachers preferred the accuracy of the observational rubrics but found the checklists more manageable. As a result, WestEd (2014) decided to “utilize a combination of the features of the checklist and observational-rubric items for the observational part of the KRA, such that all observational items would be based on a rubric that describes the skill” (p. 13). Finally, teachers did not have

any significant administration issues, though a few did note that assessing an entire class of students at the beginning of the school year might be challenging and recommended researchers explore that potential issue in the field test (WestEd, 2014).

Field Test

The final stage of development prior to statewide implementation of the KRA throughout Maryland and Ohio was a field test. The researchers' goal was to administer every potential assessment item to a minimum of 500 students; as such, a larger number of teachers was needed for the study. Seventy-nine teachers from Maryland and 158 from Ohio participated, for a total of 237. Additionally, six test forms were developed, three of which focused exclusively on the literacy domain. Each participating school was given one form that all their kindergarten teachers administered. The demographics of the students who were assessed represented the demographics of the state in which they resided. The sample of students also included English language learners, students with disabilities, and students from low socioeconomic settings (WestEd, 2014).

Though the researchers were still interested in an item analysis as well as the teachers' perspectives on the administration of the KRA, their goals for the field test also included an evaluation of “the allowable student supports, the online data system, and the professional development” (WestEd, 2014, p. 14). Based on quantitative and qualitative data, researchers decided to remove one question from the 164 potential questions. Additionally, they were able to narrow the questions down to the KRA 1.0 Blueprint (discussed further in section 4.3) that was utilized for the statewide administration of the KRA during the fall of 2014. The teachers did note some concerns such as the length of time to administer the assessment—particularly at the beginning of the school year—and the process of entering data into the online system. Because

the assessment was new, researchers were not surprised by the teachers' perspectives. Rather, they acknowledged the concerns and made a concerted effort to improve the teachers' professional development as well as the KRA's technology prior to statewide implementation (WestEd, 2014).

4.3 Assessment Items

According to WestEd (2014), "A KRA item is one question or observation that aligns to a specific essential skill and knowledge statement from within the Common Language Standards and that results in one recorded score" (p. 3). The following types of items are included throughout the SC-KRA:

- For *selected response items (SR)*, students are required to touch the correct response from three possible options. These items are each worth one point and are quick to administer and score.
- *Performance-task items (PT)* require students to physically and actively respond to a prompt. For some of these items, students are given manipulatives. Each item is scored with a rubric and is worth up to three points.
- *Observational-rubric items (OR)* are unique in that the students are not aware of the assessment; one-on-one interaction is not required. As such, the students are observed by the teacher in a more authentic, natural environment. The teacher is given a list of skills to observe and a rubric with which to score the students' performance of each skill (WestEd, 2014).

As noted above, the field test allowed researchers to develop the KRA 1.0 Blueprint, outlining the distribution of each type of item throughout the four domains: Language and Literacy, Mathematics, Physical Well-Being and Motor Development, and Social Foundations.

Since that initial blueprint, revisions were made, resulting in version 1.5 (see Table 4.1), which was still in use in South Carolina as of the 2020-2021 school year (WestEd, 2014; WestEd, 2021).

Table 4.1

KRA 1.5 Blueprint						
Domain	SR	PT	OR	Total Items	Total Points	Percentage of Total Points
Language and Literacy	6	9	2	17	34	35
Mathematics	3	11	0	14	25	26
Physical Well-Being and Motor Development	0	0	7	7	14	14
Social Foundations	0	0	12	12	24	25
Total	9	20	21	50	97	100

(WestEd, 2021, p. 3)

Common Language Standards

To ensure that each KRA item measures an appropriate skill, the Common Language Standards were developed. In essence, these standards are a synthesis of the early childhood standards utilized in Maryland and Ohio. The standards are divided into the four KRA domains and are further subdivided into strands. For example, the Language and Literacy strands are as follows: reading, speaking and listening, writing, and language. The strands are then subdivided into multiple, specific skills (WestEd, 2014). See Appendix B for the Language and Literacy Common Language Standards.

4.4 Supports for Diverse Students

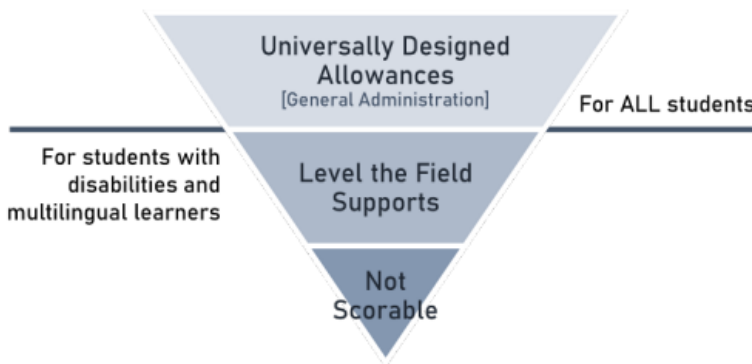
Teachers in South Carolina are required by law to administer the SC-KRA to all public-school kindergarten students within the first 45 school days—including students with disabilities and multilingual learners (“Kindergarten Readiness Assessment,” n.d.; South Carolina Department of Education, n.d.). Therefore, the assessment needs to be administered in a way that allows as many students as possible to participate and receive valid, reliable results.

In the context of the SC-KRA, the following definitions are used to identify students with disabilities and multilingual learners:

- A student with a disability is defined as a student with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or a Section 504 plan.
- A student who is a multilingual learner is defined as a student whose primary or home language is one other than English and who cannot perform some or all classroom activities in English because he or she may have limited or no age appropriate ability to understand or speak in English. (South Carolina Department of Education, n.d., p. 3).

Additionally, three levels of administration have been identified (see Figure 4.1), enabling teachers to make informed decisions when determining whether an assessment item is appropriate for a specific student. Each of these levels is described in detail below.

Figure 4.1



(South Carolina Department of Education, n.d., p. 3)

General Administration with Universally Designed Allowances

This first level of administration is the broadest and meets the needs of the vast majority of students. Teachers simply administer the assessment as described in the instructions; however, certain actions can be taken, if necessary, that will benefit all students, hence the term *universally designed allowances*. According to the South Carolina Department of Education (n.d.), these

“allowances encompass the range of actions, material presentations, procedures, and settings that are acceptable for use with all students” (p. 4). See Table 4.2 for the list of allowances from which teachers are permitted to select.

Table 4.2

Directions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read directions aloud and repeat as many times as needed, either by request of the student or as determined by the teacher. Important: When repeating directions, teachers should not deviate from the item’s script. • Pause while reading directions to ensure the student is attending. • Redirect the student’s attention to an item or a direction.
Item Presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide magnification or enlargement of the test items (as many as needed). • Change the position or orientation of materials to maximize the student’s visual engagement (e.g., hold the stimulus booklet at a vertical angle instead of placing it flat on a table). • Provide audio amplification for verbal directions. • Provide physical support that maintains all possible answer choices for a given item to improve visual acuity. For example, use color contrast overlay. • Allow the student to retake an item, as determined by the teacher, at any point within the test window if the teacher determines that the student’s performance was not indicative of his or her typical level of functioning (e.g., due to illness).
Student Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow the student to point to or verbally indicate a response for an item that asks the student to touch the correct response. • Allow the student to indicate a corrected or changed response. • Encourage a response from the student as long as the encouragement is not used as a cue.
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the student in a familiar, comfortable location in the classroom or school. • Allow the student to move and change locations during a test session. • Change the lighting. • Change the arrangement of the furniture, including allowing the student to stand during a direct assessment activity. • Provide noise buffers. • Assess in a setting with minimal visual distractions.
Scheduling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use teacher discretion for starting and stopping item and/or section administration. • Allow the student to initiate starting and stopping item and/or section administration. • Give as much time as needed to complete an item, unless otherwise indicated in the item directions. • Provide breaks as needed.

(South Carolina Department of Education, n.d., p. 7)

Level the Field Supports

The second level of administration is designed to provide access to the SC-KRA without impacting the validity or reliability of the results. These supports are only permitted for students

who are identified as having disabilities and multilingual learners, based on the definitions provided above. For students with disabilities, supports could include the following:

- Use braille to present item content, when appropriate.
- Use sign language to administer the item to a student who is deaf or hard of hearing and uses sign language as his or her mode of communication.
- Allow the student to gesture toward, touch, use eye gaze, or otherwise indicate a response through whatever dominant communication mode/language he or she utilizes, including sign language, sign language approximations, and digital language. (South Carolina Department of Education, n.d., p. 9)

Students who are multilingual learners might be allowed to physically indicate their answer rather than verbally stating it. Regardless of the supports chosen, they should simply give the students the ability to answer rather than inflating the scores by making the items easier to answer. Additionally, kindergarten teachers should collaborate with the other specialists (e.g., special education teachers) who work with the students in question to determine which supports, if any, are needed (South Carolina Department of Education, n.d.).

Not Scorable

The *Not Scorable* level of administration should only be used when all other options have been explored. It is only permitted for students with disabilities and multilingual learners who are unable to respond to an assessment item—even after the use of universally designed allowances and Level the Field supports. Marking *Not Scorable* for an item on the SC-KRA will negatively affect the final score; therefore, the school specialists must agree with the kindergarten teachers that this is the only option. An important consideration is that *Not Scorable*

is not the same as a score of zero. *Not Scorable* indicates lack of access, whereas *zero* reflects a child’s ability to demonstrate the skill in question.

4.5 Data and Reports

Data

When developing the KRA, researchers determined that percent-correct scores would not be the best option. Rather, they decided to convert each student’s raw score to a scale score. “Scale scores account for the difficulty of individual items and forms, providing consistency in the interpretation of results and allowing for comparison of results across cohorts and forms” (WestEd, 2021, p. 4). The scale scores are then aligned to one of three readiness levels—demonstrating readiness, approaching readiness, and emerging readiness—each of which is briefly described to clarify the meaning of the numerical score (WestEd, 2021). See Table 4.3 for an overview of the performance levels, descriptions, and scale score ranges.

Table 4.3

Performance Levels and Overall Scale Score Ranges for the KRA		
Performance Level	Description	Overall Score Range
Demonstrating Readiness	The child demonstrates foundational skills and behaviors of being prepared for kindergarten	270-298
Approaching Readiness	The child demonstrates some skills and behaviors of being prepared for kindergarten	258-269
Emerging Readiness	The child demonstrates minimal skills and behaviors of being prepared for kindergarten	202-257

(WestEd, 2021, p. 5)

Scale scores are also provided for each of the four domains: Language and Literacy, Mathematics, Physical Well-Being and Motor Development, and Social Foundations. However, researchers urge caution when analyzing the domain scores since “these scores are determined by a subset of the items that compose the entire KRA, meaning that they provide a less-precise measure of ability” (WestEd, 2021, p. 5).

Reports

During and following the administration of the KRA, numerous reports are available for teachers, principals, and even district officials (Johns Hopkins, n.d.a). Since the focus of this study is on teachers' perceptions of kindergarten readiness and the SC-KRA, the primary focus of this section will be teacher reports.

After the teacher completes the SC-KRA for each student, an individual student report (ISR) can be viewed, providing information such as the overall scale score and domain-specific scale scores. Additionally, the following reports are available for teachers' use:

- *Interactive Data Displays:* The Interactive Data Displays are interactive charts and graphs that present the KRA data in multiple ways, including the option to filter by subgroups.
- *Domain Data Export:* The Domain Data Export is a Microsoft Excel file of a teacher's class roster, organized by domain, showing total raw points earned by each student.
- *Data Results Export:* This report is similar to the Domain Data Export but is organized by item. The spreadsheet can be sorted and filtered to meet the teacher's needs.
- *Class Item Results:* This report is a PDF with scoring rubrics, showing student performance by item.
- *Individual Student Item Results:* The report is a PDF of student scores by item, including scoring rubrics. This report can be printed separately for each student, showing the student's scores for all items or only for selected items. (WestEd, 2021, p. 6)

4.6 Teacher Supports

In addition to the reports teachers are able to generate, they are also supported in other ways. For example, the South Carolina Department of Education has a webpage dedicated to the

SC-KRA, which provides numerous materials such as checklists and quick guides. Teacher training is not just encouraged; rather, it is required. The training is online, enabling teachers to complete it at their convenience. Teachers who have never administered the SC-KRA must complete the full training, while teachers who are familiar with the assessment need only complete a “refresher module” (Johns Hopkins, n.d.b, p. 1). Additionally, principals are encouraged to support their kindergarten teachers by providing the personnel and technology needed to make the administration of the assessment more manageable (Johns Hopkins, n.d.c, p. 1).

The Ready for Kindergarten assessment system provides teachers two technology tools: a website and an app. This website is where teachers access the training noted above. They can also track the progress of their SC-KRA administration each year. The app allows teachers to administer some items electronically, reducing the time required for administration and limiting the need for manipulatives (WestEd, 2014).

4.7 Validity and Reliability

Validity

According to WestEd (2021), “Every aspect of an assessment, including design, content specifications, item development, psychometric characteristics, and administration procedures, provides evidence in support of its validity (or evidence of lack of validity)” (p. 7). As such, great care was taken throughout the development of the SC-KRA to ensure the validity and reliability of the assessment.

Regarding *content* validity, assessment items were aligned to the Common Language Standards (see section 4.3) and were reviewed for potential bias. Content area experts and employees of the Maryland and Ohio departments of education were asked to provide input on

each item. Additionally, each stage of the development process (see section 4.2)—cognitive interviews, pilot test, and field test—gave stakeholders an opportunity to weigh in on the items being considered. Finally, teachers were trained in the use of supports permitted for English language learners and learners with disabilities, thereby enabling as many students as possible to access the content. *Construct* validity was evaluated through the cognitive interviews described above (see section 4.2) and teacher surveys. Researchers found “strong evidence that the response processes of students were consistent with the intended designs of the items” (WestEd, 2021, p. 8).

Further evidence of validity was established by a statistical analysis, including p-value statistics and item-total correlations. “The p-value statistic is a measure of item difficulty (or item easiness) and falls between 0 and 1” (WestEd, 2021, p. 9), whereas the item-total correlation measures the correlation between one item and all the items. For this statistic, the score will fall between -1 and 1, with 0 indicating a lack of correlation (see Table 4.4). Finally, Pearson correlation coefficients demonstrated a strong correlation between domain scores and total scores (WestEd, 2021). These statistics are provided in more detail in Tables 4.4 and 4.5, respectively.

Table 4.4

Summary of Classical Item Statistics for the KRA in Fall 2020							
Domain	Number of Items	p-Value			Item-Total Correlation		
		M	SD	Range	M	SD	Range
All	33	0.69	0.15	0.38 – 0.90	0.48	0.11	0.30 – 0.63
Language and Literacy	15	0.70	0.15	0.49 – 0.90	0.48	0.12	0.32 – 0.62
Mathematics	14	0.65	0.16	0.38 – 0.88	0.47	0.12	0.30 – 0.63
Physical Well-Being and Motor Development	3	0.77	0.07	0.68 – 0.84	0.49	0.04	0.44 – 0.53

(WestEd, 2021, p. 9)

Table 4.5

Pearson Correlation Coefficients between the Overall Score and the Domain Scores			
	Overall	LL	MA
Overall	1		
Language and Literacy (LL)	0.94	1	
Mathematics (MA)	0.92	0.78	

(WestEd, 2021, p. 9)

Reliability

To determine the reliability, or consistency, of the SC-KRA, researchers utilized Cronbach’s alpha, which “is a function of the number of items, the sum of all the item variances, and the variance of the total scores” (WestEd, 2021, p. 10). The closer the Cronbach’s alpha score is to 1, the better the correlation. As seen in Table 4.6, student scores were consistent overall and in two domains—language and literacy and mathematics—thereby demonstrating the reliability of the assessment (WestEd, 2021).

Table 4.6

Summary of Descriptive and Reliability Statistics for the KRA in Fall 2020					
Domain	Mean	SD	Range	Cronbach’s Alpha	SEM
Overall	262.48	13.91	202-298	0.91	4.10
Language and Literacy	262.56	15.27	202-298	0.83	6.27
Mathematics	263.04	15.29	202-298	0.82	6.54

(WestEd, 2021, p. 10)

4.8 Parent Information

Parents receive limited information about the SC-KRA. Administrators are encouraged to communicate with families to provide an overview of the assessment. They are given two sample letters to use, one of which is worded more simply than the other (see Appendix C for a Sample Parent Letter). They are also given a Spanish version. Once a student’s assessment is complete, teachers can print an Individual Student Report (ISR) that provides more detailed information about the student’s performance (Johns Hopkins, n.d.c). For example, parents learn their child’s overall scale score, along with the corresponding performance level. Each performance level is

briefly described to give parents a general sense of their child’s readiness for kindergarten-level instruction. Additionally, the report provides multiple suggestions for parents to help their children improve in each of the four domains (“Kindergarten Readiness Assessment: Individual Student Report,” n.d.).

4.9 Consequences

As stated on the Individual Student Report (n.d.), “Performance on the KRA does not prevent or prohibit a student from entering kindergarten” (p. 1). Therefore, why does the state of South Carolina require teachers to administer it? The South Carolina Department of Education notes the following reasons:

- It benefits children by identifying their strengths and challenges and informing instruction.
- It assists teachers with rich information to help them differentiate instruction and address learning gaps.
- It informs families about their child’s strengths and abilities.
- It provides school leaders and early childhood specialists with information to target professional development and transition practices.
- It helps community leaders and policy makers to make informed programmatic, policy, and funding decisions. (“Ready for Kindergarten,” n.d., p. 1)

Though these benefits encompass all stakeholders from the students to the policy makers, are they being consistently realized? This topic is further explored in chapter five as teacher perspectives of kindergarten readiness and the SC-KRA are closely examined.

CHAPTER 5 THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUP DATA

5.1 Introduction

As noted in section 3.7, coding of data led to the development of two themes: Current State of Kindergarten Readiness and Informed Literacy Instruction. Throughout chapter 5, these themes are analyzed through the lens of kindergarten teachers' perspectives, as evidenced by their responses throughout the two focus group discussions (see section 3.6). Each theme is first briefly described; then data excerpts are provided and analyzed in alignment with the following final codes (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2):

- Theme 1
 - Perceptions of Readiness
 - Changes in Readiness
- Theme 2:
 - Data Use
 - Perceived Limitations
 - Better Options
 - Changes Needed

5.2 Theme 1: Current State of Kindergarten Readiness

The current state of kindergarten readiness is best identified by exploring two dimensions: teachers' *perceptions of* readiness as well as *changes in* readiness. Their perceptions emerged as they defined readiness and described a child who is ready for kindergarten-level instruction. Changes in readiness focused primarily on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Perceptions of Readiness

As teachers discussed readiness—particularly their definitions of *kindergarten readiness* as a concept and their descriptions of a child who is ready for kindergarten—their expectations for students’ skills (i.e., historical bodies), and even their underlying assumptions (i.e., discourses), became apparent. As such, to better understand teachers’ perceptions of readiness, their comments have been categorized and analyzed according to historical bodies and readiness discourses in literacy.

Historical Bodies

When analyzing teachers’ expectations for students’ historical bodies, I aligned their comments to the following categories of skills:

- Social-emotional (e.g., working with others, separation from parents)
- Behavioral (e.g., sit and listen, follow one-step direction, transition)
- Academic (e.g., colors, letters, letter sounds)
- Self-help (e.g., getting hand sanitizer independently)

The comments on Table 5.1 are direct quotes from the teachers who participated in the focus groups and are organized under the four categories of skills described above. The speakers are identified as teacher A, B, C, or D.

Table 5.1

Historical Bodies			
Social-Emotional	Behavioral	Academic	Self-Help
A: “Kindergarten readiness is...it’s a kindergarten-aged child being socially, emotionally, and academically ready to excel in kindergarten. And with being ready, the child comes to	A: “Just behavior...just behavior, the self-control. It’s just not there. The impulsivity. And it’s, it’s like a whole class. It’s just not like two students.” B: “...ready to be able to sit and listen for a short	A: “Kindergarten readiness is...it’s a kindergarten-aged child being socially, emotionally, and academically ready to excel in kindergarten. And with being ready, the child comes to	B: “...I had no idea that first, kindergarteners came, like, not knowing how to...get hand sanitizer on their own.” C: “Yeah, even like washing hands.”

<p>kindergarten with a set of tools already established that provides him or her with an appropriate foundation for kindergarten.”</p> <p>A: “With the pandemic, we're just seeing a lot of just that social-emotional part of a child that they do not have...And we don't have time to teach the social-emotional part. But especially after the pandemic, that's lower than before. It's been tough.”</p> <p>A: “We are seeing lower academics and even lower social-emotional.”</p> <p>B: “For me, like, kindergarten readiness is more about, like, social skills, like ready to be able to work with others...”</p> <p>When asked whether social-emotional or academic skills are more important...</p> <p>B: “My opinion social.”</p> <p>D: “Yeah. Social for sure. That's harder for us to teach them.”</p> <p>C: “Social-emotional. Also, separation from their parents. I didn't mention that earlier. That's a big deal. Another thing that preschool prepares them for.”</p> <p>B: “I had one [student] this year that was (this is the first year I've ever</p>	<p>amount of time. I mean, obviously, it's kindergarten, so we don't ever make them sit longer than 5 or 10 minutes without getting up and doing a little break. But being able to do that, being able to transition is a huge, a huge kindergarten [sic] because as for me coming from first grade, I had no idea that first [sic], kindergarteners came, like, not knowing how to make a line...”</p> <p>C: “And just to be able to listen and follow just the one-step direction.”</p> <p>C: “Getting their attention in the first place. It's hard to get their attention. It is hard to keep it, but some of them are not with, like, no, they're just not there. They're not ready to listen.”</p> <p>D: “I mean, yeah, someone who's ready to come in, like they said, you know, and sit and listen.”</p> <p>When asked about the impact of the pandemic...</p> <p>B: “I think, too, honestly, that parents were a lot more lenient with their children for the past couple of years, because they felt bad...So, honestly, kids are not disciplined like they used to be. So that makes a huge difference.”</p>	<p>kindergarten with a set of tools already established that provides him or her with an appropriate foundation for kindergarten.”</p> <p>A: “We are seeing lower academics and even lower social-emotional.”</p> <p>A: “But...especially with that ELA, we're hitting the ELA areas, and beginning of kindergarten, it's letter name, letter sound. Then it moves into decodable words. You know...using more things with the letter name and letter sound.”</p> <p>A: “I feel like with my class, they...a lot of them out...probably about seven of them could read coming in.”</p> <p>B: “It's nice if they know, like their colors, but I feel like they don't have to come in knowing their letters and letter sounds because a lot of times those kids are bored, that do know their letters and letter sounds, you know, because we do that. That's what we start with.”</p> <p>D [When asked for a textbook definition of kindergarten readiness]: “I said, ‘the ability to enter in kindergarten and successfully keep up with our suggested units.’ Because they [district] do give us a pacing guide. And so it's like they [students] need to be</p>	<p>When asked to identify the domain in which that year's students were least prepared for kindergarten upon entering...</p> <p>D: “I think self-help skills for mine. Like, even a kid, if their arm of their jacket was inside out, they couldn't figure out how to flip their jacket sleeve and just really self-help, like, the washing the hands, the things that you would think the children would just do at home.”</p> <p>C: “Yeah, lack of independence. They don't want to, either. They prefer us to do that. ‘Put my jacket on.’ And that's common in kindergarten, but it's just many more kids this year like that.”</p>
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<p>had to deal with that), that, like, literally, like, had to tear her away from her mom every morning for, like, 9 weeks. And I was, like, 'This is awful.'"</p> <p>B: "So, I mean, that, that was, that was tricky. So yeah. But, like, those kinds of things are almost more important than academics, because the academics we can teach."</p>	<p>C: "Yes, so the fact that, that this year, it seems more difficult for a kid to handle a negative consequence. They just either, like, have a meltdown all the rest of the day. Get angry right away."</p> <p>C: "...this year, it's like, yes, we are constantly disciplining such that we, it's difficult for me to keep up with the pace in kindergarten."</p>	<p>able to come in and, like, immediately jump on to that path of being, so if they don't have these foundational things that we're ready to, you know, go ahead and start with, then it kind of holds up our whole pacing guide."</p> <p>D: "And they really need to come in with, you know, those foundational skills of not just, like, singing their ABCs but, kind of, you know, a little bit of letter identification. Like we get into the sounds and stuff, but because of the pace that we move at, if they come in knowing some of those things already, it really helps us to, you know, be able to keep up."</p> <p>When asked to identify the domain in which that year's students were most prepared for kindergarten upon entering...</p> <p>D: "I think my kids knew a lot of the vocabulary. When it was, like, name the rug, name the teacher, name the, they knew the vocabulary. They were stronger in that, but not necessarily the, like, what letter is this? What sound? Like those things. So it seems like they had conversations with their parents. Like their vocabulary was strong, but not their actual academic, like that part."</p>	
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The teachers believed that social-emotional skills are of more importance than academic skills for students entering kindergarten. They noted that social-emotional skills are more challenging to teach and that students who attend preschool tend to be more prepared in this area. Their comments implied that when students are ready for kindergarten socially, the teachers can focus more on academic skills, thereby enabling them to keep up with the school district's pacing guides. Interestingly, based solely on the number of comments, behavioral skills seemed to be equally as important as social-emotional skills. However, the differentiation between the two categories is my own. I believe these teachers viewed social-emotional and behavioral skills as one entity.

Academic skills appeared to be of concern to only two of the four teachers. Teacher D was very conscious of the district's pacing guide and, as a result, believed the students should enter kindergarten with some basic academic skills such as letter identification. Interestingly, this teacher had the least amount of experience teaching kindergarten; at the time of the focus group discussions, she was nearing the end of her first year.

Two of the teachers identified self-help skills as the area in which their current students were least prepared for kindergarten instruction. One teacher implied that the pandemic exacerbated this weakness. Overall, the students tended to expect their teachers to help them with tasks that should be accomplished independently.

In general, the teachers agreed on the skills that are most important (i.e., social-emotional/behavioral) and the skills that were weakest at the beginning of the school year (i.e., self-help). The biggest discrepancy was in their views of academics. The teacher with the least experience tended to value academic skills more than the teachers with more experience, who believed they could teach those skills. In fact, one teacher noted that students with higher

academic skills at the beginning of the school year tended to be bored. Clearly, these teachers' expectations for students' historical bodies were not aligned.

Readiness Discourses in Literacy

Using the descriptions of the maturation, skills mastery, and sociocultural discourses as noted in section 2.4, I identified perceptions that fall within the parameters of these discourses. Therefore, the teachers' comments are organized under the following categories:

- Maturation Discourse
- Skills Mastery Discourse
- Sociocultural Discourse

The comments on Table 5.2 are, again, direct quotes from the teachers who participated in the focus groups and are organized under the three discourses noted above. The speakers are identified in the same manner as on Table 5.1.

Table 5.2

Readiness Discourses in Literacy		
Maturation	Skills Mastery	Sociocultural
<p>A: "With the pandemic, we're just seeing a lot of just that social-emotional part of a child that they do not have...And we don't have time to teach the social-emotional part. But especially after the pandemic, that's lower than before. It's been tough."</p> <p>A: "We are seeing lower academics and even lower social-emotional."</p> <p>A: "Just behavior...just behavior, the self-control. It's just not there. The impulsivity. And it's, it's like a whole class. It's just not like two students."</p> <p>B: "I mean, obviously, it's kindergarten, so we don't ever make them sit longer than 5 or 10</p>	<p>A: "Kindergarten readiness is...it's a kindergarten-aged child being socially, emotionally, and academically ready to excel in kindergarten. And with being ready, the child comes to kindergarten with a set of tools already established that provides him or her with an appropriate foundation for kindergarten."</p> <p>A: "We are seeing lower academics and even lower social-emotional."</p> <p>A: "But...especially with that ELA, we're hitting the ELA areas, and beginning of kindergarten, it's letter name, letter sound. Then it moves into decodable words. You know...using more things with the letter name and letter sound."</p>	<p>A: "Kindergarten readiness is...it's a kindergarten-aged child being socially, emotionally, and academically ready to excel in kindergarten. And with being ready, the child comes to kindergarten with a set of tools already established that provides him or her with an appropriate foundation for kindergarten."</p> <p>A: "With the pandemic, we're just seeing a lot of just that social-emotional part of a child that they do not have...And we don't have time to teach the social-emotional part. But especially after the pandemic, that's lower than before. It's been tough."</p>

<p>minutes without getting up and doing a little break.”</p> <p>B: “...as for me coming from first grade, I had no idea that first [sic], kindergarteners came, like, not knowing how to make a line, you know, or how to, how to get hand sanitizer on their own.”</p> <p>C: “They’re not ready to listen.”</p> <p>C: “Not necessarily to preschool or restaurant, but, like, you know, we take them on field trips, typically. They’re very excited about this first one, but I’m very nervous about it, because they [sic] never been anywhere. So, I think maybe the isolation has made a difference. They’ve only seen their own house.”</p> <p>B: “I think, too, honestly, that parents were a lot more lenient with their children for the past couple of years, because they felt bad. You know, like, you just kind of have this, like, feel-bad type thing. So, honestly, kids are not disciplined like they used to be. So that makes a huge difference.”</p>	<p>D [When asked for a textbook definition of kindergarten readiness]: “I said, ‘the ability to enter in kindergarten and successfully keep up with our suggested units.’ Because they [district] do give us a pacing guide. And so it’s like they [students] need to be able to come in and, like, immediately jump on to that path of being, so if they don’t have these foundational things that we’re ready to, you know, go ahead and start with, then it kind of holds up our whole pacing guide.</p> <p>D: “And they really need to come in with, you know, those foundational skills of not just, like, singing their ABCs but, kind of, you know, a little bit of letter identification. Like we get into the sounds and stuff, but because of the pace that we move at, if they come in knowing some of those things already, it really helps us to, you know, be able to keep up.”</p> <p>D [When asked to identify the domain in which that year’s students were <i>most</i> prepared for kindergarten upon entering]: “I think my kids knew a lot of the vocabulary. When it was, like, name the rug, name the teacher, name the, they knew the vocabulary. They were stronger in that, but not necessarily the, like, what letter is this? What sound? Like those things. So it seems like they had conversations with their parents. Like their vocabulary was strong, but not their actual academic, like that part.”</p>	<p>A: “We are seeing lower academics and even lower social-emotional.”</p> <p>A: “A lot of it I feel like was with quarantine...and a lot of parents working from home. So when parents were working from home, they couldn’t always be accessible to their child. So they would just give their child a device or just have them even when they were doing a virtual school, they would have a device and...it’s just the connections are...a lot of connections are gone.”</p> <p>A: “Just behavior...just behavior, the self-control. It’s just not there. The impulsivity. And it’s, it’s like a whole class. It’s just not like two students.”</p> <p>B: “So we can do our job of teaching them. It’s just they have to be able to learn that [M: ‘...to listen and follow just the one-step direction’], you know.”</p> <p>D: “Because they [district] do give us a pacing guide. And so it’s like they [students] need to be able to come in and, like, immediately jump on to that path of being. So if they don’t have these foundational things that we’re ready to, you know, go ahead and start with, then it kind of holds up our whole pacing guide.”</p> <p>D: “And they really need to come in with, you know, those foundational skills of not just, like, singing their ABCs but, kind of, you know, a little bit of letter identification. Like we get into the sounds and stuff, but because of the pace that we move at, if they come in knowing some of those things already, it really helps us to, you know, be able to keep up.”</p>
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		<p>D: “Like a lot of my kids didn’t go to preschool because of COVID who typically would have, I think. I mean, I had a mom tell me, like, ‘We haven’t eaten at a restaurant. We haven’t left our,’ like, because the mother is medically fragile. And she said, you know, ‘We haven’t been anywhere in two years.’ And a lot of my other parents were like, you know, ‘We didn’t do preschool. We were hesitant. We didn’t start preschool until,’ you know. So I think that really did impact their readiness this year.”</p> <p>C: “Yes. That and just not having gone in public.”</p> <p>B: “I think, too, honestly, that parents were a lot more lenient with their children for the past couple of years, because they felt bad. You know, like, you just kind of have this, like, feel-bad type thing. So, honestly, kids are not disciplined like they used to be. So that makes a huge difference...And I think it’s because of COVID, because parents felt bad for their kids, like, ‘We can’t go anywhere. We’re stuck in home. So do whatever you want. Stay on the iPad all day!’ You know, that kind of thing? I guess.”</p> <p>When asked to identify the domain in which that year’s students were <i>most</i> prepared for kindergarten upon entering...</p> <p>B: “Physical ones, like can hop and write, hold the pencil.”</p> <p>B: “They’re pretty good with, like the, you know, the beginning questions where it’s like...sorting, the sorting, the patterns.”</p> <p>C: “They’re very visual this year. I’ve learned.”</p>
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		<p>D: “I think my kids knew a lot of the vocabulary. When it was, like, name the rug, name the teacher, name the, they knew the vocabulary. They were stronger in that, but not necessarily the, like, what letter is this? What sound? Like those things. So it seems like they had conversations with their parents. Like their vocabulary was strong, but not their actual academic, like that part.”</p> <p>When asked to identify the domain in which that year’s students were <i>least</i> prepared for kindergarten upon entering...</p> <p>D: “I think self-help skills for mine. Like, even a kid, if their arm of their jacket was inside out, they couldn’t figure out how to flip their jacket sleeve and just really self-help, like, the washing the hands, the things that you would think the children would just do at home.”</p> <p>C: “Yeah, lack of independence. They don’t want to, either. They prefer us to do that. “Put my jacket on.’ And that’s common in kindergarten, but it’s just many more kids this year like that.”</p>
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Regarding the maturation discourse, the teachers noted that kindergarten students are not ready to sit for very long periods of time or to listen. Additionally, that year’s students were not prepared for basic activities such as getting hand sanitizer or lining up. The effects of the pandemic were of concern to the teachers, a topic that will be further examined in the next section. For example, students displayed weaker academic and social-emotional skills. Additionally, according to the teachers, students were not ready for school behaviorally due to lack of discipline at home and lack of experiences outside the home, a perspective that overlaps with the sociocultural discourse.

Whereas all four teachers provided insights that aligned with the maturation discourse, only two focused on the skills required of kindergarten students. Teachers A and D both emphasized that children need to enter school with certain skills already in place. Teacher D noted that students should be able to do more than sing the ABC song; they also need to have a basic understanding of letters and their sounds. Teacher D additionally mentioned the pacing guide kindergarten teachers are required to follow. If students do not have foundational skills, the teachers struggle to teach at the recommended pace. This issue seemed to be of particular concern for Teacher D, as none of the other teachers discussed the pacing guide.

Of the three readiness discourses, the sociocultural discourse was the most readily apparent throughout the teachers' comments. The teachers placed a heavy emphasis on students being ready for school but did not acknowledge that schools should also be ready for students. The implication was that these teachers are unable to do their job until the students have foundational skills such as sitting, listening, and identifying letters, thereby placing the burden on parents to prepare their children for kindergarten instruction. They did, however, acknowledge that that year's students arrived with good motor, visual, and vocabulary skills. Many of the teachers' comments centered around the pandemic, again placing the onus on the parents, rather than the schools, to ensure the readiness of students entering kindergarten. The potential impact of the pandemic on students' readiness for kindergarten is examined in the section below, "Changes in Readiness."

Changes in Readiness

Throughout the focus group discussions, one topic surfaced frequently: the impact of the pandemic on students' readiness for kindergarten. These teachers had observed changes in readiness that they attributed to the pandemic—specifically the time students spent at home.

Table 5.3 outlines the comments, which are organized by teacher (i.e., Teacher A, B, C, or D) and are, again, direct quotes.

Table 5.3

Impact of the Pandemic			
Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Teacher D
<p>“We're really seeing a difference in kindergarteners well, with having kids before the pandemic, and especially after the pandemic, too.”</p> <p>“With the pandemic, we're just seeing a lot of just that social-emotional part of a child that they do not have...And we don't have time to teach the social-emotional part. But especially after the pandemic, that's lower than before. It's been tough.”</p> <p>“We are seeing lower academics and even lower social-emotional.”</p> <p>“A lot of it I feel like was with quarantine...and a lot of parents working from home. So when parents were working from home, they couldn't always be accessible to their child. So they would just give their child a device or just have them even when they were doing a virtual school, they would have a device and...it's just the connections are...a lot of connections are gone.”</p> <p>“And we're seeing that across the board,</p>	<p>“This year more than others [regarding students not being ready to listen]. This year has been rough.”</p> <p>“I think, too, honestly, that parents were a lot more lenient with their children for the past couple of years, because they felt bad...So, honestly, kids are not disciplined like they used to be. So that makes a huge difference...I'm still dealing with a lot of the same issues that I was dealing with in August. And I think it's because of COVID, because parents felt bad for their kids, like, 'We can't go anywhere. We're stuck in [sic] home. So do whatever you want. Stay on the iPad all day!’”</p>	<p>“This year has been...it's just like twice or three times as hard to teach.”</p> <p>“That [regarding students not attending preschool] and just not having gone in public. Not necessarily to preschool or restaurant, but like, you know, we take them on field trips, typically. They're very excited about this first one, but I'm very nervous about it, because they [sic] never been anywhere. So I think maybe the isolation has made a difference. They've only seen their own house.”</p> <p>“Yes, so the fact that...that this year, it seems more difficult for a kid to handle a negative consequence. They just either, like have a meltdown all the rest of the day. Get angry right away. And we have that typically, you know, three...two...three...but this year, it's like, yes, we are constantly disciplining such that we...it's difficult for me to keep up with the pace in kindergarten.”</p>	<p>“Like a lot of my kids didn't go to preschool because of COVID who typically would have, I think. I mean, I had a mom tell me, like, 'We haven't eaten at a restaurant. We haven't left our,' like, because the mother is medically fragile. And she said, you know, 'We haven't been anywhere in two years.' And a lot of my other parents were like, you know, 'We didn't do preschool. We were hesitant. We didn't start preschool until,' you know. So I think that really did impact their readiness this year.”</p>

<p>especially at my school. I'm not...I haven't had this conversation with other schools. But at our school, we're definitely seeing it, and we're at a higher academic school.”</p> <p>“Just behavior...just behavior, the self-control. It's just not there. The impulsivity. And it's, it's like a whole class. It's just not like two students.”</p> <p>“And just the amount of students that need intervention. It's a lot. I think some classes have 12 students that are...half the class for intervention group.”</p> <p>“So yeah. We're seeing about half...the classes are using it [intervention]. And before it might only been [sic] four students...before the pandemic. So it's just jumped.”</p>			
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The impact of the pandemic on students’ readiness was of concern to all four teachers, though Teacher A spent the most time on the topic. According to these teachers, many parents kept their children home from preschool throughout the pandemic; some rarely left the house. To compensate, the parents potentially relaxed their discipline, resulting in students who were less prepared for school academically, had more behavior issues, had fewer self-help skills, and lacked independence. As a result, the teachers admitted to having had a much more challenging teaching experience that year. They had dealt with far more behavior issues than usual, and a higher percentage of students had required academic intervention—even at a school in which the students typically perform well academically. Additionally, the students had struggled with

social-emotional skills, which the teachers identified as being the most important skills for kindergarten and the skills most challenging to teach (see the “Historical Bodies” section).

Summary and Evaluation of Theme 1

At the time of these focus group discussions, the current state of kindergarten readiness was a concern to the participants. Their perceptions of readiness were tightly related to the perceived changes in readiness—due primarily to the impact of the pandemic. Though they desired to effectively teach state-required skills to the students, their efforts were hampered by the time spent on behavior, social-emotional, and self-help skills—skills which these teachers believed were prerequisite to kindergarten-level instruction. However, could the kindergarten landscape be shifting? Should teachers expect students to arrive with certain skills already in place, or should they, rather, be prepared to acknowledge and accept each child’s skill level and build upon that foundation?

5.3 Theme 2: Informed Literacy Instruction

Whereas Theme 1 focused on teachers’ perceptions of kindergarten readiness in general, Theme 2 narrows that focus to their perceptions of South Carolina’s Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (SC-KRA). A thorough description of the SC-KRA is provided in chapter 4; as such, this section will explore teachers’ use of SC-KRA data, limitations they have observed, alternate data sources they prefer, and changes they desire.

Data Use

One of the primary purposes of literacy assessment is to inform teachers’ instruction, thereby enabling them to meet the individual needs of students more effectively. Public-school kindergarten teachers throughout South Carolina are required to administer the SC-KRA within the first 45 days of the school year, but is it a helpful tool for teachers when framing their literacy

instruction? Are the teachers trained in how to use the data? Does the SC-KRA impact learner achievement? These questions were explored throughout the two focus groups; their comments are organized by teacher on Table 5.4.

Table 5.4

Data Use			
Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Teacher D
<p>When asked if the SC-KRA is an effective instrument for framing literacy instruction...</p> <p>“No.”</p> <p>“So we have 45 days to get it in, which I try to get it in really quick. Because it's...a real big hassle to take on and to do right at the beginning. It's a lengthy...assessment. And for us to spend so much time on that assessment, we get nothing from it...We just need to get it in, check it off, and move on.”</p> <p>“That's how we use it. The state needs it. We do it. We move on. We never look at it again.”</p> <p>“We just assume the state needs it to see...is [sic] the 4K programs doing what they need for kindergarten? We've never been told, nor have I ever known what they use it for, but I've always thought, "Okay. They're keeping tabs on this [sic] 4K programs. Is the funding...is it still there for 4K?”</p>	<p>When asked if the SC-KRA is an effective instrument for framing literacy instruction...</p> <p>“Absolutely not.”</p> <p>“Well, I mean, number one, we've always had the issue with...it's called kindergarten readiness, but we're giving it in kindergarten. So what's the point? I mean, they're already in kindergarten. We're not going to be like, 'Oh, no. You're not ready. You're going back to preschool.’”</p> <p>“It's just not relevant to what we do, and we don't use it. We do it because we have to. And then it's done.”</p> <p>When asked if the teachers were trained to use the data...</p> <p>“No.”</p> <p>When asked if the SC-KRA impacts learner achievement...</p> <p>“No.”</p> <p>“Or if we did it again in the spring, which I don't want to do. But if we did,</p>	<p>When asked if the SC-KRA is an effective instrument for framing literacy instruction...</p> <p>“No.”</p> <p>“We don't even talk about it again until the results...and we don't even use the results when we get the results.”</p> <p>“So it's more like teacher talk than what would be helpful. So it's not helpful to us as teachers, and it doesn't help us form any classes or anything, because we already have our class when we do it. And then it's not helpful to parents, because it's either alarming...or they just don't understand.”</p> <p>When asked if the teachers were trained to use the data...</p> <p>“No.”</p> <p>When asked if the data impact instruction...</p> <p>“Not mine.”</p> <p>When asked if the SC-KRA impacts learner achievement...</p>	<p>When asked if the SC-KRA is an effective instrument for framing literacy instruction...</p> <p>“No.”</p> <p>“And the results aren't specific when we get them. When we get it...it's just like on this rating scale but it doesn't say, like, was it their vocabulary? Was it their letter identification? So it really doesn't even give us a good picture.”</p> <p>When asked if the teachers were trained to use the data...</p> <p>“That we were not trained on.”</p> <p>When asked if the teachers find the data useful...</p> <p>“No. I think it would be more useful if we got them...like they said, you know, before school started. It would go ahead and give us an idea of, like, forming our little literacy groups and our math groups. But because we don't...I mean, at that point, we already know our students enough to</p>

<p>“We administer it. We never look back because we do not get the results. We just got the results back in February of this year.”</p> <p>“I feel like with kindergarten teachers, there's no...need for us to know what the score means at this time, because it's also five months later...What the district or the state might want us to do...we should have been doing that the third week of school.”</p> <p>When asked if the teachers do anything profitable with the data...</p> <p>“No...And I wish we could because we spend so much time on it. I wish we would instantly see our scores...But it's not like that. We...administer it. We send in the results...So we don't even see, like, a composite score whenever we put our scores in.”</p> <p>“A lot of the teachers don't really want to invest in it when we don't get anything back from it.”</p> <p>When asked if the teachers were trained to use the data...</p> <p>“No. No. Not at all. That was never even brought up.”</p> <p>“That would be wonderful. You know, I</p>	<p>I mean, because it's kind of like, you know, you have that data. But then...you're not checking to see if they grew in that area. There's no end-of-the-year assessment for that or anything like that.”</p> <p>“We just wish it were more useful than it has been.”</p>	<p>“No.”</p> <p>“I just kept thinking, ‘Why are we having to do this?’ It doesn't do anything unless perhaps seeing, like, a significant something in our year. Could have them add more preschools...free preschools.”</p> <p>“It's got to do with funding.”</p>	<p>have them grouped by the time we finish the KRA.”</p> <p>When asked if the data impact instruction...</p> <p>“No. Because it's still not like we get [the results] before...school.”</p> <p>“We still don't get [the results] until we've already been with our kids.”</p> <p>When asked if the SC-KRA impacts learner achievement...</p> <p>“No.”</p>
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<p>haven't even thought of training to use it. Because in my mind, we just write it off and get it done.”</p> <p>When asked if the SC-KRA impacts learner achievement...</p> <p>“No, it doesn't. Like I said...after we administer it, we send the scores right off, and then we never speak of the KRA again. It's one of those, like, 'KRA's done. Let's get into real instruction.'”</p>			
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The crux of the SC-KRA issue is that the data are not useful. These teachers made it abundantly clear that they make no use of the data once the assessment is complete. Their comments indicated frustration with the system: the time and effort they invest should yield benefits, but that is not the case. Though the teachers are trained in how to administer the SC-KRA, they receive no training in how to utilize the data. Teacher A acknowledged that she had never even considered that type of training but that it would be helpful. Another aspect of the SC-KRA that impacts the use of the data is the timing, an issue that will be further explored in the sections titled “Perceived Limitations” and “Changes Needed.”

The teachers additionally indicated that they are uncertain of the purpose of the SC-KRA, speculating that funding is the motivation. Another possibility they contemplated is the state’s use of the data to evaluate the effectiveness of preschool programs. However, these potential purposes benefit the state more than classroom teachers.

In essence, the SC-KRA does not inform teachers’ literacy instruction and, therefore, has no impact on learner achievement. Rather, these teachers viewed the assessment as nothing more than a requirement to fulfill, as evidenced in the following comment: “After we administer it, we

send the scores right off, and then we never speak of the KRA again. It's one of those, like, 'KRA's done. Let's get into real instruction.'" Another teacher stated, "It's just not relevant to what we do, and we don't use it. We do it because we have to. And then it's done." These statements are sobering when viewed through the lens of the time, money, and effort invested each year in the administration of the SC-KRA.

Perceived Limitations

The teachers' perceived limitations primarily revolved around one issue—timing. Two aspects of timing emerged in their comments: the time required to administer the SC-KRA and the timeliness of the results. Their remarks are organized by teacher on Table 5.5.

Table 5.5

Perceived Limitations			
Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Teacher D
<p>"So we have 45 days to get it in, which I try to get it in really quick. Because it's...a real big hassle to take on and to do right at the beginning. It's a lengthy...assessment. And for us to spend so much time on that assessment, we get nothing from it...We just need to get it in, check it off, and move on."</p> <p>"I feel like with kindergarten teachers, there's no...need for us to know what the score means at this time, because it's also five months later...What the district or the state might want us to do...we should have been doing that the third week of school."</p> <p>"I wish we would instantly see our</p>	<p>"Well, I mean, number one, we've always had the issue with...it's called kindergarten readiness, but we're giving it in kindergarten. So what's the point? I mean, they're already in kindergarten. We're not going to be like, 'Oh, no. You're not ready. You're going back to preschool.' So that's my number one thing. I think it should be done either at the end of kindergarten to see if they're ready for first grade, or the end of K4, or before they even come in the summertime or something [sic] before they come to kindergarten."</p> <p>"The other issue I have with it is we don't get the results until, like, December, January.</p>	<p>"And it takes weeks. At least it takes me, like several weeks."</p> <p>When asked how much time is required per student to administer the SC-KRA...</p> <p>"I was gonna say 45 minutes."</p> <p>When asked when the teachers receive the results...</p> <p>"January? Around Christmas time. January."</p> <p>When asked if parents find the results useful...</p> <p>"So it's not helpful to us as teachers, and it doesn't help us form any classes or anything, because we already have our class when we do it.</p>	<p>When asked how much time is required per student to administer the SC-KRA...</p> <p>"Probably close to an hour."</p> <p>When asked when the teachers receive the results...</p> <p>"I printed mine right when I finished. So it gave the option to, like, print the report right when I finished...But we were told not to send anything home."</p> <p>When asked if receiving the results earlier would help...</p> <p>"No, because it's still not like we get them before...school. We still don't get them until</p>

<p>scores...But it's not like that. We...administer it. We send in the results...So we don't even see, like, a composite score whenever we put our scores in."</p> <p>"If I could use that little bit of information a little bit sooner, it might would be able to help us in the classroom."</p> <p>When asked how much time is required per student to administer the SC-KRA...</p> <p>"About, I would say, most [sic] 25 minutes per child."</p> <p>When asked when the teachers receive the results...</p> <p>"We administer it. We never look back because we do not get the results. We just got the results back in February of this year."</p> <p>When asked if parents find the results useful...</p> <p>"And we send home parent...we send the information. And we have to always do a write-up. 'This is...not where your child is currently at.' Because parents get this information like we just took it last week. 'This is where your child is at now.'...A lot of the times [sic] the child has made so much growth since then that the child may not be low performing</p>	<p>That's when we send them home."</p> <p>"Well, we feel bad that it is such a negative thing, but we've said it since the day we started KRA. Like, just, this is so silly. It's such a waste of instruction. At the beginning of the school year, when we should be teaching some of these things, instead, we're having to pull kids one at a time to ask 50 questions. It's 50 questions per kid...or maybe even more than that actually."</p> <p>"I'm not one that's gonna sit outside the classroom all day...so I do it in increments, and it ends up taking quite a bit of time."</p> <p>"The other thing is that how we put in the results is a nightmare...I mean, I've been up one [sic] in the morning still entering in data because you have to go in and enter it. Now you could sit and do it with the kid while they're doing it...But I can't concentrate on what my child is doing if I'm sitting on a computer while they're doing. I have to be, like, focused with them."</p> <p>"So we're marking it on paper and then we have to go back in and enter the results...I mean, that takes about as long as it does the...KRA."</p>	<p>And then it's not helpful to parents, because it's either alarming...or they just don't understand."</p> <p>"They email and are concerned when it says 'not ready.' And what can I do? What can I do to catch them up? And I'm saying, 'Wait. They're caught up.'"</p>	<p>we've already been with our kids."</p>
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<p>anymore. So we always have to put this big long letter that we write up.”</p>	<p>When asked when the teachers receive the results...</p> <p>“It's the second...almost third nine weeks, right? Well, not third, but definitely second nine weeks of school.”</p> <p>When asked if parents find the results useful...</p> <p>“To be honest...I think it's just another piece of paper to give them.”</p> <p>“It's so silly because their parents are like, ‘My kid can't count? They can count.’ I'm like, ‘Well, they couldn't in August, cause that's when I gave the assessment. So here are your results.’”</p>		
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Though the overarching sentiment was that of frustration, the teachers’ comments varied on their perceptions of the SC-KRA’s limitations. Most of the teachers agreed that the assessment simply requires too much time. For these teachers, the average time per student ranged from 25 minutes to an hour. However, that estimate did not include the time required to then enter the data into the SC-KRA system. One teacher noted that the data entry sometimes takes nearly as long as the assessment itself.

The teachers were also concerned about the length of time between administering the assessment and receiving the results. Teacher D noted that she prints a report as soon as she finishes entering the data. The other teachers were seemingly unaware of that feature. However, Teacher D admitted that viewing the data immediately was still not beneficial since the school

year was already underway. SC-KRA data would be most beneficial prior to the beginning of the school year to help teachers with planning such as forming literacy groups.

Regardless of when the teachers receive the data, the parents do not receive their report until January or February—several months after the assessment is given. The report, therefore, is confusing to parents. Skills that were identified as below kindergarten level might no longer be an issue, thereby requiring teachers to field questions and concerns.

Better Options

Though teachers are required to administer the SC-KRA to all public-school kindergarten students, teachers typically do not use the data to inform their literacy instruction, as noted in the section above titled “Data Use.” This begs the following questions: Do kindergarten teachers have better options? In other words, are other data sources more beneficial than the SC-KRA? The focus group participants’ thoughts on this topic can be found on Table 5.6.

Table 5.6

Better Options			
Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Teacher D
<p>“Yes, we do our own [assessment]...at the very beginning...where we do high frequency words, letter name, letter sound. And then can they write their name? But also, we use FastBridge. And that's administered a couple weeks after school starts. But FastBridge is great. We love...our FastBridge.”</p> <p>“We use FastBridge...for ELA, along with the teacher-made things that we pull.”</p> <p>“Oh, it's wonderful! Because we really do a</p>	<p>“We do so many other assessments.”</p> <p>“I occasionally use [an assessment] that I found somewhere else in Fountas and Pinnell, which doesn't time them. It just shows you can circle letters they don't know.”</p> <p>“And then we also do, you know, with our small groups, we use the information based on FastBridge...So we have our high groups that can read already, and then the lower group that we're still focusing on</p>	<p>“[The word wall assessment is] just to see if they know those words coming in. And when they do, there's a first-grade list we could have them start working on, you know, to differentiate.”</p> <p>“It's much more helpful to form our literacy curriculum with FastBridge than the KRA.”</p>	<p>“The FastBridge we do, which is more letter identification, sound identification, gives us very specifics [sic] as to, you know, which children know how many letters...And that's much more helpful than just a rating scale somewhere in this gray area.”</p> <p>“We have a word wall assessment that we do occasionally...a couple times a year.”</p>

<p>combination of the two. We use our FastBridge to know, okay, overall, what is our student struggling with, and it could be different per class. So it leaves it up to the...teacher to really drive that instruction per her class.”</p> <p>“So FastBridge is great. It's just the overall what your kids need and how you can drive that instruction from your lesson plans, or you can change it up based on whatever the class needs. The assessment that we use, that was teacher made, and allows us especially to see high frequency words. So the assessment probably has about 12 high frequency words on it. If they can already read those 12, we're already putting them in a reading group. We're already getting started with that.”</p> <p>“So these assessments that we do in the classroom can really show us what the kids need for their...guided reading.”</p> <p>“It's a quick way to get these kids by the second week of school in a group and already doing things.”</p> <p>“We've really gotten great with using [FastBridge] in the past couple years...We've been more intentional</p>	<p>letters and letter sounds.”</p>		
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with it. We've had a lot more training.”			
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Two alternate data sources were mentioned by the focus group participants: teacher-made assessments and FastBridge. The teachers did not go into detail regarding the teacher-made assessments, but they noted that these assessments allow them to quickly determine information such as students’ knowledge of letter names, letter sounds, and high-frequency words. However, they seemed even more excited by an assessment called FastBridge, which “[helps] teachers pinpoint the specific reading skills that students are struggling with so that they can target interventions to the five components of effective reading instruction” (“Reading Assessment,” n.d., para. 3). The FastBridge data enable the teachers to quickly place students into guided reading groups—a process that is, therefore, completed long before they have finished administering the SC-KRA. Teacher A also noted that their use of FastBridge data had improved due to the amount of training they had received. Essentially, FastBridge provides specific data that allows the teachers to target the individual needs of students and place them in appropriate reading groups, thereby informing their literacy instruction more effectively than the SC-KRA.

Changes Needed

The focus group questions were designed to explore two potential categories of change. First, the teachers’ frustrations highlighted multiple ways to improve the overall administration of the SC-KRA. Second, questions were asked regarding three specific characteristics of the SC-KRA: equity, validity, and reliability. The teachers’ perspectives are noted on Table 5.7.

Table 5.7

Changes Needed			
Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Teacher D
“I wish we would instantly see our scores...But it's not like	“Well, I mean, number one, we've always had the issue with...it's called	“We don't even talk about it again until the results...and we don't	“And the results aren't specific when we get them. When we get

<p>that. We...administer it. We send in the results...So we don't even see, like, a composite score whenever we put our scores in."</p> <p>"I think with the KRA, it has great intentions behind what it does. It just gives you a snapshot, though, with the test. It just is a snapshot of what the child may know. There's not a lot of questions."</p> <p>"So I feel like the KRA, for it to be useful for me, I would just need to know a little bit more information...and I just need to get those results...back sooner."</p> <p>When asked about being trained to use SC-KRA data...</p> <p>"That would be wonderful! You know, I haven't even thought of training to use it. Because in my mind, we just write it off and get it done."</p> <p>"Training would be wonderful...I've never thought of using that information for anything."</p> <p>When asked if the SC-KRA is designed to meet the needs of diverse children...</p> <p>"I don't believe it is."</p> <p>When asked about the SC-KRA's validity...</p>	<p>kindergarten readiness, but we're giving it in kindergarten. So what's the point? I mean, they're already in kindergarten. We're not going to be like, 'Oh, no. You're not ready. You're going back to preschool.' So that's my number one thing. I think it should be done either at the end of kindergarten to see if they're ready for first grade, or the end of K4, or before they even come in the summertime or something [sic] before they come to kindergarten."</p> <p>"The other issue I have with it is we don't get the results until, like, December, January. That's when we send them home."</p> <p>"It's just not relevant to what we do, and we don't use it. We do it because we have to. And then it's done."</p> <p>"The other thing is that how we put in the results is a nightmare."</p> <p>"So we're marking it on paper and then we have to go back in and enter the results...I mean, that takes about as long as it does the...KRA."</p> <p>When asked if the SC-KRA appears to be a valid assessment...</p> <p>"Yeah."</p> <p>Final thoughts...</p>	<p>even use the results when we get the results."</p> <p>"And the language on this results page seems to be difficult for parents to understand as well. We get a lot of questions."</p> <p>"So it's more like teacher talk than what would be helpful. So it's not helpful to us as teachers, and it doesn't help us form any classes or anything, because we already have our class when we do it. And then it's not helpful to parents, because it's either alarming...or they just don't understand."</p> <p>"Also the cost factor...I don't know how much it costs, but that money really could be used to lower class sizes."</p> <p>"They should use the KRA to form kindergarten classes."</p> <p>When asked if the SC-KRA appears to be a valid assessment...</p> <p>"Yes."</p> <p>When asked if the SC-KRA appears to be a reliable assessment...</p> <p>"Yeah. I think so."</p> <p>A final thought...</p> <p>"It makes us upset. It's frustrating to say we're giving a kindergarten readiness test after we're in kindergarten."</p>	<p>it...it's just like on this rating scale but it doesn't say, like, was it their vocabulary? Was it their letter identification? So it really doesn't even give us a good picture."</p> <p>"I think [the administration] could help by giving us, like, an extra planning period or something that week, or having someone else come in and do some type of lesson with the children while we're pulling them out to administer it...I'm having to plan something that just my aide can do with the class while I'm administering it because it's so early in the year, they can't sit and do anything independently, really."</p> <p>When asked about the benefits of receiving the results earlier...</p> <p>"I think it would be more useful if we got [the results]...like they said, you know, before school started. It would go ahead and give us an idea of, like, forming our little literacy groups and our math groups. But because we don't...I mean, at that point, we already know our students enough to have them grouped by the time we finish the KRA."</p> <p>"It still doesn't give us specifics in terms of...exactly which areas they're [struggling]</p>
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<p>“With this one, I don't feel like I'm 100% sure because I don't really know what they're trying to get at with just the snapshot of the content...I feel like there's great intent behind it...But they're covering so much.”</p> <p>“So I think it has great intent behind it; it's just a snapshot of each little thing. You don't really have a chance to really dive into it because it's just giving you a highlight of, just, each little thing. And maybe that's what it's supposed to be for...We're not sure...We really don't do much with it.”</p> <p>When asked about the SC-KRA's reliability...</p> <p>“I do think it's pretty reliable, because the students who score low in the beginning are typically the lower...throughout the year...So I think, you know, in terms of...that, you...do see consistency across...the board with what they're asking and throughout the year.”</p> <p>A final thought...</p> <p>“We would love to use [the KRA]. Make it usable for us; allow us to actually use it. Student scores back so late in the year...doesn't do anything for us, and it doesn't do anything for the parents,</p>	<p>“I would like to know how they use the data. I still would like to know that.”</p> <p>“I just think...it should be done earlier...or change the name.”</p>		<p>because it just groups literacy all together.”</p> <p>When asked if the SC-KRA is designed to meet the needs of diverse children...</p> <p>“I think my ESOL [student] needed a lot more support than I could even give him. I wish, you know, we could have had someone, like, asking the question to him in Spanish...But we didn't get any option to have that kind of support.”</p> <p>When asked if the SC-KRA appears to be a valid assessment...</p> <p>“Yeah.”</p> <p>When asked if the SC-KRA appears to be a reliable assessment...</p> <p>“I mean, I've only administered it one year, but I mean, I think my results were what I anticipated.”</p>
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and it doesn't do anything for the child.”			
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Very few of the teachers’ comments were specific recommendations for improvements; rather, their frustrations implied changes needed in the administration of the SC-KRA. For example, the teachers believed that giving the assessment after school has begun is too late. Instead, the SC-KRA should be administered before kindergarten begins, as implied by the word *readiness* in the name of the assessment. Additionally, the teachers—and parents—need to receive the results much sooner to avoid confusion, particularly on the part of the parents. However, Teacher D noted that even earlier results would not be particularly beneficial since the results are not specific, thereby implying another improvement. Another potential change is the level of support provided by the school throughout the administration process. For example, if the teachers were given a substitute or additional planning periods, they could complete the SC-KRA more quickly, thereby limiting the amount of instructional time lost. Training is another needed change. If teachers are expected to use the data to inform their instruction, they must be taught how to do so. Finally, the state needs to clarify the purpose of the SC-KRA.

Regarding equity, validity, and reliability, only one area concerned the teachers: the capacity of the SC-KRA to tap into the abilities of diverse students. After Teacher A stated that the SC-KRA does not meet the needs of diverse students, she proceeded to describe a specific situation from her own classroom. A non-verbal student was required to take the SC-KRA with no additional accommodations, such as an alternative communication device. Essentially, the child received no scores due to an inability to respond to the questions. Teacher D noted that her English as a Second Language (ESL) student needed more support—such as reading the

questions in Spanish—but she was not given the option to provide that level of support. For the SC-KRA to be equitable, all students need equal access to the assessment.

Summary and Evaluation of Theme 2

One word encapsulates the teachers' attitudes toward the SC-KRA: frustration. The teachers essentially ignore the data. They administer the assessment because they are required to do so. Their goal is to get the SC-KRA completed so they can move on to “real instruction,” as Teacher A so poignantly stated. They were not trained in how to use the data and, at the time of the focus group discussions, were unaware of the purpose of the SC-KRA. The timing of the assessment was of particular concern—the time required to administer it as well as the timing of the results. As a result, they began using other data sources to inform their literacy instruction. These sources—such as teacher-made assessments and FastBridge—provide more detailed information more quickly, allowing teachers to form their literacy groups and begin instructing students, long before the SC-KRA is complete. Though the teachers were not concerned about the validity or the reliability of the SC-KRA, they were very concerned about the equity. Unfortunately, students with disabilities and/or language barriers do not always have access to the assessment. This needed change is just one of several that emerged throughout the focus group discussions.

In chapter 6, Themes 1 and 2 are again summarized, in greater depth and in alignment with the research questions. Additionally, new directions are explored. In other words, what do these findings mean for teachers going forward? What is the future of the SC-KRA? Does it even have a future? Also, implications for various stakeholders are discussed. Finally, I reflect on the research process and provide suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 6 RESEARCH SYNTHESIS AND REFLECTION

6.1 Introduction

As noted in section 1.1, the issues surrounding kindergarten readiness are two-fold. On one hand, disagreements and/or misperceptions exist regarding the concept itself. What is *kindergarten readiness*? What skills does a child who is ready for kindergarten-level instruction already possess? Are some skills more crucial for success than others?

On the other hand, numerous frustrations surround the assessments used in most states to determine a child's readiness for kindergarten. Teachers have concerns such as the time required for administration, the timing of the results, and the equity of the assessments.

As such, this study sought to address each of these issues by aligning them to one of two research questions:

- How does a focus group of kindergarten teachers perceive kindergarten readiness in general?
- How do these kindergarten teachers utilize data from a statewide kindergarten readiness assessment tool to inform their literacy instruction?

These research questions led to the development of two themes—Current State of Kindergarten Readiness and Informed Literacy Instruction—which provided the framework for the analysis of teachers' perceptions.

Previous chapters have explored current and seminal research on kindergarten readiness and kindergarten readiness assessments; provided an in-depth overview of South Carolina's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (SC-KRA); and analyzed teachers' perceptions of readiness, through the lenses of historical bodies and discourses, as well as their perceptions of the SC-KRA.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a summary of each theme before delving into potential new directions. Next, I discuss the implications for various stakeholders. Finally, I reflect on my research process and consider ideas for future research.

6.2 Thematic Summaries

Theme 1: Current State of Kindergarten Readiness

To explore the current state of readiness in kindergarten classrooms, I first delved into teachers' perceptions of readiness (see Figure 3.1). This multifaceted, thematic analysis allowed me to view their personal definitions of *readiness* as a concept alongside their descriptions of a child who is prepared for kindergarten-level instruction. I analyzed these definitions and descriptions through two lenses—historical bodies and discourses—to better align their perspectives to current research. Teachers' expectations for students' historical bodies were placed into one or more of the following categories:

- Social-emotional (e.g., working with others, separation from parents)
- Behavioral (e.g., sit and listen, follow one-step direction, transition)
- Academic (e.g., colors, letters, letter sounds)
- Self-help (e.g., getting hand sanitizer independently).

Additionally, the focus group participants' comments were aligned to one or more of the following readiness discourses: maturation, skills mastery, and sociocultural. The second aspect of the current state of kindergarten readiness revolved around changes in students' readiness—primarily as a result of the pandemic.

Perceptions of Readiness: Historical Bodies

Overall, the focus group participants' expectations for students' historical bodies were aligned. When asked whether social-emotional or academic skills were more important for

success in kindergarten, all the teachers selected social-emotional. Academic skills can be taught; social-emotional skills are more challenging to teach in a classroom setting. Teacher B even acknowledged that students who enter kindergarten with stronger academic skills tend to be bored. Teacher D had a different perspective, however. Though she agreed that social-emotional skills are the priority, she also emphasized the district's pacing guide and expressed concern about the ability to keep up with it. Interestingly, at the time of the focus group discussion, Teacher D was completing her first year in a kindergarten classroom; she had previously taught in a higher grade. When asked which skills were weakest at the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year, the teachers noted self-help skills as an area of concern. Students had struggled with basic independent activities such as getting hand sanitizer and putting on a jacket.

The teachers' perspectives match current research, including the difference of opinion regarding academics. In their study of teachers in Delaware, Hustedt et al. (2018) found that "kindergarten teachers consistently ranked self-help and social-emotional skills as higher priorities than academic skills" (p. 62). Because this study spanned 13 years, the researchers also tracked changes and found that, while social-emotional skills remained the top priority, academic skills rose in importance. Other researchers have noted a similar trend. According to Brown (2013), while teachers have traditionally emphasized social-emotional skills, "empirical research is beginning to document a shift in which teachers tend to prioritize children's academic skills more" (p. 556). This shift could be due to the increased academic rigor in today's kindergarten classrooms, thereby causing them to become more and more like first grade (Brown et al., 2021; Kinkead-Clark, 2021; Wesley & Buysse, 2003).

Perceptions of Readiness: Readiness Discourses in Literacy

While all three readiness discourses—maturation, skills mastery, and sociocultural—were evident in the teachers’ comments, the sociocultural discourse rose to the top in importance. The teachers noted areas in which the students simply were not ready for kindergarten-level instruction (i.e., maturation discourse) such as self-help skills and behavior. Additionally, two of the teachers were concerned about academic skills the students lacked, thereby impacting their ability to meet district requirements (i.e., skills mastery). However, the primary implication throughout the focus group discussions was that the parents are responsible to better prepare their children for kindergarten (i.e., sociocultural). No mention was made of the schools’ responsibility to teach these students, no matter their readiness.

The teachers’ comments reflect a lack of awareness of current research and best practices. In 1998, the National Education Goals Panel identified “ready schools” as a necessity for ensuring that children receive the education they deserve. The panel noted that “strengthening achievement requires not only getting children ready for school, but also getting school ready for the particular children they serve” (Shore, 1998, p. 3). To accomplish this goal, schools and teachers must understand the community they serve along with the academic expectations of the district. Additionally, they need to be able and willing to utilize developmentally appropriate practices to ensure all students have access to the education to which they are entitled (Gill et al., 2006; Graue, 2006; Maxwell & Clifford, 2004; “Where We Stand on School Readiness,” 2009).

Changes in Readiness

The focus group participants were all in agreement that the current students were not as ready for kindergarten-level instruction as previous cohorts. Their analysis of this change was that the pandemic was to blame. Children who would have attended preschool were not afforded

that opportunity; experiences outside the home were not as readily available; and/or parents were busy working from home and perhaps less attentive. As a result, the students were less prepared for kindergarten in every skill area.

Though research is limited due to the recent timing of the pandemic, the research that is emerging aligns with the focus group participants' observations. Murphy et al. (2023) surveyed preschool and kindergarten teachers who were able to compare students before and after the pandemic. Nearly 80% of these teachers labeled their students' overall readiness as *worse* or *much worse* after the pandemic; "teachers reported that children struggled most with emotional regulation, adhering to classroom rules and routines, and literacy skills" (pp. 6-7). Interestingly, Murphy et al. (2023) found that children's self-help skills had improved, whereas the focus group participants identified self-help skills as a concern. Despite this discrepancy, the consensus remains that the pandemic had a negative impact on students' readiness for kindergarten.

Theme 2: Informed Literacy Instruction

Theme 2 shifts the focus from kindergarten readiness in general to an in-depth exploration of kindergarten readiness assessments, specifically the one utilized in South Carolina public schools (SC-KRA). Effective assessments serve a much greater purpose than simply allowing teachers to grade student work; rather, they provide data about each student, thereby enabling teachers to individualize their instruction and better meet their students' needs. Does the SC-KRA accomplish this purpose? Does it provide data that informs teachers' instruction—specifically their individualized literacy instruction? To answer these questions, I examined teachers' perceptions of the SC-KRA across four domains (see Figure 3.2):

- Data Use
- Perceived Limitations

- Better Options
- Changes Needed

The focus group participants' perspectives are described below and are aligned to current research in the field.

Data Use

All four teachers stated definitively that the SC-KRA data are not useful and have no impact on learner achievement. In essence, they view the assessment as a requirement to accomplish as quickly and efficiently as possible so they can move on to “real instruction,” as Teacher A described. Though they were trained in the administration of the assessment, they were not trained in the use of the data, and one teacher noted that she had not even considered that possibility. In their study of teachers' perceptions in North Carolina, Little et al. (2020) had similar findings. They stated, “Educators may feel unprepared to use data to engage in activities like interpreting test scores, adjusting the curriculum...and interrogating data in meaningful ways” (p. 800).

Another concern is that the teachers are unaware of the purpose of the SC-KRA. They assume the underlying motivation is either monitoring the effectiveness of preschool programs or obtaining government funding. Teacher A stated, “A lot of the teachers don't really want to invest in it when we don't get anything back from it.” The implication was that an awareness of the purpose might improve teacher buy-in. In their study situated in Alaska, Harvey and Ohle (2018) found that “educators and educational organizations have an inconsistent understanding of the role of assessments in instructional decision-making” (p. 5) and recommended that stakeholders come to a consensus on the purpose of kindergarten readiness assessments. Clearly, this purpose then needs to be communicated to those on the front lines, the classroom teachers.

The SC-KRA requires significant time, energy, and money—an investment that should reap benefits. However, these teachers are frustrated by the seeming lack of benefits, despite their best efforts. Perhaps training in data use and a clearer understanding of the purpose of the SC-KRA could alleviate those concerns.

Perceived Limitations

The teachers were primarily frustrated by one overarching limitation of the SC-KRA: timing. This issue impacts two aspects of the assessment—the length of time required to administer the SC-KRA as well as the timing of the reports for teachers and parents.

Kindergarten teachers in South Carolina are required to complete the assessment within the first 45 days of the school year. According to the focus group participants, the SC-KRA requires a minimum of 25 minutes and a maximum of an hour per child to complete, which eliminates valuable instructional time throughout the first few crucial weeks of kindergarten.

Additionally, the data are not reported for several weeks. Teacher D noted that a report can be printed immediately after the data are entered into the computer program, but she was the only teacher who was aware of that option. However, she admitted that the data are still too late to be useful; a kindergarten readiness assessment should be administered *prior* to kindergarten to enable teachers to plan their instruction and group their students according to ability. Parents do not receive a report until the beginning of second semester, at which time the students have advanced beyond the original findings. Teachers, then, must field questions from concerned parents and reassure them that their children are progressing.

These findings are, again, consistent with current research. Schachter et al. (2020) found that teachers were concerned about the amount of time required to administer the test at the beginning of the school year. Additionally, their study demonstrated that the data were outdated

as soon as the administration was complete. In a study situated in a different state, Little et al. (2020) drew similar conclusions: “Some teachers claimed that they did not use the data because it became irrelevant after the start of the school year” (p. 806). As noted in the previous section, “Data Use,” teachers typically do not utilize SC-KRA data when planning their literacy instruction. Perhaps data that are more relevant would be more beneficial.

Better Options

The fact that the focus group participants essentially ignore SC-KRA data does not imply that they have no data sources. Rather, they eagerly described two sources they heavily rely on: teacher-made assessments and FastBridge (see description in section 5.3), which provide detailed information such as students’ knowledge of letter names, letter sounds, and high frequency words. Additionally, these assessments can be completed in a timelier fashion than the SC-KRA, allowing teachers to form their literacy groups quickly and begin targeted instruction.

When Harvey and Ohle (2018) explored Alaskan teachers’ perceptions, they found similar practices. Because these teachers had significant concerns about the kindergarten readiness assessment required by the state [Alaska Developmental Profile (ADP)], they felt pressure to find alternatives, such as teacher-made assessments, rubrics, and a variety of standardized tools. Harvey and Ohle (2018) found that the teachers preferred these other options because “they knew the purpose of the assessments, what they measured, and how to use the results, which differentiated them from the ADP” (p. 14). This perspective reinforces the importance of teacher training—in the purpose, administration, and effective use of data.

Changes Needed

Throughout both focus groups, the participants’ comments implied changes that would enable the SC-KRA to be a more useful tool. Most of the recommended improvements revolved

around one overarching concept—timing (see “Perceived Limitations” section above). For example, if the SC-KRA were administered *prior* to kindergarten, the teachers could begin planning individualized instruction at the beginning of the school year, rather than waiting several weeks for the completion of the assessment—or even several months for the official results. These delayed results are another needed change. Teachers and parents alike would benefit from a more expedient process. Additionally, the length of time required per student to administer the assessment and then enter the scores into the computer program is prohibitive and wastes valuable instructional time. The teachers were also concerned that the SC-KRA data do not provide enough detailed information. Teacher D noted that “the results aren't specific when we get them. When we get it...it's just like on this rating scale but it doesn't say, like, was it their vocabulary? Was it their letter identification? So it really doesn't even give us a good picture.”

Multiple studies have demonstrated that the time required to administer kindergarten readiness assessments and the timing of the results are of grave concern to teachers (Little et al., 2020; Schachter et al., 2015; Schachter et al., 2020). However, Graue (2006) additionally noted “that kindergarten is too late to begin focusing on readiness” (p. 51). Though Graue was referring to readiness in general rather than narrowly focusing on readiness assessments, I believe her sentiment supports the focus group participants’ opinions that administering a kindergarten reading assessment after kindergarten is underway is too late.

The teachers also indicated that the SC-KRA needs to be more equitable in nature. They shared anecdotes of students with disabilities or language barriers who could not access the assessments, yet the teachers were required to administer it regardless. Like the timing issue, this concern aligns with current research. In their focus group research, Wesley and Buysse (2003) noted that “discussion in all groups of professionals addressed their observations and fears that

school readiness criteria did not accommodate children whose birthdays fell late (especially young boys), whose families do not speak English, or who have developmental delays or disabilities” (p. 360). To plan effective, individualized literacy instruction, teachers must have access to accurate, informative data; this goal can only be accomplished with an assessment that reaches every student.

6.3 Implications

This study’s findings centered around two constructs: kindergarten readiness in general and, more specifically, the kindergarten readiness assessment utilized in South Carolina’s public elementary schools. Based on the focus group participants’ perspectives, multiple implications were identified for the following stakeholders: policymakers, administrators, kindergarten teachers, preschool teachers, parents, and, most importantly, the students themselves. The implications for each group are discussed below.

Policymakers

Because a universal definition of *kindergarten readiness* does not exist, each state has developed its own (Pierson, 2018). Unfortunately, these definitions are typically based on mainstream norms, often causing students who are not from white, middle-class homes to be viewed as lacking readiness skills (Gill et al., 2006). Policymakers, therefore, must reconceptualize readiness as encompassing more than traditional academic and social expectations. Stipek stated, “The meaningful question is not *whether* a child is ready to learn but rather *what* a child is ready to learn” (as cited in Gill et al., 2006, p. 221). In other words, educators must consider each child’s individual strengths and weaknesses and plan instruction accordingly, rather than expecting the students to fit neatly into a prescribed program (Bernstein et al., 2019). Additionally, policymakers should not allow future expectations to drive their

definitions. Rather, this reconceptualization of readiness should give educators the flexibility to meet students' current needs without fear of future failure (Brown et al., 2021).

Policymakers in states that utilize a kindergarten readiness assessment must ensure that the purpose of the assessment is clearly defined and communicated to other stakeholders (Harvey & Ohle, 2018; Schachter et al., 2015). Though the purpose will likely vary by state, it should be for teaching and learning rather than for accountability (Regenstein et al., 2017). Additionally, policymakers should select an assessment that is manageable for teachers—one that does not require too much time at the beginning of the school year, provides data in a reasonable timeframe, and effectively utilizes technology (Schachter et al., 2015)—and that is equitable in nature, acknowledging the varying skills that students bring with them to the classroom (Gill et al., 2006). Finally, training in the administration of the assessment and the utilization of the data should be provided to teachers (Schachter et al., 2020).

Administrators

Administrators at the state, district, and school levels are the link between the policymakers and those in the trenches, the kindergarten teachers. According to Harvey and Ohle (2018), “Teachers want guidance and support, and administrators are in a position to offer both” (p. 20). For example, administrators must ensure that teachers understand the purpose of the kindergarten readiness assessment; clarity in their understanding could improve teacher buy-in. Per the focus group participants, administrators could decrease the burden of the assessment by providing substitute teachers or additional related arts classes to give the teachers time to assess their students. Administrators, finally, must provide training, not just in the administration of the kindergarten readiness assessment, but also in the effective utilization of the data to inform instruction—specifically literacy instruction (Harvey & Ohle, 2018; Schachter et al., 2020). In

their study of North Carolina’s Kindergarten Entry Assessment (NC KEA), Little et al. (2020) “found evidence that teachers can access and interpret the data from the NC KEA, but they struggle to then construct implications for action” (p. 810); however, professional development offered at school increased teachers’ data use. Teachers who view kindergarten readiness assessments as a tool to improve their instruction and better meet the needs of their students will be more willing invest the time and energy required; administrators are in a prime position to turn this prospect into reality.

Kindergarten Teachers

First and foremost, kindergarten teachers must reframe their definitions of *readiness*; rather than viewing it through the lens of traditional, mainstream expectations, they must acknowledge the fact that each student will enter the classroom with a unique set of experiences and skills and must be prepared to build upon that knowledge. In essence, teachers should no longer expect students to be ready for school; rather, schools should be ready for students (Graue, 2006; “School Readiness,” 1995; Shore, 2009; Wesley & Buysse, 2003; “Where We Stand on School Readiness,” 2009).

Regarding the SC-KRA, Teacher B stated, “We do it because we have to. And then it’s done.” This perspective does nothing to empower teachers to embrace this mandated assessment and view it as a beneficial tool rather than a necessary evil. Rather, teachers must take advantage of professional development opportunities regarding the SC-KRA or overall assessment practices—particularly those that delve into the effective use of data to inform literacy instruction (Harvey & Ohle, 2018).

Preschool Teachers

Kindergarten teachers are not the only educators impacted by a state’s definition of *readiness* and expectations for the skills rising kindergartners demonstrate. Preschool teachers can also feel pressured to prepare students to meet those expectations. This pressure is complicated by the desire to utilize developmentally appropriate practices. The temptation is to delve into practices that are not appropriate in the attempt to achieve potentially unreachable goals (Kinkead-Clark, 2021; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Though this dilemma may seem insurmountable, Brown (2013) found “that there is a desire among many ECE practitioners to seek out programmatic reforms that unite their programs and practices so that all of the children they work with start school ready to succeed” (pp. 569-570).

These findings highlight the need for preschool teachers to reconceptualize readiness as more than state-defined expectations and employ developmentally appropriate practices, regardless of the pressure to do otherwise. Additionally, preschool teachers should not allow the looming kindergarten readiness assessment to impact their current practices. Brown et al. (2021) posited that “those who work with children need to think about how their perceptions of the future may ignore the immediate needs of the children in their classrooms” (p. 137). A clear understanding of the purpose of KRAs—for improved teaching and learning rather than accountability (Regenstein et al., 2017)—will give preschool teachers the freedom to meet their students’ current needs without fear of future repercussions.

Parents

Though “reconceiving readiness to value the unique ways in which families ready their children for school makes visible the often-overlooked effort families make on their children’s behalf” (Brown et al., 2021, p. 137), teachers have identified several specific ways parents can

participate in this transition to kindergarten. For example, parents must educate themselves on the various readiness expectations in their state and tap into community resources (Gill et al., 2006; “Where We Stand on School Readiness,” 2009). Additionally, parents should not only read to their children but also take advantage of other activities—at home or in the community—that will broaden their children’s knowledge base. When their children enter school, parents should stay in contact with the teacher and participate in school activities as they are able. They also need to communicate questions and concerns with the teacher so that all parties are working toward the same goals. Not all parents will be able to achieve this level of involvement; however, even small steps will smooth their children’s transition to formal schooling (Gill et al., 2006).

Students

When policymakers, administrators, and teachers agree on a definition of readiness and the purpose of readiness assessments, the ultimate beneficiaries are the students. Parents can also contribute to this process, but schools must be ready to meet the needs of students, regardless of the level of parental involvement (Graue, 2006; “School Readiness,” 1995; “Where We Stand on School Readiness,” 2009). How, then, do kindergarten students benefit?

Philosophical disagreements among stakeholders on the meaning of readiness can lead to unrealistic academic expectations for kindergarten students, thereby resulting in pressure on teachers to utilize practices that are not developmentally appropriate in order to meet those expectations. However, agreement among stakeholders on these issues will free teachers to meet students’ needs in a developmentally appropriate way (Kinkead-Clark, 2021; Wesley & Buysse, 2003) and broaden their focus to include more than just academics. Essentially, realistic expectations combined with developmentally appropriate practices will enable teachers to focus

on the “whole child,” ultimately “[impacting] who kindergartners are being and becoming as students” (Brown et al., 2021, p. 136).

Additionally, realistic expectations will eliminate the overidentification of students with special needs (Kinkead-Clark, 2021) and give teachers time to provide early intervention. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), “Early intervention efforts support children who may be at risk for later school failure” (“Where We Stand on School Readiness,” 2009, p. 1). Furthermore, when teachers are trained in the effective use of readiness assessment data, they will be better equipped to meet their students’ individual needs (Schachter et al., 2020). This focused, individualized instruction will not also benefit kindergarten students in the present, but also pave the way for their success in the future.

6.4 New Directions

Teachers

Based on this study’s findings and the resulting implications, the path forward must include a stronger link “between preschool [and] K-12 education systems” (Brown, 2013, p. 568). For example, preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers need to be aligned in their perspectives of readiness expectations to ensure consistency from one grade to the next. Further, these teachers should collaborate by allowing preschool students to visit kindergarten classrooms, bringing kindergarten students to preschool classrooms to spend time interacting with the students, and/or keeping some preschool students together when they advance to kindergarten, so they see familiar faces when entering a new, potentially overwhelming, environment. Additionally, teachers must partner with and communicate with families of preschool and kindergarten students by clarifying expectations, providing resources and training, and encouraging involvement (Gill et al., 2006).

Tool

Kindergarten readiness assessments (KRAs) will likely continue to be used throughout the country—particularly considering the government funding promised to states that administer them (Schachter et al., 2015). As such, stakeholders should explore ways to improve their usefulness. For example, teachers need to be trained in the effective utilization of KRA data when planning their individualized literacy instruction (Bernstein et al., 2019; Regenstein et al., 2017; Schachter et al., 2020). According to Schachter et al. (2020), “It would be ideal if the KRA was designed such that it could provide state-level data while also meeting teachers’ needs” (p. 20). Policymakers need to ensure, however, that the data are used for teaching and learning rather than accountability (Regenstein et al., 2017).

Further, the design of the assessment must be considered. First, KRAs should “look at the whole child rather than a few narrow skills” (Bernstein et al., 2019, p. 5). To accomplish this goal, the tool itself needs to be more comprehensive, or teachers should be permitted to administer multiple assessments that, together, provide a well-rounded picture of each student (Bernstein et al., 2019; Regenstein et al., 2017). Second, timing should be considered—the time needed to administer the KRA as well as the requirement to administer it during the first few weeks of kindergarten. Though assessing each student prior to the beginning of the school year would be an undertaking, it would, nonetheless, ease the burden on teachers during the first few crucial week of school and provide them with much-needed data with which to begin their instruction (Schachter et al., 2020). Finally, KRAs need to be designed “in ways that reflect the diverse special learning needs and abilities, cultural heritage, and linguistic background of the children being assessed” (Regenstein et al., 2017, p. 6), thereby ensuring the equity of the tool and the accuracy of the data.

6.5 Reflection

This exploration of kindergarten readiness and kindergarten readiness assessments, specifically the SC-KRA, not only opened my eyes to current issues and best practices but also enabled me to grow in my own research skills. The alignment of my findings to those of experts in the field was empowering. However, this study was not perfect. I would have preferred to work with several more teachers to gain their perspectives; additional teachers would have necessitated more schools, thereby increasing the diversity of participants. If time had allowed, I also would have broadened my research to include other school districts throughout the state. Initially, I considered creating a survey to tap into even more perspectives; the resulting data would have provided another source for triangulation of data. However, based on research, I believe additional perspectives would simply have confirmed my findings rather than altering them.

Future research could include an analysis of the benefits to students and teachers when a definition of readiness is agreed upon by stakeholders—including the perspective that schools should be ready to educate rising kindergartners, regardless of their level of preparation (Kinkead-Clark, 2021). Additionally, the impact of the pandemic on students' readiness should be explored. Regarding kindergarten readiness assessments, researchers need to examine each assessment to determine whether it is equitable, reaching all students no matter their language, disability, or culture. Further, a comparison of KRAs to teacher-made assessments could be conducted to determine which approach is more equitable and beneficial. Additionally, the timing of KRAs should be analyzed to decide whether administering them prior to or during kindergarten is more advantageous for teachers and students alike (Schachter et al., 2020).

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Appendix A: Sample Codebook

Theme	Code Name	Definition	When to Use	When not to Use	Example
Current state of kindergarten readiness	Perceptions of readiness	Any reference to a teacher’s definition of readiness <i>or</i> description of a student who is ready for kindergarten instruction	Use when teachers define readiness, describe their perceptions of readiness, or describe a student who is ready for kindergarten	When referring to recent concerns, use <i>Changes in Readiness</i>	“It’s a kindergarten-aged child being socially, emotionally, and academically ready to excel in kindergarten.”
	Changes in readiness	Any reference to the impact of the pandemic on kindergarten readiness <i>or</i> changes noted in readiness over the years	Use when teachers compare current students’ readiness to past students’ readiness	When referring to readiness expectations, use <i>Perceptions of Readiness</i>	“With the pandemic, we’re just seeing a lot of just that social emotional part of a child that they do not have... And we don’t have time to teach the social emotional part... It’s been tough.”
Informed literacy instruction	Data Use	Any reference to the use of data to inform literacy instruction <i>or</i> the impact of the KRA on learner achievement	Use when teachers describe their use of KRA data or its impact on learner achievement	When referring to teacher-made assessments or FastBridge, use <i>Alternate Data Sources</i>	“We get nothing from it [KRA]... We just need to get it in, check it off, and move on.”
	Perceived limitations	Any reference to the time required to administer the KRA <i>or</i> the timeliness of the results	Use when teachers calculate the time required to administer the KRA <i>or</i> the approximate month they receive the results	When referring to changes needed, use <i>Improving the KRA</i>	“I just need to get those results back sooner... If I could use that little bit of information a little bit sooner, it might would be able to help us in the classroom.”

Appendix B: Language and Literacy Common Language Standards

Domain	Strand	Code	Standard (yellow) Essential Skill and Knowledge	Learning Progression
Language and Literacy (LL)	Reading (1)	LL.1.1	Comprehend and respond to interactive read-alouds of literary and informational text.	Story/Text Comprehension
		LL.1.1.A	Before interactive read-alouds, make predictions and/or ask questions about the text by examining the title, cover, illustrations/photographs, graphic aids, and/or text.	
		LL.1.1.B	During interactive read-alouds, listen and ask and answer questions as appropriate.	
		LL.1.1.C	After interactive read-alouds, respond by retelling the text or part of the text in an appropriate sequence, using discussions, re-enactment, drawing, and/or writing as appropriate.	
		LL.1.1.D	Identify the beginning, middle, and end of literary text.	
		LL.1.1.E	Identify the main topic of informational text.	
		LL.1.2	Demonstrate understanding of spoken words and sounds (phonemes).	Phonological Awareness
		LL.1.2.A	Identify initial and final sounds in spoken words.	
		LL.1.2.B	Identify, blend, and segment syllables in spoken words.	
		LL.1.2.C	Blend and segment onsets and rimes of single-syllable spoken words.	
		LL.1.2.D	Recognize rhyming words in spoken language.	
		LL.1.3	Know and apply letter-sound correspondence and letter recognition skills.	Phonics and Letter Recognition
		LL.1.3.A	Recognize that words are made up of letters and their sounds.	
		LL.1.3.B	Demonstrate basic knowledge of one-to-one letter-sound correspondences by producing the most frequent sound for some consonants.	
		LL.1.3.C	Recognize and name some upper- and lowercase letters.	
	Speaking and Listening (2)	LL.2.1	Communicate effectively in a variety of situations with different audiences, purposes, and formats.	Communication
		LL.2.1.A	Speak or express thoughts, feelings, and ideas clearly enough to be understood in a variety of settings.	
	LL.2.1.B	Participate in conversations with adults and peers, staying on topic through multiple exchanges and adding appropriate ideas to support or extend the conversation.		
	Writing (3)	LL.3.1	Produce letter-like shapes, symbols, letters, and words to convey meaning.	Emergent Writing
		LL.3.1.A	With modeling and support, print letters of own name.	
LL.3.1.B		With modeling and support, print meaningful words with letters and letter approximations.		
LL.3.1.C	Use a combination of drawing, dictating and developmentally appropriate writing for a variety of purposes (e.g., tell a story, give an opinion, express ideas).			
Language (4)	LL.4.1	Demonstrate beginning understanding of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when engaged in literacy activities.	Grammar	
	LL.4.1.A	Use familiar nouns and verbs to describe persons, animals, places, events, actions, etc.		
	LL.4.1.B	Develop understanding of singular and plural nouns (e.g. "dog" means one dog, "dogs" means more than one dog); form regular plural nouns orally by adding /s/ or /es/.		
	LL.4.1.C	Understand and begin to use question words.		
	LL.4.1.D	Use frequently occurring prepositions (e.g., "to," "from," "in," "out," "on," "off," "for," "of," "by," "with").		
	LL.4.1.E	Produce complete sentences in shared language activities.		
	LL.4.2	Use words acquired through conversations and shared reading experiences.	Vocabulary	
LL.4.2.A	Identify real-life connections between words and their uses (e.g., relate the word "helpful," used in a story, to own life by telling ways to be helpful).			
LL.4.2.B	Determine the meanings of unknown words/concepts using the context of conversations, pictures that accompany text, or concrete objects.			

(WestEd, 2014, p. B-2)

Appendix C: Sample Parent Letter

[School Letterhead]

[Date]

Dear Parent or Guardian,

The Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) is a tool used to get to know your child at the start of kindergarten. The KRA is administered to all kindergarteners enrolled in South Carolina public schools. The tool has 50 items that measures your child's readiness across four areas: social foundations, language and literacy, mathematics, and physical well-being and motor development.

All parts of this assessment must be conducted in a face-to-face, in-person setting. Children attending kindergarten virtually are expected to come in-person to be assessed to ensure they have the best opportunity to demonstrate what they know. Once the assessment is completed, teachers will share information about your child's performance.

On the KRA, there are three ways for your child to show what he or she knows and is able to do:

1. Selecting an answer to a question.
2. Performing a requested task.
3. Being observed by the teacher.

Your child's kindergarten teacher will be glad to answer any questions you have about the KRA and how you can support your child's growth and development throughout the kindergarten year.

Thank you,

[School Principal]

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CURRICULUM VITAE

EDUCATION

EdD **Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, 2023**
Literacy, Culture and Language Education

Dissertation title: *An Examination of Kindergarten Teachers' Perceptions of Readiness and Their Utilization of South Carolina's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Data to Inform Literacy Instruction*

Committee: *Drs. Karen Wohlwend (chair), Sharon Daley, and Mary McMullen*

MEd **Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC, 1999**
Special Education

BS **Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC, 1998**
Elementary Education

LICENCES AND CERTIFICATIONS

South Carolina Educator License Number: 190914

- Areas of Certification: Elementary Education, Generic Special Education, Learning Disabilities
- Validity Period: 07/01/2023 – 06/30/2028

South Carolina Endorsed Read to Succeed Literacy Teacher

- All four state-required literacy courses are complete and have been approved by the state.

Certified Social/Behavioral Researcher

- Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI)
- Validity Period: 02/19/2021 – 02/18/2026

CONTINUING EDUCATION

2019 **International Literacy Association National Conference**
New Orleans, LA

Collaborated with colleagues while attending a worldwide literacy conference. Sat under the teaching of literacy experts. Explored available literacy resources.

2019 **Greenville County International Reading Association Spring Conference**
Greenville, SC

Participated in a local conference conducted by a literacy expert who was one of my professors at Furman University.

- 2018 **May Institute**
Bob Jones University
Participated in the Center for Engaged Teaching and Effective Learning (CETEL) May Institute on backwards course design.
- 2017 **Assessment of Reading**
Bob Jones University
Completed three undergraduate literacy credits.
- 2017 **3rd Southern Regional International Dyslexia Association (IDA) Conference**
Greenville, SC
Attended the conference as a new IDA board member. Assisted with event details and gained resources regarding students with dyslexia.
- 2017 **Greenville County International Reading Association Spring Conference**
Greenville, SC
Attended a local literacy conference led by a well-known author.
- 2017 **South Carolina Teaching Standards Rubric Training**
Bob Jones University
Was trained in South Carolina's teaching standards rubric and became certified to assess pre-service teachers using the rubric.
- 2016 **Teaching Phonemic Awareness and Phonics**
University of Central Missouri
Completed three graduate literacy credits.
- 2015-2016 **Literacy Education**
Furman University
Completed fifteen graduate literacy credits.
- 2014 **Southeast Christian School Convention**
Myrtle Beach, SC
Collaborated with colleagues while attending sessions designed to strengthen my teaching practice.
- 2014 **Differentiated Learning, Mrs. Lisa Joyner**
AACS Continuing Education
Expanded my ability to differentiate instruction for learners.
- 2014 **South Carolina Council for Exceptional Children Annual Conference**
Greenville, SC
Collaborated with colleagues while attending sessions designed to strengthen my ability to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities.

- 2013 **South Carolina Association of Christian Schools Convention**
Spartanburg, SC
Collaborated with colleagues while attending sessions designed to strengthen my teaching practice.
- 2012 **Southeast Christian School Convention**
Myrtle Beach, SC
Collaborated with colleagues while attending sessions designed to strengthen my teaching practice.
- 2012 **Intro to Biblical Counseling**
Bob Jones University
Completed three graduate credits in biblical counseling.
- 2001 **Teaching Techniques for the Learning Disabled**
MidAmerica Nazarene University, Olathe, KS
Completed a course designed to teach a specific and unique approach for working with students with learning disabilities.

PROFESSIONAL TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPMENT

- 2011 **Lifelong Learning Courses**
Greenville County Schools, Greenville, SC
PowerPoint 2007 for Educators
Promethean Board Basics for Educators
Excel 2007 for Educators

CURRENT POSITION

- 2022–Present **Associate Professor, School of Education and Human Services**
Division of Teacher Education
Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC
Teach courses (listed below) in the SOEHS.
- 2022–Present **Advisor, School of Education and Human Services**
Elementary Education, BS
Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC
Communicate regularly with advisees via email. Meet with advisees individually each semester for preregistration and anytime a student requests a meeting. Serve approximately 12-15 advisees per semester.
- 2021–Present **Literacy Coordinator, School of Education and Human Services**
Division of Teacher Education
Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC
Participate on the Curriculum Committee of the School of Education and Human Services (SOEHS). Oversee all literacy courses in the SOEHS.

Coordinate literacy course approvals with the South Carolina Department of Education. Coordinate professional development sessions in literacy for the SOEHS faculty. Compile literacy resources for SOEHS faculty.

2021–Present **Substitute Teacher**
Greenville County Schools, Greenville, SC
Substitute in a variety of elementary and middle schools in Greenville County during BJU’s breaks.

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE

Summer 2021 **Summer Bridge Program**
Paris Elementary School, Greenville SC
Assessed individual students to determine current reading levels. Worked with small groups of students to strengthen their reading skills.

2017–2022 **Assistant Professor, School of Education and Human Services**
Division of Teacher Education
Division of Educational, Child & Family Studies
Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC
Taught courses (listed below) in the SOEHS.

2017–2022 **Program Coordinator, Educational Studies, BS**
Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC
Oversaw and developed the Educational Studies program from its inception. Developed ECF 390 (junior field experience) and ECF 495 (senior capstone). Built relationships with approximately 60 community organizations such as Greenville Zoo, Greenville Symphony Orchestra, Safe Harbor, Refuge Sports, Greer Police Department, Greenville County Sheriff’s Office, Greenville County Department of Social Services, Greenville Center for Creative Arts, and Agape English Language Institute. Completed annual program assessments. Acted as Program Champion. Participated in College Up Close events.

2016–2017 **Instructor, School of Education and Human Services**
Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC
Taught courses (listed below) in the SOEHS.

2014–2022 **Advisor, School of Education and Human Services**
Educational Studies, BS
Early Childhood Education, BS
Child Care & Development, AS
Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC
Communicated regularly with advisees via email. Met with advisees individually each semester for preregistration and anytime a student requested a meeting. Served approximately 20-40 advisees per semester.

- 2014–2016 **Adjunct Instructor, School of Education and Human Services**
Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC
Taught courses (listed below) in the SOEHS.
- 2011–2017 **Faculty, Learning Resource Center**
Bob Jones Academy, Greenville, SC
Worked with students who have various disabilities to strengthen their literacy, math, and organizational skills.
- 2006–2011 **Substitute Teacher**
Greenville County Schools, Greenville, SC
Substituted in a variety of elementary and middle schools in Greenville County.
- 1999–2004 **Faculty**
Colonial Christian School, Indianapolis, IN
Taught elementary music, grade 7 math, and grade 7 English. Worked with resource students from elementary through high school.

SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY

- 2017–2019 **Board Member, International Dyslexia Association (IDA)**
Collaborated with educators who serve students with dyslexia throughout South Carolina. Helped organize a statewide IDA conference.
- 2013-2014 **Foster Parent**
Miracle Hill, Greenville, SC
Fostered two children—one for two weeks and another for one year. Grew in knowledge of foster care system, Child Find (assessment system for children with disabilities), and techniques for parenting a child with disabilities and behavior issues. Gained valuable experience and information that continue to impact the literacy courses I teach.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

- 2017-2020 **International Dyslexia Association**
- 2016–Present **Greenville County Literacy Association**
- 2016–Present **Palmetto State Literacy Association**
- 2015–Present **International Literacy Association**

DIVERSITY EXPERIENCES

- 2017 **Why Poverty Matters Conference**
Presbyterian College, Clinton, SC

Collaborated with colleagues while growing in my knowledge of the impact of poverty on education.

- 2017 **Poverty Simulation**
Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC
As a member of the IDA board, I assisted with the poverty simulation sponsored by the University Educator Association.
- 2016 **Ministry Safe Child Sexual Abuse Awareness Training**
Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC
Renewed my Ministry Safe certification.
- 2015 **Ministry Safe Child Sexual Abuse Awareness Training**
Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC
Renewed my Ministry Safe certification.
- 2013 **Ministry Safe Child Sexual Abuse Awareness Training**
Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC
Attended a live Ministry Safe presentation and successfully completed the certification assessment.

UNIVERSITY COURSES TAUGHT

- 2022–Present **Ed 205: Foundations of Reading**
- 2018–2019 **Ed 365: Assessment of Reading**
2022–Present
- 2018–2021 **ECF 495: Service-Learning Capstone**
- 2017–2021 **ECF 390: Service Learning for Educators**
- 2017–Present **Ed 353: Instructional Practices of Reading**
- 2016–2022 **Ed 305: Foundations in Reading for Early Childhood and Elementary School Teachers**
- 2016–2022 **Ed 306: Foundations in Reading for Middle School and High School Teachers**
- 2014–2017 **ECC 210: Exceptional Young Children**

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Hamrick, A. (2023, July). *Comprehension strategies for any content area* [Conference session]. North Carolina Christian School Association Summer Professional Development Seminars, Goldsboro, NC, United States.

Hamrick, A. (2023, July). *Fluency: The forgotten reading skill* [Conference session]. North Carolina Christian School Association Summer Professional Development Seminars, Goldsboro, NC, United States.

Hamrick, A. (2023, July). *Making vocabulary meaningful* [Conference session]. North Carolina Christian School Association Summer Professional Development Seminars, Goldsboro, NC, United States.

Hamrick, A. (2022, September). *Comprehension strategies for any content area* [Conference session]. Great Lakes Christian Educators Convention, Kalamazoo, MI, United States.

Hamrick, A. (2022, September). *Fluency: The forgotten reading skill* [Conference session]. Great Lakes Christian Educators Convention, Kalamazoo, MI, United States.

Hamrick, A. (2022, September). *Making vocabulary meaningful* [Conference session]. Great Lakes Christian Educators Convention, Kalamazoo, MI, United States.

Hamrick, A. (2021, October). *Comprehension strategies for any content area* [Conference session]. Tennessee Association of Christian Schools State Teachers' Convention, Murfreesboro, TN, United States.

Hamrick, A. (2021, September). *Digging deeper into phonics* [Conference session]. Tennessee Association of Christian Schools State Teachers' Convention, Murfreesboro, TN, United States.

Hamrick, A. (2021, September). *Making vocabulary meaningful* [Conference session]. Tennessee Association of Christian Schools State Teachers' Convention, Murfreesboro, TN, United States.

Hamrick, A. (2021, October). *Phonemic awareness: What's the big deal?* [Conference session]. Tennessee Association of Christian Schools State Teachers' Convention, Murfreesboro, TN, United States.

Hamrick, A. (2021, October). *Why service learning?* [Conference session]. Tennessee Association of Christian Schools State Teachers' Convention, Murfreesboro, TN, United States.

Hamrick, A. (2019, September). *Comprehension strategies for any content area* [Conference session]. Southeast Christian School Convention, Myrtle Beach, SC, United States.

- Hamrick, A. (2019, September). *Fluency: The forgotten reading skill* [Conference session]. Southeast Christian School Convention, Myrtle Beach, SC, United States.
- Hamrick, A. (2019, September). *Making vocabulary meaningful* [Conference session]. Southeast Christian School Convention, Myrtle Beach, SC, United States.
- Hamrick, A. (2019, September). *Phonemic awareness: What's the big deal?* [Conference session]. Southeast Christian School Convention, Myrtle Beach, SC, United States.
- Hamrick, A. (2019, May). *Comprehension strategies for any content area* [Conference session]. BJU Press Authors, Greenville, SC, United States.
- Hamrick, A. (2018, October). *Comprehension strategies for any content area* [Conference session]. Arizona Teachers' Convention, Phoenix, AZ, United States.
- Hamrick, A. (2018, October). *Digging deeper into phonics* [Conference session]. Arizona Teachers' Convention, Phoenix, AZ, United States.
- Hamrick, A. (2018, October). *Fluency: The forgotten reading skill* [Conference session]. Arizona Teachers' Convention, Phoenix, AZ, United States.
- Hamrick, A. (2018, October). *Making vocabulary meaningful* [Conference session]. Arizona Teachers' Convention, Phoenix, AZ, United States.
- Hamrick, A. (2018, October). *Why service learning?* [Conference session]. Arizona Teachers' Convention, Phoenix, AZ, United States.
- Hamrick, A. (2018, September). *Comprehension strategies for any content area* [Conference session]. Indiana/Illinois Teachers' Convention, Schaumburg, IL, United States.
- Hamrick, A. (2018, September). *Digging deeper into phonics* [Conference session]. Indiana/Illinois Teachers' Convention, Schaumburg, IL, United States.
- Hamrick, A. (2018, September). *Making vocabulary meaningful* [Conference session]. Indiana/Illinois Teachers' Convention, Schaumburg, IL, United States.
- Hamrick, A. (2018, September). *Phonemic awareness: What's the big deal?* [Conference session]. Indiana/Illinois Teachers' Convention, Schaumburg, IL, United States.

PUBLICATION

- Hamrick, A. (2018). *Service learning: What is it?* <https://today.bju.edu/perspective/service-learning-what-is-it/>