

# PERCEPTIONS OF KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS REGARDING SYSTEMIC CONSTRAINTS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

*PERCEPÇÕES DE PROFESSORES DA EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL SOBRE AS LIMITAÇÕES SISTÊMICAS IMPOSTAS AO ENSINO APRENDIZAGEM*

*LAS PERCEPCIONES DE LOS MAESTROS DE EDUCACIÓN INFANTIL SOBRE LAS LIMITACIONES SISTÉMICAS IMPUESTAS A LA ENSEÑANZA APRENDIZAJE*

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**Resumo:** O propósito deste múltiplo estudo de caso foi o de examinar as percepções de professores de jardim de infância em relação a restrições sistemáticas da relação pedagógica entre professores e crianças. Como o aumento de responsabilidade e o aumento de pressão estão colocados nos professores da educação infantil para focarem num currículo centrado em conteúdos disciplinares e em responsabilidades padronizadas, pouco tempo está reservado para implementar o desenvolvimento de práticas apropriadas. Este estudo qualitativo obteve dados de quatro professores experientes de educação infantil, selecionados aleatoriamente com o uso de entrevistas, observações em classe e revisão de documentos de sala e aula. A análise destes dados geraram três temas altamente proeminentes: 1) o desenvolvimento de práticas apropriadas no contexto da educação infantil são consensuadas em contextos de altos escalões; 2) o movimento instrucional do currículo tem mudado a dinâmica das aulas/classes da educação infantil; 3) habilidades acadêmicas são enfatizadas como um resultado do currículo preestabelecido no contexto da educação infantil. Em resumo, os professores da educação infantil acreditavam que a dinâmica da relação pedagógica entre o professor e a criança tem mudado como um resultado de restrições sistemáticas. Os professores deste estudo perceberam que o currículo predeterminado impõe pressão para que o currículo acadêmico seja trabalhado na maior parte do dia. No entanto, os professores mantiveram que mesmo sob pesadas pressões do currículo preestabelecido, foram capazes de sustentar um alto senso de autoeficácia,

ainda acreditando em suas habilidades de ajudar seus estudantes a serem bem-sucedidos.

**Palavras-chave:** Primeira Infância. Responsabilidade. Restrições sistêmicas. Práticas adequadas ao desenvolvimento.

**Abstract:** The purpose of this multiple case study was to examine the perceptions of Kindergarten teachers regarding systemic constraints on the teacher/learner pedagogical relationship. As greater responsibility and increasing pressure are imposed on early childhood teachers to focus on a subject-centered curricula and accountability standards, there is less time available to implement and develop appropriate practices. This qualitative study gathered data from four randomly-selected experienced Kindergarten teachers, through interviews, classroom observations, and a review of classroom documents. Analysis of the data generated three highly prominent themes: 1) developmentally appropriate practices in the Kindergarten setting are compromised in a high stakes environment; 2) the instructional pacing of the curriculum has changed the dynamics of the Kindergarten classroom; and 3) academic skills are emphasized as a result of the push-down curriculum in Kindergarten settings. In summary, the Kindergarten teachers believed that the dynamics of the pedagogical relationship between the teacher and the learner have changed as a result of systemic constraints. Teachers from the study perceived that the push-down curriculum imposed pressure to cover an academic curriculum throughout most of the day. However, the teachers maintained that even under the mounting pressures of the push-down curriculum, they were able to sustain a high sense of self-efficacy, still believing in their ability to help their students succeed.

**Key Words:** Early Childhood. Accountability. Systemic Constraints. Developmentally Appropriate Practices.

**Resumen:** El propósito de este múltiple estudio de caso fue el de examinar las percepciones de los maestros de jardín de infantes en relación a restricciones sistemáticas de la relación pedagógica entre maestros y niños. Como el aumento de responsabilidad y el aumento de presión pesan sobre los maestros de la educación infantil para que enfoquen un currículo centrado en contenidos disciplinares y en responsabilidades estandarizadas, poco tiempo queda reservado para implementar el desarrollo de prácticas apropiadas. Este estudio cualitativo obtuvo datos de cuatro experimentados maestros de educación infantil, seleccionados aleatoriamente con el uso de entrevistas, observaciones en clase y revisión de documentos de la clase. El análisis de estos datos generó tres temas altamente relevantes: 1) el desarrollo de prácticas apropiadas en el contexto de la educación infantil es consensual en contextos de altas esferas; 2) el movimiento instruccional del currículo ha cambiado la dinámica de las aulas/clases de la educación infantil; 3) se enfatizan las habilidades académicas como un resultado del currículo preestablecido en el contexto de la educación infantil. En resumen, los maestros de educación infantil creían que la dinámica de la relación pedagógica entre el maestro y el niño había cambiado como resultado de restricciones sistemáticas. Los maestros de este estudio notaron que el currículo predeterminado impone una presión para que el currículo académico sea trabajado durante la mayor parte del día. Sin embargo, los maestros sostuvieron que incluso bajo la pesada presión del currículo preestablecido, fueron capaces de mantener un alto sentido de autoeficacia, confiando en sus habilidades

de ayudar a sus estudiantes para que alcancen el éxito.

**Palabras clave:** Primera Infancia. Responsabilidad. Restricciones sistémicas. Prácticas adecuadas al desarrollo.

## INTRODUCTION

Early childhood educators understand that standards and curriculum guidelines are essential to the development of early readiness, as a way of improving the quality of early childhood settings (NAEYC/NAECS, 2002). There is consensus among early childhood practitioners that developmentally appropriate practices provide the foundation necessary to achieve optimal learning, and foster growth and development of all children (RAINES & JOHNSTON, 2003). However, in the current climate, early childhood teachers are experiencing a 'philosophy-reality conflict' that constrains and compromises their beliefs about what is an effective, developmentally-appropriate, and age-appropriate teaching practice for young children (ADOCK & PATTON, 2001). According to Adock and Patton (2001), the pressures that have influenced the personal teaching philosophies of early childhood teachers stemming from a prescriptive of 'push-down' curriculum, early learning standards, and accountability mandates such as high stakes testing are known as "systemic constraints" (p. 195). This study investigates the perceptions of Kindergarten teachers regarding systemic constraints on the teacher/learner pedagogical relationship.

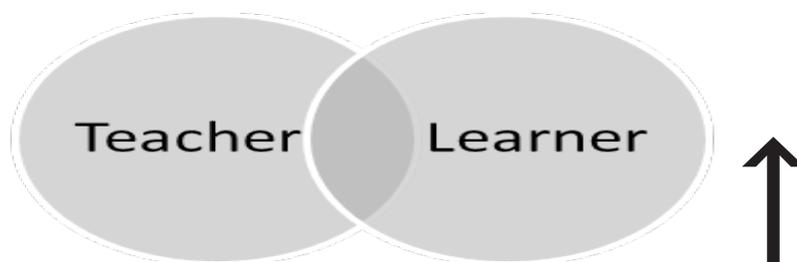
Unfortunately, in the United States, because a curriculum based on mandated accountability standards stemming from the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) and *Race for the Top* (2009) is implemented in the classroom, the teacher's power of curricular decision-making is lost (FECHO, 2004). Early childhood teachers have very little power over decision-making processes regarding their school's curriculum and instructional practices. As schools are more externally controlled, teachers' autonomy in making curricular decisions in their classrooms is eroded, resulting in more didactic, achievement-oriented instruction (PENCE, 2005). Didactic-oriented instruction results in students spending most of their time working individually on class tasks, with limited time spent on collaborative work and social interaction with their teachers and classroom peers (STIPEK, 2004).

Opportunities are also lost for teachers to engage in activities with their students in the ways they prefer. Teachers are spending more time on tested

areas such as reading, science and math, than on non-tested areas such as social studies and the arts. As more time is spent on preparing students for state tests, less time is spent on enrichment activities, field trips, and structured play. As a result, some of this instructional time does not represent good pedagogical practice (PEDULLA, 2003).

Taking an active role in the classroom is imperative for reaching the goals and actions set by the teacher. The classroom leader moves from a position of control and demand to one of facilitator; from directives to shared direction; from exclusion to inclusion. Hence, teaching goes from a 'unidirectional' to a relational process of learning (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Relational Process of Teaching and Learning



## PEDAGOGICAL RELATIONSHIP

Learning relations are activated and cultivated by 'being' in a relationship of trust and respect with our students. Without such a relationship, pedagogy becomes a recipe for compliance rather than for promotion of learning (FECHO, 2004). Human relations can give educators the motivation to promote and maintain what is central to the task of teaching and learning (SIDORKIN, 2002). Ultimately, as a result of institutional systemic constraints, the integrity of the teacher/learner pedagogical relationship is compromised.

The researcher sought to answer the following questions:

- What are Kindergarten teachers' perceptions regarding systemic constraints on the teacher/learner pedagogical relationship in an era of *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top*?
- How are the roles of the teacher and learner fostered or compromised in relation to institutional systemic constraints?
- How are the Kindergarten curriculum and developmentally appropriate practices responsive to systemic constraints?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE CONSTRUCTIVIST PARADIGM

One of the philosophical orientations that informs qualitative research is constructivism (MERRIAM, 2009). Constructivist philosophy considers a “relativist ontology,” which holds that people construct multiple realities in their lives and in their interactions with others (Patton, 2002). Its epistemological premise is “subjectivist,” whereby “knower and respondent co-create understandings” (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2008, p. 32). Methodologically speaking, constructivism positions itself in the natural world, allowing the researcher to investigate phenomena in real world settings (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2008).

This study is situated in Dewey’s (1938) constructivist theory, which emphasizes how a social, relational teaching and learning environment is crucial to the early childhood classroom. In *Experience and Education* (1938), Dewey explains his views:

There is, I think, no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process, just as there is no defect in traditional education greater than its failure to secure the active cooperation of the pupil in the construction of the purposes involved in his studying. (p. 67)

Constructivism is rooted in a spirit of individualism, which respects and validates the way we make sense of the world (CROTTY, 2003). This is achieved by inviting students to explore the complexities of *their* world by asking questions and generating their own answers (BROOKS AND BROOKS, 2002). Learning becomes a process that enables children to make sense of their world by making connections and constructing their own meanings (GREENE, 1995). At its core, is the imperative of learning in an environment that is fully immersed in experiences that are constructed by an individual, and for this study, by the experiences constructed by the child in the early childhood classroom. Children in the early childhood classroom construct knowledge in an environment that is relevant to their needs and interests (JACKSON, 1990). The formation of identity is nurtured in an environment that celebrates the worth and agency of the child (GREENE, 1995). The child, who lives and interacts naturally in his/her surroundings, should, therefore, also construct knowledge in relevant surroundings. Learning takes place when a child’s ideas completely fuse with his interactive actions (DEWEY, 1934). When children are actively engaged in a relational, or as Fecho (2004) terms it, ‘transactional,’ pedagogical curriculum of discovery and invention, aesthetic play emerges and envelops students with learning that speaks to them. Learning becomes a seamless, transactional process that brings into play the child’s motivation, attitudes, and emotions in relation to others.

Developmentally appropriate practices also provide a research-based framework for successful teaching and learning in early childhood settings (NAEYC, 2009). The use of developmentally appropriate practices is grounded in the works of early childhood supporters such as Dewey (1916, 1938), Montessori (1949), Piaget (1952), Erikson (1963), Vygotsky (1978), Bronfenbrenner (1979), and Gardner (1993) and are based on the following principles: 1) the cognitive, physical, emotional, and social domains of learning and development are interconnected; 2) children build knowledge and skills based on prior experiences; 3) each child learns and develops at varying rates; 4) development and learning are shaped by social and physical interactions and experiences; 5) children learn and develop in a variety of ways, using a wide-range of teaching strategies; and 6) children learn in a supportive, relational community that promotes well-being and care (NAEYC, 2009). Designing the curriculum around the use of developmentally appropriate practices provides a dynamic and holistic approach to curriculum and instruction that informs best practices in early childhood settings.

## METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative, multiple case study approach that tends to produce more powerful and robust results than a single case study (YIN, 2003). This approach was designed to focus on the meaning of a particular experience, and allowed the researcher to inquire and frame the perspectives and experiences of its participants (ROSSMAN & RALLIS, 1998). Currently, an understanding of complex phenomena, such as the study of 'human learning' and 'human relations', is prevalent in qualitative descriptive work (JARVIS & PARKER, 2005). Particular to this study was the examination of how systemic constraints influenced the teacher/learner pedagogical relationship in the Kindergarten setting. By experiencing the phenomenon first hand, the researcher was able to understand and interpret the 'world' through the other person's experiences. Therefore, conducting in-depth interviews and field observations were essential to the study, as these approaches allowed the researcher to capture the thoughts, actions, and interactions of human experience (LAWRENCE-LIGHTFOOT & DAVIS, 2002).

As recommended by Merriam (1998), the means of data collection were threefold: interviewing teachers, conducting field observations of randomly selected participants, and examining relevant classroom documents. The first method involved interviewing randomly selected participants using semi-structured, in-depth interviews (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2000; SEIDMAN, 2006;

STAKE, 1995). After each interview, the researcher also gained data relevant to the Kindergarten experience by conducting a series of classroom observations and performing a document review of relevant data sources provided by the teacher.

## THE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL.

An interview protocol was developed by the researcher using Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) framework for designing interview questionnaires. Particular to this study, the interview protocol included three sets of semi-structured questions that attempted to capture the perceptions of Kindergarten teachers regarding the effects of systemic constraints on the teacher/learner pedagogical relationship. The three sets of questions focused on the following areas: (a) The Role of the Teacher, (b) The Learner, and (c) The Kindergarten Curriculum.

## PARTICIPANT SAMPLING.

The participants were selected from a sample of all Kindergarten school teachers working at a public school in Florida, in the United States. Random sampling was used to select the participants. This method ensured no bias, and gave an equal opportunity for all participants to be selected as part of the sample. It also provided an 'independent chance' that the researcher would not select one participant over another (SALKIND, 2006). In terms of sampling size, a maximum of four participants were selected by the researcher to participate in the qualitative interviews and observations of the setting, as recommended by Creswell and Plano (2007).

The sampling criteria were based on Kindergarten teachers with at least seven years of teaching experience, including two years teaching were at Kindergarten level. Focusing the sample group to include teachers with prior teaching experience and advanced educational training was important for this study, to ensure that teachers have had the time to reflect upon policies such as NCLB. These criteria provided the researcher with a good description and in-depth understanding of the perspectives of Kindergarten teachers from different educational settings and/or ethnic backgrounds in terms of how systemic constraints influenced the teacher/learner pedagogical relationship. To maintain confidentiality, the participants were assigned a pseudonym. When

interviews were conducted, the teachers were given the following pseudonyms: Ana, Beth, Coretta, and Diane.

## **DATA GENERATION: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS.**

Each respondent was interviewed once by the researcher at a site chosen by the participant, for approximately one hour, using the interview protocol. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed with the consent of each participant. The researcher conducted a 'validity check' by having participants review each of their interview transcripts. All interviews were conducted by the researcher over a period of one month.

## **DATA GENERATION: FIELD OBSERVATIONS.**

After the interviews were conducted, the second form of data collection generated was the field notes, drawn from the observations of each teacher interacting with her students in the educational setting. The complexities of human experience and behavior are captured in its 'ecological context' (LAWRENCE-LIGHTFOOT & DAVIS, 2002, p. 44). Being immersed in the setting allowed the researcher to experience the participant's reality (MARSHALL & ROSSMAN, 2006). This type of observation is naturalistic, allowing the researcher to observe the participants in their natural environment. The role of the researcher is 'participant-as-observer' where the researcher spends time on the 'inside' and informs the participants that they are being observed (TASHAKKORI & TEDDLIE, 2003).

The observation form, which was developed by the researcher, included four areas: 1) The Physical Ecology of the Setting, 2) The Social Ecology of the Setting, 3) The Formal/Academic Instruction Time of the Setting, and 4) The Enrichment Activities of the Setting. Each teacher was observed twice in the classroom setting, by the researcher, over a period of two weeks. Each week the teacher was observed once for three hours for a total of two observations. These focused observations were conducted after the interviews, to see how the classroom setting influenced behavior and relationships (MARSHALL & ROSSMAN, 2006).

## DATA GENERATION: DOCUMENT COLLECTION.

The third method of data collection was to examine documents relevant to classroom practice. The documents were examined by the researcher after the interviews and observations had been conducted, in order to provide critical insights into how the documents informed the teachers' classroom practice. Document analysis was used, to provide the researcher with a means of describing and interpreting the documents of the setting (Merriam, 1998; Shank, 2006). The documents provided the researcher with a richer understanding of the complexities of the study (MARSHALL & ROSSMAN, 2006). These documents included curricular guidelines, lesson plans, and class schedules which informed the researcher of the various types of materials used during instruction time, and their influence on the teaching practice.

## RESULTS: EMERGENCE OF THEMES

Three (3) distinct Assertions or Themes emerged using Stake's (2006) cross-case analysis. The first theme that emerged was **developmentally appropriate practices in Kindergarten versus high stakes testing**. Developmentally appropriate practices in the Kindergarten setting are compromised in a high stakes testing environment. This theme explained how participants experienced tension between what they perceived to be developmentally appropriate in Kindergarten teaching and learning in a climate that is based on high stakes testing. The researcher found that the developmental nature of Kindergarten education has decreased, as an emphasis on academics has increased. However, even though developmentally appropriate practices are compromised, teachers have been able to adapt a developmentally appropriate curriculum to a high stakes accountability standards-based environment by providing differentiated instructional experiences to their students.

The second theme that emerged was **instructional pacing of the Kindergarten curriculum versus the dynamics of the classroom**. The instructional pacing of the curriculum has changed the dynamics of the Kindergarten classroom. This theme revealed that as a result of an emphasis on academic instruction in the Kindergarten, the fast-paced daily schedule has impacted the dynamics of how teachers teach and how children learn in the classroom. The researcher found that as academic instruction increased in Kindergarten education, less time has been afforded for play, creativity, and spontaneity in

the classroom. Hence, the academic daily schedule dictates the dynamics of teaching and learning in the classroom. Furthermore, it was found that the teacher's "teachable moments," spontaneity and engagement on topics of interest were constrained during instruction as a result of the prescribed, paced curriculum.

The third theme to emerge was the **push-down curriculum in Kindergarten versus the push to achieve learner potential**. As a result of high stakes testing, academic skills were emphasized, resulting in a "push-down" curriculum in Kindergarten settings; however, the teacher, even under the pressure of the "push-down" curriculum, desired the best for her students and *pushed* them to achieve their potential. This theme revealed that mounting pressures were stemming from the expectations on Kindergarten children to be ready for first grade, not only socially, but also academically.

#### Explanation of Themes

### **Theme 1: *Developmentally appropriate practices in Kindergarten vs high stakes testing***

All four (4) teachers agreed that developmentally appropriate practices in the Kindergarten classroom have been compromised as a result of being in a climate of high stakes testing. To the teachers' dismay, the developmental nature of Kindergarten education has decreased as a high stakes environment is emphasized in early childhood settings. Ana elaborated on this point:

I don't see it. Okay I really don't see it to be developmentally appropriate for 5 year olds...if we were in a wonderful...beautiful...environment where I would only receive students from a Pre-K that are ready I would say then, yes...curriculum goes along with the testing and testing goes along with the materials and everything is perfect, but it doesn't happen like that, so...the push for those standardized tests...children who are coming from grandma's just do not have any kind of experience...we have students who have never seen pencils...or scissors...even in this day and age because they are afraid that they are going to cut themselves...or for whatever reason...you start with so many different varieties of learners that...maybe they should use standardized tests a little further down the road.

Coretta echoed the same concern as above:

I don't think that kids are benefiting from it. There are other areas that are being left out...the social...the physical...testing has become the new norm. Some of the standards and pressures placed on teachers are not helpful in giving students the proper head start. It's a lot of stress because I might be teaching them things that I might find inappropriate. It's not the right place to do that because it's a development stage.

Diane expressed the frustration she witnessed as her young students struggled with the pressures of the annual FAIR Test in Florida Kindergartens as a result of high stakes testing and accountability standards. She explained:

I think developmentally, some kids are just not ready for that...there are certain things and I think that's a huge frustration...don't get me on a soap box but I had children this last implementation of FAIR who looked at the reading story that they were expected to read and put their head down and burst into tears...and it is not what you'll see back there for in our reading book... the sentences and the pictures...it was a page of text... and it overwhelmed them and I don't think it does support in any which way...some parts of it does but...what I didn't like about FAIR...don't know if that has anything to do with anything...it would start at a higher level and then if the child couldn't...if they weren't successful then it would go to an easier story and an easier story and I think once a child gets frustrated it's very hard to recoup that enthusiasm when seeing one and more and saying ok read this honey and I'm timing it and tell them that and for me it's not very conducive.

In order to negotiate these challenges, all the teachers concurred that employing differentiated instruction was necessary. These strategies were implemented in the classroom in different modalities, including facilitating small group instruction, providing learning centers for skill practice and remediation, and using the assistance of another teacher and/or paraprofessional. Ana stated:

Well, we do differentiated instruction, that has helped us tremendously...calling up groups, your different groups of everyday helps you to see in which areas what they need to achieve what, so while they are doing whole group activities, you can call them up in order to substantiate these problem areas that they have or in our situation which is very beneficial while he's (the teacher) teaching I can bring up the low ones or the ones that are struggling.

Diane also used small groups to provide differentiated instruction by having students rotate in learning centers. It is important to note that learning centers in today's Kindergarten classroom are much more academic than before *No Child Left Behind*. During the observation period of the data collection, the researcher noted the academic nature of learning centers in the Kindergarten classrooms. Typical play centers as seen in most Kindergarten classrooms before *No Child Left Behind* and *Race for the Top* have been replaced by reading centers, math centers, and science centers, in order to comply with the accountability mandates and the pressures of high stakes testing. Diane described how her Kindergarten students rotate to centers that focus on academic skills:

Yes, they do rotate. One group will be computers, one group will be the library, one group will be the phonics activities and working with words. For example, while at the computer center students might work on Starfall. They have actually all kinds of Starfall things I think...they have a math one as well...I've been focusing on phonics...reading stories...learning games...they cover the gamut...which I like because the children can choose and they always gravitate toward what they're comfortable with in their learning level...we also have Success Maker and Accelerated Reader available...I find children aren't quite ready for that until the end of the year. In the phonics center, the phonics activities that we have with the series are geared toward the benchmarks that we are

doing that week. When they go to the Library Center, it is mainly for them to maybe look at books. They also have reading response sheets that are leveled...differentiated.

## **Theme 2: *Instructional Pacing versus the Dynamics of the Teacher/Learner Pedagogical Relationship***

The instructional pacing of the Kindergarten curriculum has changed the dynamics of the teacher/learner pedagogical relationship. This theme revealed that as a result of an emphasis on academic instruction and academic pressure, the instructional pacing of the daily schedule has impacted the dynamics between the teacher and the learner in the Kindergarten classroom. All four (4) participants agreed strongly that the daily schedule dictated the Kindergarten curriculum. Coretta explained:

We follow the curriculum. As you saw earlier, (lesson plans) we have a lot to cover...Hour by hour...minute by minute. The day is dictated by time. Our daily schedule is much more structured than before. Ten years ago our day was so much more relaxed.

Beth echoed the same concern as she reflected how the pace of the Kindergarten, when she first became a teacher was significantly different than the pace of today's Kindergarten. She recalled:

When I first started, it was an easier pace. We had a schedule that we created ourselves. We made the schedule and it wasn't 'so let's get right to it'. We did little things...we flowed in the day...you know...we knew we had certain things we had to do, but now you have to make sure that certain things are done. We have many, many things to do. The pace...the pace...the pace of the Kindergarten was different than let's say the pace of the Kindergarten now.

The constraints of time during the day were clearly observed by the academic nature of the teachers' schedules, lesson plans, and curriculum guides. For example, Diane's daily schedule captured a portrait of a typical day in a Kindergarten that emphasized academic instruction throughout the day. A daily block schedule of mathematics, reading, language arts, science, and social studies leaves only one day a week for recess. Furthermore, the rituals of naptime, playtime, and snack time are non-existent in the daily schedule. It is evident as the daily schedule is ruled by time constraints.

Moreover, the weekly pacing guide included prescribed lesson plans with minute-by-minute time intervals up to one hundred and twenty minutes. For example, during a reading lesson, the researcher observed how a teacher followed the pacing guide minute by minute. The opening routine took place from 10:35 am to 10:45 am, which included reading around the room: calendar, daily message, and phonemic awareness. The researcher observed that phonemic awareness was practiced by reading "Jack and Jill" and playing a word game. From 10:45 am to 11:00 am the teacher conducted a read aloud by

reading the book "Run Away" followed by work on story structure: beginning, middle, and end. From 11:00 am to 11:10 am the teacher read the story again, emphasizing the action words of the story. After the second reading, the teacher asked Who, What, Where, Why questions. From 11:10 am to 11:30 am the teacher conducted a phonemic awareness lesson on the beginning sound of /Jj/. From 11:30 am to 11:40 am the teacher wrote and illustrated the animals found in the story. Finally, from 11:40 am to 12:30 pm students wrote words independently beginning with the sound of /Jj/ while the teacher met with her guided reading groups. The same exact pacing minute by minute took place every day during the four observations periods. The researcher observed the teacher trying her best to keep not only herself on task, but also her students, in order to achieve the many academic skills required each day.

As evidenced by the teachers' daily schedules, pacing guides, and lesson plans, the instructional pacing allowed for little deviation from the prescribed academic curriculum. As a result of this academic pressure, a new teacher/learner dynamic has emerged in the Kindergarten classroom. Diane explained her perspective:

I think when we had less pressure, we were all more relaxed in terms of how we functioned here in the classroom in terms of just how much time we spent on centers and how much time we had for individual reading groups...I think the dynamics has changed because I think there's more academic pressure.

Diane continued to explain how this new, emerging dynamic in the Kindergarten classroom has impacted the teacher/learner pedagogical relationship which she referred to as her 'teachable moments'. Diane clarified what this meant:

I have a problem with losing my 'teachable moments'...as we used to call them...and going with an idea or an interest and just taking off and doing a thematic unit...and it's more than the freedom; it's engaging the kids in things that you know they're tuned into rather than, 'Oh, I know we have to cover this and I know that we're going to assess this and I know I have to get this done in the pacing guide' in the ...let me get my dander up here...in the first...you know...nine weeks...and it's that kind of thing that I miss.

Diane continued explaining how the interaction with her students has compromised her beliefs about what is essential to the way children learn. She expressed her dilemma with frustration:

I have a problem with it...I have a problem every year...I see this...I'm at the computer all the time...looking at the standards and looking at the newer standards and the Next Generation and I have a ...I have a problem, I feel 'My God, I've got to get all this information into these kids by the end of the year' and I think that really diminishes how you interact with your kids.

Ana also expressed how the spontaneity between the teacher and the learner is compromised:

I'm not able to go off on my tangents...I'm very conscious of that because I know in terms of observations and so forth they do expect us to follow that to a tee...I know my administrators understand that that isn't necessarily always happening or always possible...but I think it really impacts the way I...present things...I can't go off on tangents and so on as much as I would like to, or ...engage the kids...something spontaneous...I miss that part of Kindergarten.

### ***Theme 3: Push in the Kindergarten versus the push to achieve learner potential***

The Theme of "push" in the Kindergarten emerged in two ways. First, the push-down curriculum infiltrated the Kindergarten classroom resulting in teachers focusing on academic skills. The "push-down" curriculum stems from the expectations imposed by preparing Kindergarten children for first grade. Not only are Kindergarten children being prepared for first grade, they are also introduced to the first grade curriculum as early as January. Second, the Theme of "push" also emerged as a prominent feature with all the teachers interviewed, when expressing that the teachers would "push" themselves *and* their students to do whatever it took to achieve their maximum potential.

When sharing her views regarding the expectations of first grade teachers as related to readiness skills in Kindergarten, Ana commented:

They expect them to come there knowing certain things like you...making sure they know how to write their name...they need to know the alphabet and the sounds...they know their numbers up to 20...because it helps them...because...it's like there is a whole other jump from ours and like each grade everybody needs to know what they need to know to get to the next grade and you have to be prepared so that you can do what you need to do to help them and I think it's important and they expect that...they expect them to be ready for their area...you know...cause if they're not then they are going to be behind and they are going to be trying to catch up...what we should have done...or what we could have done...or what the children could have done...so they can do what they need to do...they expect that. And it's important to because they can do what they need to do.

Because of the academic expectations resulting from the push-down curriculum, teachers perceived their role as Kindergarten practitioners to be very different in today's climate. In a moment of authentic realization, Ana vividly portrays her perspective:

I'm not a Kindergarten teacher anymore. I'm a first grade teacher, whereas before I used to be able to play the guitar, and to create centers and do all this...and we don't do that anymore. I get worried because even though we push and even though we build the students to where they're supposed to be, and even this year we took first grade material and brought it into Kindergarten and since January we've been doing first grade curriculum which I'm totally against because of the fact that these are Kindergarten

students...and yes the schools want it, but I feel a lot of compliance. What if one parent one day tells me, 'you know you are a Kindergarten teacher...you should be teaching Kindergarten curriculum not first grade'...what are we going to do? I mean if this is coming from the First grade teachers, and our principal, because they want them so ready for the FCAT that they are willing to run over everything else, so we do it.

Coretta used different terms to describe the changing role of the Kindergarten teacher. She described the new 'mindset' in Kindergarten teaching and learning:

It is a new mindset. We do what we have to do because it is required of us; however, it doesn't make it right. We're teaching them to help them get ahead academically but the other areas are being neglected. So the way we are teaching today is different...the way children are learning is different.

Diane also expressed her view on how the teacher/learner pedagogical relationship has changed as a result of the push down curriculum in the new Kindergarten:

I'm not a mommy figure anymore. To me it seems to be something very basic missing that I try very hard to compensate for in the day to day structure...a far cry from what it used to be...and how that affects the children I don't know. I'm hoping I'm compensating...I think that level of now being as relayed and that flow...I think it takes a toll in other ways.

The Theme of "push" also emerged as teachers pushed themselves and their students to succeed. As earlier noted, the "push-down" curriculum has created tension and pressure to prepare Kindergarten children for first grade. These expectations stemmed from teachers having to cover not only the Kindergarten curriculum, but the first grade curriculum as well. In an environment of high stakes testing and accountability standards, the push-down curriculum is imposed upon the way teachers teach and children learn; however, under the imposed circumstances, the teacher supports the learner and they do what is best for the child. This perspective is apparent in the comments from Coretta:

It seems to me that it is creating pressure...pressure on us...pressure on the kids...preparing them for standardized tests...getting them ready for 1<sup>st</sup> grade...it's changing the ways we used to teach children...it's so much more structured...very little leeway...however, it is mandated...so we do what we have to do to help the child along.

In the midst of institutional systemic constraints that stemmed from the push-down curriculum, all teachers remained resilient and optimistic. This sense of resiliency and optimism is astutely expressed by Beth:

Sometimes I might get rushed, you know, but I'm always doing what I need to do and it's not going to affect them...it's going to help them...I can see the good in it...you know...sometimes I might say 'urgh'... but then I'm like ok we're gonna do this...you know so...I see the good in it...it doesn't hurt...it doesn't hinder me.

Ana also expressed the importance of being optimistic and passionate about her teaching practice in order for students to succeed:

I see it with all the other grade levels as well, and I think it's too much push. You know... it's like your athletes they run the mile in so many minutes...I mean how much more can you push a human being? Whether they're ready or not they're pushing them, you as a teacher have to adapt. And if you are passionate about your students, if you do want your students to succeed you go with that adaptation. You go with that change because if you do not, they're not...they're not going to succeed. And you want to save them from that kind of frustration or whatever they're going to go through in first grade so you push them.

Coretta succinctly expanded on this point:

I think it comes from being dedicated to what you do. In times of change, your dedication to the profession and to your students goes a long way. Some teachers have many years of experience, but are not dedicated to the profession or to their students. These expectations have changed what we used to do, to what we do now. But as a teacher who has seen so many changes over the years, you adapt to those changes...as the system evolves, you evolve as a teacher as well. I think good teachers do that.

Diane provided a positive outlook about today's current climate of teaching and learning and a hopeful message that brings closure to Theme 3. She articulately stated:

I want to say something very positive. I'm amazed at what they can absorb. Despite the fact that I feel...I mean...perhaps it's not as drastic as I'm perceiving but because I have had the time in the classroom where it's changed so dramatically...perhaps these results are wonderful... you can tell me...but I hope they leave everyday enjoying what they do...and I ....I get good feedback...I love school...'we do something different everyday'... and you know that's what we live for as educators.

## DISCUSSION: THE FIRST RESEARCH QUESTION

The first research question of the study asked, "What are Kindergarten teachers' perceptions regarding systemic constraints on the teacher/learner pedagogical relationship in an era of *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top*?" The perceptions of the Kindergarten teachers in this study revealed that the systemic constraints imposed on them as a result of the push-down curriculum has impacted the way teachers teach and the way learners learn.

In the current study, the Kindergarten teachers believed that the *dynamics* of the pedagogical relationship between the teacher and the learner have changed as a result of systemic constraints. Teachers from the study perceived that the push-down curriculum imposed pressure on teachers to cover an academic curriculum throughout most of the day. The teachers believed that

the increased time spent on academic instruction to meet the prescribed curriculum constrained the dynamics of the Kindergarten teachers' 'teachable moments'. One teacher described her 'teachable moments' as "going with an idea or an interest and just taking off with it." Another teacher described it as "not being able to go off on tangents in the way I present things and engage kids." Another, teacher described her 'teachable moments' with frustration when you're working with the kids on something engaging and you have to cut it off and move to the next activity or subject." Instead the 'teachable moments' are brushed aside, as teachers focus on the scripted, pacing guide thinking "we have to cover this" or "I know we're going to assess this."

The teachers' perceptions revealed that the spontaneity or playfulness of the Kindergarten environment has also been compromised. Moments for songs, movement, fun centers, and play-related activities have been eroded from the daily routines of Kindergarten life. One teacher recalled:

I think school should be a more open environment...I think it should be more realistic to what a five year old needs. I remember in the past we used to have a kitchen area, we used to be have this whole beautiful area where they had puppets, storybook characters...I would play the guitar...ask me how many times I can play the guitar now... because of the fact that they need to read, they need to write, do math. I try to bring in creativity...you do as much as you can...but your time is so limited. The prescribed curriculum has become the center of instruction. Our daily, schedule is much more structured. We used to have unlimited time in our centers. We were able to spend quality time on activities and special projects. Now there is a sense of rush...a push to get things done quicker.

## THE SECOND RESEARCH QUESTION

The second research question asked, "How are the roles of the teacher and the learner fostered or compromised in relation to institutional systemic constraints?" First, the perceptions of the teachers revealed that the role of the Kindergarten teacher was not compromised as a result of institutional constraints. The teachers believed that the institutional constraints that they encountered stemmed from the expectations of the "push-down" curriculum, resulting in a daily instructional schedule that was focused on academic subjects such as reading, writing, math, and science. However, the teachers believed that even under the mounting pressures of the push-down curriculum, due to the teaching of mostly academic subjects, the teachers demonstrated a high level of resilience and self-efficacy, having confidence in their ability to help their students succeed.

Secondly, unlike the Kindergarten teachers whose role did not appear to be compromised, the teachers believed that the role of the Kindergarten learner

was compromised as a result of institutional constraints. As Kindergartners experience the increasing academic demands of the push-down curriculum, less time was afforded for play and play-related opportunities during the daily class routine. Thus, the second research question revealed two very important components: 1) the role of the teacher and the teacher's sense of self-efficacy and 2) learner- and child-initiated play in today's Kindergarten. Both of these components are explained below as related to the relevant literature, specifically in support of how a teacher's high sense of efficacy is crucial when dealing with the pressing demands imposed by institutional constraints. Furthermore, the role of the learner will be examined in support of play and play-related activities in Kindergarten, as seen in the current research.

## *SELF-EFFICACY OF TEACHERS*

Participants of the study consistently reported that the push-down curriculum has imposed increasing demands on the teacher to cover more academic subjects, especially in the area of reading. These demands stemmed from Kindergarten teachers preparing students for first grade. Kindergartners are introduced to the first grade curriculum as early as January. As a result, students are expected to know the alphabet, the sounds of the letters, and how to decode words. All participants reported that Kindergarten students must know the initial 100 Fry words, which before *No Child Left Behind*, were usually learned in first grade. However, in the current climate, Kindergarten children are expected to be reading by the time they enter first grade; thus, the 100 Fry words must be mastered.

The teachers participating in this study viewed the obstacles of the push-down curriculum as a positive challenge. Through their dedicated and committed high sense of self-efficacy, they were still able to achieve their goals and the goals of their students. As one teacher commented:

If you are passionate about your students, if you want your students to succeed you go with that adaptation, you go with that adaptation, you go with that change because if you do not, they're not...they're not going to succeed. And you want to save them from that kind of frustration or whatever they're going to go through in first grade, so you push them.

Despite the benefits associated with play as a part of the academic environment, play time has been greatly reduced in Kindergarten classrooms today. As observed by the researcher's current study, children remain in their seats most

of the day in order to cover the academic subjects of reading, math, science and social studies. Hence, learners are spending most of the day in teacher-directed activities. Teachers reported that barriers to play in Kindergarten classrooms today are because the curriculum does not integrate it, and that there is very little time during the day for it. Furthermore, play centers such as the dramatic play center, the kitchen center, the blocks area, and the art center have been replaced by academic centers such as the phonics center, the math center, and the writing center; reducing opportunities for play, free choice, exploration, discovery, and creativity. One study participant believed that:

Play is a dynamic, active, and constructive behavior- is an essential and integral part of all children's healthy growth, development, and learning across all ages, domains, and cultures. Play is a powerful, natural behavior contributing to children's learning and development and that no program of adult instruction can substitute for children's own observations, activities, and direct knowledge.

## THE THIRD RESEARCH QUESTION

The third research question asked, 'How are the Kindergarten curriculum and developmentally appropriate practices responsive to systemic constraints?' The portrait of the new Kindergarten teacher, as indicated by the teachers of the study, revealed that there is a tension between what the teacher perceives to be developmentally appropriate practice and what is expected of them as a result of the push-down curriculum in a high stakes environment. To negotiate these challenges, the teachers participating in this study used differentiated instruction in the classroom in different modalities, such as small group instruction, providing learning centers for remediation, and using another teacher or paraprofessional.

## CONCLUSION

A focus on accountability standards and a push for early academics have led to early childhood teachers struggling to negotiate between systemic constraints imposed by accountability mandates stemming from federal and state policies and personal beliefs as to what is developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood settings. Mandated academic standards have intensified the instructional expectations, especially those of kindergarten teachers. Furthermore, teachers express frustration over having to maintain an acceler-

ated teaching pace which may not be developmentally appropriate, in order to cover all mandated standards and content by the end of the year. However, a significant finding of the current study was how teachers maintained a high level of efficacy to “get the job done” even under the most daunting pressures in classroom today. As such, under mounting pressures of the push-down curriculum to prepare students, all teachers in the current study were able to maintain autonomy and their integrity in teaching by believing in their capabilities to overcome situational constraints in order for their students to succeed and learn.

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