

# Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) Program's Influence on Preschool Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

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**Abstract:** Three veteran preschool teachers told their stories about navigating the implementation of VPK. Even with parents' misconceptions about VPK's goals, teachers were able to meet its standards by continuing to embrace a play-based, hands-on philosophy that also emphasized children's social and emotional needs.

The importance of providing a high quality preschool education is easily agreed upon by policymakers, child advocates, and child development specialists, but defining the characteristics of a high quality program is still debated. According to the National Association of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009), it is the shared responsibility of policy makers, early childhood professionals and other stakeholders to construct a comprehensive curriculum that is developmentally-appropriate, and assessment systems which measure the whole child in real-world settings, rather than measuring a narrow set of skills. Play is the way young children learn. Through play, children learn language, cognitive, creative, problem-solving, social and emotional skills (Hanline, Milton, & Phelps, 2008). Many preschool curricula are more narrowly focused on academic skills as precursors to kindergarten readiness with little evidence of the long-term effects (Fitzpatrick, 2008). This is still occurring in spite of decades of research that demonstrate high-quality preschool programs, grounded in child-initiated, open-ended explorations are linked to increased problem-solving abilities, long-term academic mastery, and greater social and emotional competencies (Ashiabi, 2007; Ramani, 2012; Smilansky, & Shefatya, 1990; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997).

Play allows children to practice making decisions, negotiate with others and to move at their own pace (Ginsberg, 2007). Play promotes the long-term well-being of children by allowing them to develop a love of learning. Teachers who are knowledgeable about child development and pedagogy are vital to children developing a positive attitude towards learning. They form a relationship by which young children are able to learn and internalize success (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). These positive, early learning experiences provide a solid foundation at a time when the brain's architecture is developing and sensitive to new life experiences. According to Duncan, Ludwig and Magnuson (2007), the young child's developing brain is also sensitive to the growth of social and emotional skills such as self-regulation. Early emotional experiences, embedded in the brain's architecture, affect the child's ability to control aggression and the ability to maintain attention, thus affecting their ability to learn in school. These early years, especially the first six or seven years, are critical for developing social and emotional skills. A child who does not learn to relate to other children during this period often has long-term difficulties in social settings, including school settings (Dowling, 2000). Squires and Bricker (2007) reported that the majority of children who had difficulties in preschool classrooms often times have social and emotional problems that can interfere with learning basic skills including reading. Children who struggle with self-control issues in preschool were three times more likely to have social and emotional problems into young adulthood (Moffitt et al., 2011). Early childhood education must include opportunities to nurture the social and emotional development for children to be successful not only in relationships with self and others, but also

for academic success. A high quality, play-based early childhood curriculum provides the platform for children to learn cognitively, socially and emotionally.

One of the latest policies to affect preschool education is the Florida Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) voucher program. With this policy came the enactment of learning standards for four year olds, an assessment tool to measure student learning, and a preschool readiness score calculated to label how proficiently the preschool prepares its students for kindergarten on isolated skills such as letter recognition, phonological awareness and mathematical knowledge. When Florida VPK began, preschools were not guided by standards, curriculum or assessments. However, as policymakers looked to raise student achievement at higher grades, preschool quickly became the new starting point of children's formal education. This resulted in state standards and assessments for prekindergarten children. In 2011, the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) adopted the Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standards for Four-Year-Olds. With the adoption of the state standards, children are required to be assessed within the first 30 days of kindergarten to demonstrate kindergarten readiness and to rate the preschool of origin. In addition, preschools are required to administer the Florida VPK assessment to children three times per school year to demonstrate learning gains (FLDOE, 2011). It has been said, "We measure what we value." If that is true, then cognitive development is the primary domain that is valued within the Florida VPK "curriculum" as evidenced by the Florida VPK assessment, which includes the following categories: print knowledge, phonological awareness, mathematics, and oral language and vocabulary. Florida VPK assessment does not include criteria to assess children's social and emotional skills, even though research demonstrates the importance of developing social and emotional skills of young children.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Child-initiated, play-based curricula are rooted in Piaget's (1952) constructivism theory of learning and Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory. Piaget (1952) posits that children learn best when they are able to investigate, manipulate, and play in order to construct their own knowledge about the world. Through these play-based experiences, children interact and often problem solve together, thus increasing their cognitive as well as their social and emotional skills. An advantage of constructivism is that it reaches students of all backgrounds, because it provides hands-on experiences that allow children to engage and learn in a way that is meaningful to them. Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory puts forward the idea that children need to interact with others in order to internalize new information to increase their knowledge. Teachers facilitate young children's learning by providing learning materials and experiences that help them meet challenging, yet achievable learning goals through a process known as scaffolding. These learning theories provide educators with a framework to promote the education of young children's learning and development.

### **Research Questions**

The implementation of the Florida VPK has provided all four year olds with access to early childhood education. However, the introduction of academic standards to the preschool environment is a new concept to veteran preschool teachers. Currently, there is no literature that describes how this policy affects the veteran preschool teachers who are teaching the children under the Florida VPK policy. The research questions guiding this study are (a) how has the implementation of the Florida VPK policy affected veteran preschool teachers' daily teaching practices, and (b) how do veteran preschool teachers experience the use of standards in prekindergarten? These questions will help guide this study to gain a more in-depth

understanding of the ripple effect created by the VPK policy. Through the narratives of the preschool teachers themselves, the reader will be privy to a view inside the preschool classroom.

### **Method**

A narrative inquiry approach seeks to understand a phenomenon through the story telling of those who have lived the experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). Narrative inquiry is constructivist in nature and a way to account for actions and events that shape everyday life. It enlightens the reader through the narrative to understand the meaning of the lived experience. Through this process, the participants were encouraged to tell their story about how the implementation of the Florida VPK policy has affected their daily teaching practices.

### **Participants**

For the purpose of this study, qualified participants were defined as veteran preschool teachers who taught prekindergarten prior to the implementation of the Florida VPK policy and were currently teaching prekindergarten under the VPK policy. One qualified participant was acquired through a flyer distributed at a director's meeting in Broward County, Florida, with the remaining participants acquired through a snowball technique. Three participants who all worked at the same preschool, Preschool Play Academy (pseudonym) located in Broward County, Florida, were interviewed. The participants were offered the option of choosing their own pseudonym, but declined and allowed the researcher to choose one for them. The first teacher, Kelly had been teaching prekindergarten at this preschool for over 17 years. Leslie had been teaching a total of 12 years with the last nine years at the Preschool Play Academy. Finally, Megan, who had been teaching prekindergarten for 16 years, had aspirations of becoming a preschool director. All of the participants described how they became preschool teachers as a result of volunteering in their own children's preschool classrooms. Snippets of their individual stories will be narrated in the findings.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher first spoke to participants on the phone to determine whether they were viable candidates. Once confirmed, the interviews took place at time and location that was convenient for the participant. Data were collected through individual, face-to-face interviews with each veteran preschool teacher. A general interview protocol guided the interview process, yet allowed the researcher the flexibility to probe and explore particular subject areas in more depth. Prior to beginning the research, each participant was given an informed consent form to sign. The consent form explained the duration of the interview process, and that their participation was voluntary and confidential. Once the informed consent form was signed, the personal interview began and was digitally audio recorded.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher transcribed the audio-recordings. The data analysis followed a constant-comparison method (Glaser & Straus, 1967) where each transcript was read in its entirety for overall meaning. Upon second reading, significant statements were highlighted and coded into a category defined by the researcher. The researcher copied the highlighted statements into an Excel spreadsheet with the assigned category code in an adjacent column. This allowed statements to be copied more than once if the researcher decided that the statements were to be included in multiple categories. The use of the Excel spreadsheet also allowed for the statements to be sorted by their categorical codes for further analysis. Through an inductive process of data examination, the researcher discovered emerging themes that illuminated what these veteran preschool teachers were experiencing in their daily teaching practices because of the Florida VPK policy implementation.

**Process to ensure credibility.** The researcher took care to transcribe the data carefully and accurately. Once the transcripts were complete, through a process known as member-checking (Patton, 2002), participants were given the opportunity to ensure the viability of their own words and thoughts. At this point, they were able to add additional information or delete information that they reconsidered. None of the participants added or deleted any information.

**Process to ensure an ethical and reflexive study.** Prior to beginning this study, the researcher attained approval through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Barry University. Interviews began shortly after IRB approval. Because a narrative inquiry involves a synergy between the researcher and the participants, it is important to disclose researcher's views, presuppositions, and biases (Kramp, 2003). This helps to promote the transparency of research. The researcher, an early childhood education professional with 14 years' experience, believes that preschool children need to be able to play, investigate and explore to learn and develop their knowledge of the world. This open-ended investigation allows them to develop their creativity and critical thinking skills, as well as, the opportunity to learn to play, share and cooperate with other children. With the teacher to guide and scaffold, there is a natural unfolding of literacy and numeracy exploration within the context of these engaging activities. The changing education system that now sets standards for preschool children to master basic skills prior to kindergarten, ignores the fact that young children grow and develop at varying rates and those children need well-developed social and emotional skills. Journaling was implemented as a technique to keep an awareness of thoughts and analyze reactions to the stories told by the participants. This reflexive journal enabled the researcher to analyze participants' words more objectively, so that the re-story of their narratives would accurately reflect how their teaching experiences have been affected by the Florida VPK policy.

### **Findings**

Through analyzing the transcripts of the three participants, three themes emerged "It's still okay to play: Doing what we have always done"; "Building children's social and emotional skills first"; and "Parents need to know what VPK can and cannot do." Each theme is defined with quotes from the veteran preschool teachers' stories to elucidate the theme's meaning.

#### **It's Still Okay to Play: Doing What We Have Always Done**

The three veteran preschool teachers believed that implementing fun, open-ended investigations was still the best way for children to learn. They felt that knowing the children personally and keeping them involved and engaged was the formula for successful learning. Kelly explained how important hands-on play was to her teaching philosophy:

My biggest expectation for them is to have fun in school. I love watching them learn, watching them discover things. Just being an outlet for them to explore different things. I do a lot of hands-on (activities) so they can see it, experience it, feel it, touch it, do all those things.

While Leslie felt the added pressure of the VPK standards and testing, she felt that she had to work harder to make sure that her students still played and had fun. She explained:

My philosophy hasn't changed. I think it is important to get their personalities from the moment they step in the door that's what helps make it work so that you can reach each one. The biggest change is you want to make all the learning fun even when you incorporate the letters and numbers.

Megan stressed that there was no need to change her play-based, teaching philosophy to meet the expectations of VPK. Through analyzing her lesson plans, she knew she was able to continue teaching the way she had always done:

If you are using what you always did, every standard is hit. When we do a lesson plan, we color code it so you can see what standard we hit. We hit every standard with every single thing we do because we do communication and math sitting in circle, or sitting at a math table. You can turn it into every standard that VPK requires.

### **Building Children's Social and Emotional Skills First**

The three veteran preschool teachers believed that the most important thing was for the children to feel good about themselves. They wanted the children to be confident and sure of themselves. They also wanted them to be comfortable in the classroom so that they were not afraid to take risks to advance their learning. It was also important for them to be able to get along with their peers and teachers. They felt that these social and emotional skills needed to be in place before the children were able to attend to the task of learning academic skills. Leslie explained that she wanted the children "to feel good about themselves and confident because those are the building steps of learning. It's important that they feel safe and happy and if they can get more out of the school, that's even better." Megan saw the importance of academics but felt that its place was after working on the child's self-esteem, "I feel the academics at this age...the foundation needs to be there, but I feel the other stuff needs to take precedence and then the academics will fall into play when the child has self-esteem." Kelly's view was more pragmatic and stressed the importance of children's self-help and social skills:

I think the most important skills they need are the socializing and self-help skills. They need to be confident going into school; comfortable that they were going to be able to function in that environment; and that they can do self-help things like open their backpacks.

### **Parents Need to Know What VPK Can and Cannot Do**

The three veteran preschool teachers felt that parents thought VPK was about teaching their child to read. They also stated that they felt parents thought VPK was like elementary school, and it was the teacher's responsibility to teach the children. Prior to VPK, this particular preschool had many parents who volunteered to help in their children's classes, but since VPK began, parents volunteered with much less frequency. Because of parents' misconceptions, they felt that parents needed to be educated about realistic expectations of what the goals of the VPK program are. Kelly illustrated parents' misconceptions by talking about a typical conversation from the beginning-of-the-year parent meeting. "Parents ask (me) when are you going to teach them to read? I'm not, because that's not what we are here for. We are here to set the foundation so that your child will be ready to learn in kindergarten." Leslie shared that parents were not even aware of the expectations of VPK. She explained, "They are surprised by things that their four year old is expected to know that they don't even know: like identifying a pentagon and hexagon." Megan felt that although parents were well intentioned, they were often misinformed:

There is too much out there in the media; they're not getting the right information. There is too much stress on the parents. They think their child needs to be the best and they want them reading and writing, etc. I do think our parents need to be more educated.

These three interviews revealed that these teachers had similar views of how VPK affected their daily teaching practices. With many years in the field of early childhood education, they felt secure in their knowledge of child development and their decision to select teaching practices that met the needs of their students. Through developmentally appropriate teaching practices, they described how their students learned and thrived.

### **Discussion**

The stories told by these three veteran preschool teachers helped to understand not just the numerical impact of the Florida VPK policy, but revealed how its implementation affected three veteran preschool teachers at Preschool Play Academy. Regarding the first research question about how the implementation of the Florida VPK policy affected veteran preschool teachers' daily teaching practices, at this preschool, the VPK policy seemed to reaffirm their beliefs in how to best approach teaching young children. The VPK policy had very little impact on these teachers' daily teaching practices. They continued to implement developmentally-appropriate teaching strategies with play-based, open-ended investigations while the teachers guided and scaffolded the students' learning. As a result, the children had fun and learned without even knowing they were learning. Interestingly, the numeric readiness score calculated for Preschool Play Academy is among the highest in the county, which further cemented the teachers' beliefs that they know how to teach young children. The second question, concerning how veteran preschool teachers experience using standards in prekindergarten, these veteran preschool teachers revealed that they accepted the standards and requirements of this policy. Through their interviews they shared how by doing what they had always done, the standards that accompanied the VPK policy could be met without resorting to direct instruction.

### **Limitations**

Time was the limiting constraint of this study. First, because of shortened recruitment time, three participants were recruited from the same preschool. Telling their stories individually and collectively illuminated a holistic view of how one preschool chose to handle the standards and assessments of VPK. If there had been more time to conduct the research, additional participants from a variety of preschools would have been interviewed and the findings may have resulted in very different stories. Second, because of limited time, the data analysis phase only scratched the surface of possible themes. More reflection time would have elucidated additional themes.

### **Implications and Concluding Thoughts**

These preschool teachers demonstrated that teachers do not need to teach to the VPK assessment in order for children to learn. The children at this preschool learned and scored well on the VPK assessment without the teachers altering their basic teaching philosophy that young children learn best when engaged in play-based, hands-on explorations. In keeping with the philosophy of delivering high quality early childhood education, they continued to consider the social and emotional needs and development of their students first. This study suggests that high quality, play-based curriculum provides young children with the academic skills necessary to be prepared for kindergarten without ignoring the social and emotional skills that research has shown to be vital to overall student success. The implication early childhood professionals should glean from this study is that young children can learn without having to resort to teacher-directed lessons or teaching to a test. Future research that examines early childhood teacher beliefs about how young children learn would be beneficial to understand how to design professional development to address the gap among research, beliefs and practices.

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