

**Exploring Preschool Teacher Identity Through Student Interactions in Multi-age and
Single-age classrooms: A Qualitative Study**

A THESIS

Presented to

The Faculty of the Education Department

Colorado College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree

Bachelor of Arts in Education

By

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May 2024

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Abstract

Early childhood educators and their experiences are often unheard and undervalued. To help provide this voice, this study utilizes a non-experimental qualitative case study design that highlights and deepens the context of teachers' perspectives on support of social-emotional learning and classroom dynamics and the impacts of student behavior on teacher identity development in multi-age and single-age classrooms. Eight teachers from four private preschools were interviewed either in person or virtually and were asked 12 questions on topics related to classroom dynamics, support for social-emotional learning, classroom routine, and teacher reward and dissatisfaction. Teacher responses were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed through three coding cycles. Two major hypotheses were formed from the codes: teacher identity development is positively reinforced when students exhibit self-regulatory social-emotional classroom behaviors that can be positively and negatively impacted by age grouping, and teacher identity development is negatively reinforced when students demonstrate a lack of self-regulatory social-emotional classroom behaviors that can be negatively impacted by age grouping. The findings discussed within this study highlight the impact that student behavior has on teacher identity development and the complexity that is added from differing age groups.

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Exploring Preschool Teacher Identity Through Student Interactions in Multi-age and Single-age classrooms: A Qualitative Study

The importance of preschool has been researched and understood by many (e.g., Barnett, 2008 & Yoshikawa et al., 2013), yet in the U.S. we do not have nearly enough public and accessible early childhood education. Historically, early childhood education has been largely overlooked by the public and educators within the field have often been undervalued and underpaid. Yet, early childhood educators are some of the most important people in a child's schooling. Preschool has lasting effects on academic preparation, development of social-emotional skills, and economic and societal impacts. By understanding the importance of preschool, we can better understand the importance of early child educators.

High quality preschool programming helps to prepare students from all socio-economic backgrounds, but most importantly students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds (Barnett, 2008) because... High quality preschool programming not only aids in preparing students for academic settings and knowledge, but has been proven to support the social, emotional, moral, and physical development of children (Barnett & Frede, 2010). More importantly, the positive and stable interactions within the classroom can provide the necessary environment for developing young minds. Children can gain knowledge in areas such as literacy and math, alongside social-emotional development when they receive stable, accessible, and positive relationships with educators (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Preschool provides the foundational skills to not only become successful in an academic setting, but within the world. Many of the skills learned, whether they be practical, cognitive, or social-emotional are applicable to facilitating the development of well-adjusted and stable students who will grow up to be stable and well-adjusted adults. Longitudinal studies indicate that there are social and

economic benefits of preschool programming such as reduced crime and higher likelihood of employment into adulthood (Sammons et al., 2004). Although there are many public programs such as Head Start, most children living in poverty do not attend preschool by age four, and around a third of all children do not attend preschool before entering public kindergarten (Barnet, 2010).

The structure of preschool and the emphasis on social-emotional learning along with academics fostered this research. Since early childhood educators are often overlooked, I wanted to hear about their experiences and opinions on how age grouping affects social-emotional development in their classrooms. Thus, the focus of this research is teacher perspectives of social-emotional development and classroom dynamics in multi-aged and single age classrooms. The research led me down a path of deeper understanding of student-teacher interactions and their impacts on teacher identity development. Furthermore, this research continually demonstrates that teaching is a “heart-consuming” and deeply intellectual career, especially for those who teach early childhood education. To provide context for this research I begin with a review of literature on the history of preschool, single-age and multi-age classroom pedagogy, social-emotional learning, and teacher identity development.

Literature Review

History of Preschools in the U.S.

Understanding the history of preschool in the U.S. and the current approach to policy provides critical context for the experiences shared by the interviewed teachers. Early childhood education and what is known as “preschool” today has a long history with its origins in the 17th and 18th centuries with a focus on community members who could teach children to read the

bible; often the parents of these children were illiterate, and they relied on community members who could read to teach their children (Bloch et al., 1989). Moving into the 19th century, most infancy schools, kindergartens, and nursery schools were reserved for those who could afford them, although many philanthropic organizations funded public programs for students who did not have access (Bloch et al. 1989). During the mid-19th century, many states with major urban city centers, such as Boston, instituted a “Lancasterian” model of early childhood education for low-income students to learn “rudimentary reading, moral character, values, and proper behavior” (Bloch et al., 1989, p. 11-12). Entering the 20th century, public support for nursery schools and kindergartens led to a large growth of public kindergarten programs (Bloch et. al, 1989). During the Great Depression and into World War II, public kindergartens and nursery school funding was cut, and there was a decline in enrollment; however, Roosevelt’s New Deal and the WPA (Works Progress Administration) helped to fund nursery schools that low-income children could access outside of the public schooling system (Bloch et al., 1989). However, access to publicly funded preschool and early childhood education was still difficult to find for low-income families. Barnett (2010) reports that in the early to mid-1960s, only 10% of 3–4-year-olds were enrolled in preschool; however, with the implementation of Head Start in 1965 and greater access to private programs that were locally or state funded in the 1970s, there was a large growth of 3–4-year old’s enrolled in preschool. This growth continued into the 1990s and 2000s with Head Start, the largest publicly funded preschool programming, providing low-income families at or below 100% of the poverty line access to early childhood education (Cohen-Vogel et al., 2022). However, around one third of low-income four-year-olds still do not receive effective or quality preschool before they enter public education (Barnett, 2010). Thus, there is a current push for universal Pre-K or preschool in the U.S. While many states have

funded universal preschool programs, some states still withhold equitable access to preschool, which has shown to have major short-term and long-term impacts, not only on children, but how policymakers view public education (Cohen-Vogel et al., 2022). Elizabeth Rose (2010) writes that children's preschool programs are torn between education, which is seen as a right and a "public responsibility," and care, which in the United States is a "private responsibility" (p. 7). The current policy that is enacted and created for preschool programming is most often approached with the thought that childcare is a private matter and there is a heavy reliance on "market-based solutions" rather than relying on the government (Rose, 2010, p. 6).

Multi-Age Classrooms

Numerous pedagogical approaches to preschool and early childhood education pertain to classroom age composition. Preschools and early childhood programming group children in single-age and multi-age classrooms. This section defines the pedagogy around multi-age classrooms and covers the main arguments for and against grouping students in multi-age preschool classrooms.

A multi-age classroom is a wide age range of students are placed in the same classroom with the same teacher for several years (Stone, 2022). Most often, groupings have either a two-year age gap (i.e., two-year and three-year-olds) or a three-year age gap (i.e., three-year, four-year and five-year-olds). However, the greatest benefits are often seen with a three-year age gap (Stone, 2022). The multi-age model is one of the most popular preschool models, with roughly 75% of all Head Start programming being multi-age classrooms (Purtell et al., 2018). The choice to either group children in single-age classrooms or multi-age classrooms is often made at the micro-level with most public and private schools having the option to choose either. Sometimes, this choice is due to class sizes and teacher-to-student ratio; however, the decision is also often

due to the belief that one approach is optimal for children's social and academic development (Justice et al., 2019).

Multi-age classroom pedagogy has a "child-centered" approach, whereas instruction is based on the understanding that the child is centered in the learning process and learning is in harmony with the "typical" developmental stage for the child, with the focus not being on a pedagogy of learning rather than a pedagogy of teaching (Stone, 2022). Due to the emphasis on interactions and play, placing children in a multi-age setting is rooted in Vygotsky's social learning and cognitive theory of child development (Winsler et al., 2002). Multi-age classrooms are optimal environments for social and cognitive development because students learn from direct teacher instruction and each other through developmentally appropriate whole-group and small-group activities (Ansari et al., 2016).

Vygotsky viewed multi-age groups or cross-age interactions with children as optimal for preschool children's social and cognitive development. The main benefits represented in the literature about children in multi-age preschool classrooms are continuity of care, promotion of social and emotional skills, and preparation for life and further schooling. Consistent relationships are broadly understood to be critical to children's development; this is the foundation for the continuity of care promoted by multi-age classrooms. Continuity of care is defined through the emphasis on stable and deepened relationships with students' peers, caregivers, and teachers (Gavagan, 2022). Placing students with the same peers and caregivers for extended periods allows for stronger and more stable relationships, leading to more positive classroom experiences. This creates a safe environment for students to learn due to secure attachment to caregivers/teachers, teachers having ample time to learn about and provide for the individual needs of their students, reducing the number of transitions, and learning in a familiar

setting (Currid et al., 2022). Multi-age groupings foster this continuity of care through the feel of a “family climate” in the classroom, which is important at any point in a child’s life, but critical for all preschool aged children (Moller et al., 2008, p. 742). In addition to continuity of care, MA groupings promote social and emotional skills vital to children’s development in and out of the classroom. When younger students are placed in the same environment as older students, there is a wider range of interactions provided which can influence social skills (Purtell et al., 2018). The wide range of interactions provides an opportunity for the flourishing of what is referred to as pro-social skills for both younger and older children. Currid et al. (2022) have shown that younger students develop skills of empathy, collaboration, self-regulation, and self-confidence, while older students continue to develop these skills along with leadership and responsibility through modeling behavior for the younger students. By promoting these pro-social skills and the continuity of care in MA classrooms, Winsler et al. (2002) found that normative pressures and competition decrease, and self-regulation and social responsibility increase, leading to greater tolerance of a diverse classroom from students. The culmination of continuity of care and the development of pro-social skills prepares students for life both inside and outside of the classroom. Winsler et al. (2002) found that students play in more complex and mature ways and rely less on teachers and more on peers.

This combination of evidence indicates that multi-age classrooms may better allow for students to grow into independent and confident individuals who will be prepared for their transition into not only school but life. However, a few disadvantages of multi-age classrooms are worth noting.

Many arguments against multi-age classrooms point to greater benefits for younger students than older students and that teachers may have difficulty accommodating a wider range

of ages. For example, Ansari et al. (2016) found that older students who are placed in a classroom with a “moderate” number of younger students reach less optimal academic achievement than when in a single-aged classroom. Several studies attribute this difference to one of two possible reasons: either the direct peer effects witnessed in multi-age classrooms only benefit younger students or the modification of classroom practices accommodate a wider range of skill levels leading to older students’ disengagement (Ansari et al., 2016). It has been suggested (by whom-cite) that the ineffectiveness of multi-age classrooms may be due to teacher classroom management or mismanagement; teachers of multi-age classrooms are often too focused on classroom management when managing varying levels of behavior than facilitating children’s learning. It is important to note that the disadvantages of multi-age classrooms focus on students' academic learning and teachers' effectiveness.

Single-Age Classrooms

Single-age or restricted-age classrooms are the most common type of classroom age composition for K-12 schooling. As discussed above, most preschool classrooms are multi-age in some capacity, with Head Start having 75% of programming be multi-age (Yang et al., 2022,). This section defines single-age classroom compositions and examines some arguments that favor single-age preschool programming over multi-age preschool programming.

Broadly, same-age classrooms are defined by the enrollment of a single age group in a classroom. For example, a three-year-old would be enrolled in the three-year-old classroom and once they turn four years old, move into a different classroom of only four-year-old children who are usually instructed by a different teacher (Guo et al., 2014). This age grouping is typically seen in K-12 schooling, although same-age preschools exist. Same-age preschool programming came out of the “death of the one-room school” in the U.S. By the 1950s, legislation on the

standardization of age of entry and curriculum had occurred for all schooling. Although there were attempts by some rural schools and those against “age segregation” for pedagogical reasons, the organizational structures of same-age schooling were deemed politically safe and “admiratively convenient” (Pratt, 1986, p.112). Unlike multi-age groupings, same-age groupings favor a pedagogy of teaching rather than a pedagogy of learning approach (Yang et al., 2022).

Much support for same-age classrooms is based on the perceived disadvantages of multi-age classrooms. The support for same-age preschool programming focuses on overall student engagement, the ease for teachers to meet their students’ needs, and better preparing children for the type of transition they will experience for most of their elementary and secondary schooling. Evidence suggests that children in same-age classrooms are just as likely to engage in play, more specifically, dramatic play, as those in multi-age classrooms (Blasco et al., 1993). In a study of multi-age classrooms, Yang et al. (2022) found that a higher percentage of older students in the classroom led to more overall engagement and higher-level language skills. This suggests that more age-related homogeneity in the classroom increased students’ engagement. Furthermore, while multi-age classrooms may be beneficial for engaging and developing younger students, Blasco et al. (1993) suggest and support that after three years old the benefits decrease and lead to disengagement from older students. The most significant reason for placing children in same-age preschools is for teachers to meet students’ individual needs more easily. The argument asserts that same-age classrooms allow teachers to focus on a specific age group and what is deemed developmentally appropriate for that age group, which leads them to teach the curriculum more effectively, and leads to more overall student engagement (Guo et al., 2014). Additionally, Yang et al. (2022) provide evidence supporting that the wide range of student abilities and needs in a multi-age classroom may impact the quality of instruction and teacher-

child interactions. Since most student engagement stems from positive interactions with their teacher, there is support for the argument that a same-age classroom may be better overall for children to receive more focused interactions with their teachers (Yang et al., 2022). In summary, the main arguments for same-age classrooms seem to point to the academic preparation and instruction of children (Bailey Jr. et al., 1993).

What is Social-Emotional Learning?

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is rooted in progressive education trends that stress the importance of student character development as equal to academic achievement (Coomer & Skelton, 2019). The original purpose of SEL was to promote and encourage the development of moral and “just democratic citizenry;” however, there has been a shift in focus to the “internalized worlds of students” and the students’ classroom behaviors (Coomer & Skelton, 2019, p.1). This newer trend of SEL and its instruction and support is emphasized in many preschools globally, including the U.S. The importance of SEL has been found in students’ readiness and positive behavioral transitions into kindergarten; preschools that emphasize SEL promote social skills such as emotional understanding, competent problem-solving, and positive social behavior (Nix et al., 2013). SEL essentially allows for deeper development of social and emotional skills to help children self-regulate, facilitating learning. More specifically, students who received quality SEL in preschool exhibited skills such as listening, following multiple-step instructions, and challenging cognitive tasks in kindergarten (Nix et al., 2013,). At preschool age, according to Erickson’s eight stages of psychosocial development, children begin to understand the presence and essence of emotion as they enter the “initiative v. guilt” stage (Alwaely et al., 2021, p. 2484-2485). Considering pre-school-age children are entering the phase where they make relationships and decisions outside of their families, it is understandable why there has

been an emphasis on supporting their development in navigating those emotions and relationships, as well as emotional regulation; they then, in turn, have more positive interactions and conflict resolution skills (Alwaely et al. 2021). Furthermore, there is evidence that children's emotional knowledge positively affects their ability to adapt and transition in schooling socially (Alwaely et al., 2021). Overall, SEL has been emphasized in most preschools because of the positive effects it has on facilitating learning and promoting positive social behavior within the classroom.

What is Teacher Identity and Why Does It Matter?

Teacher Identity Through the Lens of Social-Emotional Regulation and Modeling in the Classroom

Teachers are constantly modeling for their students and embodying their personal and professional identities inside and outside of the classroom. This is as true for early childhood and preschool educators as for elementary and secondary teachers. Moreover, preschool teachers who model SEL for students depend on their social-emotional competency and ability to embody their identities in the classroom. Often, teacher social-emotional competency is viewed to protect oneself from the stressful situations that occur in the classroom, but also for the well-being and feelings of teachers' self-efficacy in the classroom (Lozano et al., 2021). The climate and quality of the classroom depend on the teacher's ability to emotionally regulate and have a level of social-emotional competency that allows students to have positive teacher-student and peer relationships (Lozano et al., 2021). This is a heavy burden to bear, and often teachers' identities are constructed through regulating their emotions and how successfully they do so for their students; teaching is often considered a "heart-consuming profession" (Zhang & Jiang, 2023, p.2). More deeply, the emotional labor that teachers experience often reflects how they view

their classroom performance. Additionally, while emotion is part of classroom identity construction, it is also a product embodying identity in the classroom (Zhang & Jiang, 2023).

Student Behavior Reflects Teacher Competency

Teacher identity development is rooted in their understanding of their ability to fulfill the role of teacher and their competency in the classroom. Teacher identity is constructed and reconstructed through how well they view their teaching, which is reflected in student behavior. Further, teacher identities matter because their lived experiences are embodied in the classroom; how teachers view themselves as educators impacts how they provide for their students and what they should provide for them. This is best summarized through “the symbolic interactionist theory of identity,” which simply defined, is identity constructed through “self-meanings” or the “social actors” that define the self into a structure of identities (Tsang & Jiang, 2018, p. 230). This means that individuals can make their professional identity as a teacher their “salient identity” to which they are committed to reflecting positively through their behaviors (Tsang & Jiang, 2018, p.230). Furthermore, teachers are confirmed to be fulfilling their teacher identity when their students exhibit positive behaviors leading to more positive emotional experiences for teachers; this confirms they have provided for their students meaningfully (Tsang & Jiang, 2018). There is also an added layer of complexity when understanding the teacher identity development of early childhood and preschool teachers. Often the role of preschool teacher is deintellectualized and reduced to solely watching over children (Scherr & Johnson, 2019); this adds to the need to commit to the teacher identity to prove that the work that is being done is too intellectual, which is verified to others through the students' behaviors. Self-image plays a large role in constructing teacher identity and its development in the classroom. Teachers who can understand their identities inside and outside of the classroom and separate their personal and

professional identities are able to maintain better self-image and “self-efficacy” which further adds to their commitment to teaching and how they show up in the classroom (Day et al., 2006).

Research Concern

What are preschool teacher perspectives on social emotional development and classroom dynamics in multi-age and single-age preschool classrooms?

Methods

I conducted this non-experimental qualitative case study employing in-person and virtual interviews. This study is non-experimental because I did not conduct any type of experiment or use any variables with the participants. Further, the focus of this research was to understand one case or “theory” and I did so by using qualitative methods only.

Participants

Eight early childhood and preschool teachers were interviewed, four from multi-age and four from single-age classrooms. The teachers were chosen through reaching out to various early childhood education centers to see if any teachers would be willing to participate in an interview and those who volunteered were then chosen. All teachers were female-identifying and had been teaching early education or preschool for at least a year. I located the participants through reaching out to local preschools and chose who to interview based on availability.

Study Sites

The four schools represented in this study are all private preschools and early childhood education centers. Schools A and C utilized mixed-age preschool classrooms, while schools B and D utilized single-age or restricted- age classrooms. School A placed students in preschool once they turned three, making the age range in the classroom 3-5 years. School B placed students in preschool once they turned two and a half or 30 months, making the age range in the

classroom 2.5-5 years. School C placed students in “younger preschool” once they turned three and “older preschool” once they turned four. School D placed students in preschool at three years and pre-kindergarten once students turned four. Teacher and school demographics are compiled below (Table 1).

Instrumentation

The study utilized both in-person and virtual interviews that ranged from 25-45 minutes. An audio recording was used with each participant’s prior consent (Appendix A). The interviews were guided using 12 questions (Appendix B) that covered topics ranging from classroom routine, classroom dynamics, support of social-emotional development, teacher reward, and teacher dissatisfaction. Questions were formulated to incite thoughtful and personable responses while I, as the interviewer, remained neutral. Throughout the interview, I employed contextualizing and clarifying questions when appropriate, to elicit more personal or thoughtful responses from participants.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai and later uploaded for coding using NVivo software. Pre-coding was conducted to highlight memorable or “codable moments” (Saldana, 2016, p. 20) and then later coded using NVivo 12 through first-cycle and second-cycle coding. After first cycle coding there were multiple individual codes. First-cycle codes were then further coded based on common themes which were then categorized into sub-thematic codes. Those sub-thematic codes were then coded into three main themes.

Positionality

Though I performed this study with the intent to minimize my bias, one’s positionality is always a factor when analyzing data. Although I am not an early childhood or preschool teacher,

I have significant experience as a Student Aid in a mixed-age environment. This study originated from my curiosity about the differing perspectives of teachers who teach in mixed-age versus single-age classrooms. Considering that I have more experience in mixed-age environments, I likely have some implicit bias due to my greater knowledge about and experience with mixed-age preschool education. I am also female-identifying and interviewed all female-identifying teachers.

Table 1*Teacher and School Demographics*

Teacher Name	Gender	School Name and Type	Age Group
Teacher 1	Female	School A, Private	Multi-Age
Teacher 2	Female	School A, Private	Multi-Age
Teacher 3	Female	School B, Private	Single-Age
Teacher 4	Female	School B, Private	Single-Age
Teacher 5	Female	School C, Private	Multi-Age
Teacher 6	Female	School C, Private	Multi-Age
Teacher 7	Female	School D, Private	Single-Age
Teacher 8	Female	School D, Private	Single-Age

Results

Qualitative Data

Interviews were coded using pre-coding, first-cycle, and second-cycle coding. After the first cycle, 186 individual codes (Appendix C) were coded into 20 sub-thematic codes. Three main themes emerged from the 20 sub-thematic codes, which were used to develop two hypotheses. The three main themes were “What Students Do” (Table 2), “What Teachers Do” (Table 3), and “What Happens to Teachers” (Table 4).

Findings

The tables below represent the frequency of codes in each sub-theme. The sub-themes were formed by the similarities or significance of each individual code; the frequency of individual codes under each subtheme was considered when forming the three main themes and the hypotheses. For example, “Teacher Reward” had a frequency of 69 codes from the first coding cycle. Given this high frequency, I recognized that the subtheme “Teacher Reward” was an important aspect of the interviews, which led to the following hypotheses.

Hypotheses

After compiling and refining the three themes from the interviews, I formed two hypotheses. First, teacher identity development is positively reinforced when students’ exhibit self-regulatory social-emotional classroom behaviors that can be positively and negatively impacted by age grouping. Second, teacher identity development is negatively reinforced when students demonstrate a lack of self-regulatory social-emotional classroom behaviors that can be negatively impacted by age grouping. I made the decision to have two hypotheses because my findings for all three themes that were formed were best described in two contrasting hypotheses

rather than each theme being attached to its own hypothesis. All three themes significantly influenced my development of the two hypotheses.

Table 2*What Students Do*

Subtheme	Frequency
Circle Time	20
Daily Activities	40
Development	56
Language	31
Student Emotional Regulation	39
Student Interaction	40
Types of Play	42

Table 3*What Teachers Do*

Subtheme	Frequency
Classroom Dynamics	21
Conflict Resolution	57
Goals for Lesson Planning	27
Grouping Students	37
Lesson Planning	29
Teacher Approach for SEL	51
Teacher Emotional Regulation	32
Teacher Preparation	33

Table 4*What Happens to Teachers*

Subtheme	Frequency
Environment	30
Student-Teacher Interaction	20
Teacher Experience	24
Teacher Reward	69

Discussion

***Hypothesis 1:** Teacher identity development is positively reinforced when students exhibit self-regulatory social-emotional classroom behaviors that can be positively and negatively impacted by age grouping.*

Within the literature review, much was discussed about student behaviors in different age groups. Student behavior can be impacted based on age grouping both positively and negatively (Currid et al., 2022; Ansari et al., 2016). A large part of teacher identity development is internalized by perceived competency. Student behavior is often conflated with how successful or unsuccessful a teacher fulfills their identity as a teacher, which often leads to possible changes in teaching style or strategy. Clearly, emotions and the embodiment of teacher identity can form from how their students behave (Zhang & Jiang, 2023). When teachers change their strategy or teaching style it can affect their students' behavior, which then reinforces teacher identity. This positive feedback cycle is representative of what I witnessed when interviewing several early childhood teachers and what I further discuss in this section.

When interviewing both single-age and multi-age early childhood educators, there was an obvious pattern of positive reinforcement and impact on their identities as teachers through their students' behaviors. As discussed in the literature review, often with education, especially early childhood education, student behavior reflects teacher competency and how well teachers fill their identity and roles as a teacher. Although single-age and multi-age teachers are both affected by this concept in their identity development as teachers, my findings demonstrate that there is an added level of complexity for multi-age teachers. For example, when asked "what is most rewarding about supporting social-emotional development in students," Teacher 1 said:

For me, it's the individual child. For me. It's that friend who has not used their words, and finally uses their words and you're like yes, victory! It's a friend who was potty training and finally went

potty, you know. So, I mean, it's exciting to have older friends in there because it helps the friends who are potty training able to see, you know, other friends potty training.

When the student used their words instead of a physical or non-verbal behavior, which would be deemed as unsatisfactory, Teacher 1's identity was positively reinforced and the students' behavior further confirmed that she was fulfilling the role of teacher "correctly" and with competency. Furthermore, since Teacher 1 was a multi-age teacher, the fact that students were learning from other students when potty training adds a level of complexity, considering Teacher 1 must keep in mind the developmentally appropriate behaviors of varying age groups. However, we can see this same feeling of reward and identity validation in single-age teachers as well; Teacher 7 responded to the same question when she stated, "When I can see a kiddo walk away, and be able to recognize their feelings, understand why they're feeling that way, and solve it with no help." The sense of reward Teacher 7 experiences when her students display the behaviors she models in the classroom every day is a validation of her identity as a teacher in her classroom. When students behave in ways that are deemed as satisfactory or what is expected of them, this reinforces the teacher's behavior and signals that they have fulfilled the role of teacher and should continue modeling what they have been modeling. Furthermore, this demonstrates their competency and knowledge within their role, which positively reflects upon their professional identity (Tsang & Jiang, 2018).

The classroom decisions teachers make are often based on what helps to maintain or support a level of satisfactory or developmentally appropriate behavior. For both mixed-age and single-age classrooms, supporting self-regulatory behavior often comes in the form of routine and explicitly stated expectations. When asked about her classroom routine, Teacher 1 stated,

And you can see, a behavior difference in a room that has a consistent schedule versus a room that doesn't have a consistent schedule, it creates a calming energy, like they understand they know what's gonna happen, they are not worried or anxious about where they're at in their day...and [they can] be comfortable knowing where they're at.

Much of the focus in early childhood education is not placed on academics but on the students' behaviors and preparing them for further schooling; this focus on behavior stresses social-emotional learning and self-regulatory skills and has a further impact on teacher identity development (Coomer & Skelton, 2019). Teacher 6 demonstrated this when she said:

Yeah, I don't think, I mean, teaching them to write is great. And then teaching them to learn their ABCs is great, but I don't think I measure my worth in teaching on whether they learn those things. It is more of, do they have like the basic skills to be ... kind human beings as they grow older.

She clearly states that her "worth" in teaching is based in how confident she feels students will grow up to be "kind human beings." This is a prime example of teaching being a "heart-consuming" profession where personal identity and values can be confounded with teacher identity (Zhang & Jiang 2023). Teacher 6 determines whether she has been successful in fulfilling the role of "teacher" for her students through the ways in which her students behave. Teacher 3, who is a single-age teacher, had similar sentiments towards the goals for her classroom when she said:

So, as long as there was progression, that's always been my main goal. My goal as a teacher is not to make, especially as a pre-kindergarten teacher... it's not to make, you know, little Einstein children who can write their name backwards"

Teacher 3 expresses that the goal for her students is to demonstrate a progression from the beginning of the year; in any area they may be working on. This emphasizes not just academics but the students' behaviors.

Both Teacher 1 and Teacher 6 were teachers of multi-age classrooms; the next example demonstrates how age-groupings impacts behavior which further impacts teacher identity development. Teacher 7 stated:

And so, with this age group, I feel like, because we're all learning the same thing, I can focus on who's got it, a lot of times this age group loves to be the teacher helper. So, I always have ... like the four little pod tables that everybody sits at. And usually, one of those students will get it, whatever it is we're doing, and then I can have that friend help out the rest. And if I recognize that

there's a really big struggle, I'm a student. I'm able to go over and work with that one-on-one kiddo, because my kids are independent enough to follow those multi-step directions and get through the process, they're able to advocate for themselves and if they need something they can get that, but they can also like, ask for help, and they can get that help, because they don't have, you know, so much going on.

Teacher 7 explains how being in a single-age classroom is helpful because all students are roughly at the same level developmentally and academically. She emphasizes the independence and ability to follow instructions to complete a task, which are all behaviors that are deemed satisfactory. This independence and ability to do what is being asked of her students is internalized and further reinforces that Teacher 7 is fulfilling the role and identity of the teacher.

***Hypothesis 2:** Teacher identity development is negatively reinforced when students demonstrate a lack of self-regulatory social emotional classroom behaviors that can be negatively impacted by age grouping.*

When students exhibit unsatisfactory behavior or demonstrate a lack of self-regulatory social-emotional skills after teachers have worked to model and reinforce self-regulatory behavior, this can lead to feelings of failure and signals to teachers that they have not successfully fulfilled their teacher identity. More specifically, for early childhood teachers, there is an added level of complexity because their career is often de-intellectualized and undervalued (Scherr & Johnson, 2019). Similarly to positive reinforcement, teachers can be negatively reinforced by student behavior because student behavior is often viewed as a direct reflection of how well a teacher fulfills their identity. Teachers cannot model “perfect” behavior all the time, which also leads to feelings of failure and reinforces that their identity as teachers is being invalidated (Lozano et al., 2021).

This frustration and feelings of failure or invalidation was witnessed when interviewing early childhood teachers, more specifically in the form of struggling with their own self-regulation. Teacher 4 explained:

I think the most difficult part is like, if I'm not in a good emotional state, you know, getting them to a good emotional state. Because in conscious discipline it's like, if you're not regulated, you can't regulate anybody else. And you know, sometimes by the end of the week, you're “touched out” and “emotioned out” and luckily, in our setting, I'm able to be like, hey, I need to, you know, walk away for five minutes, and I will come back when I'm ready. And so, I think it is just when I'm feeling overwhelmed. That's the hardest part.

Teacher 4 expressed how difficult it is to “regulate” others, when you are not feeling “regulated.”

When Teacher 4 feels overwhelmed or “touched out and emotioned out” this reinforces that she is not modeling the behavior she seeks from her students. This signals to her that she needs to make a change in her behavior to see a change in her students' behavior. This is exhibited when she stated that, fortunately for her she has the support to be able to use coping tools to self-regulate and remove herself from the classroom until she can better provide for her students. I note that this is not always the case, especially in public early childhood centers or preschools, where teachers are not always provided the space to walk away.

This experience of not feeling regulated or feeling overwhelmed in the classroom is not an individual experience of single-age teachers; multi-age teachers expressed similar feelings.

Teacher 6 expressed:

Regulating your own emotions. I think it's easy to say this is what you do. And this is how you should do it. But it is sometimes overwhelming when they're screaming and shouting and they're getting frustrated. And then you're also feeling frustrated. And I think that's something that's hard is controlling yourself and your own reactions. And to model like, all of these ways that you're supposed to act. Yeah. I think that's the hardest part.

This quote demonstrates that there is an understanding and expectation of the teacher identity and how teachers are “supposed to act.” Teachers understand that their identity as teacher needs to be reinforced and further fulfilled when their students behave outside of what is expected (Tsang & Jiang, 2018). Teacher 6 expresses this pressure of feeling frustrated in an overstimulating environment, as anyone naturally would, but knowing you need to be behaving differently. This internal battle of knowing there is a need to continue modeling self-regulatory behavior for your students while still being human and experiencing overwhelming emotion

signals to teachers that they are failing at fulfilling the role of teacher. Teacher 8 put it simply, “If I come in grumpy, they're gonna’ be grumpy,” so much of student behavior depends on how teachers behave in the classroom. This, with the added pressure of proving competence and validity of the career of early childhood education, leads to feelings of failure and eventually changes in behavior to hopefully change student behavior and further have their identity as teacher validated and confirmed (Scherr & Johnson, 2019).

Although both single-age and multi-age teachers can be negatively reinforced, there is a level of complexity added to the negative feedback cycle for multi-age teachers. There is a feeling of frustration or of failure when trying to tackle the differing developmental stages within a multi-age classroom. Since student behavior is also impacted by age grouping, teacher behavior is impacted as well. Unlike positive reinforcement, however, this can lead to teachers feeling like they may need to create lesson plans differently or change the goals of their classroom because they feel they are failing at providing their students adequate access to their education. Teacher 2 stated, “... with multi-age...because then you have the [different] behaviors and so you have to think about a lot of things, I'll even hear other teachers say, well, we can't do this game because of these children.” Teacher 2 expressed that she had noticed teachers trying to decide what to plan for their classroom and wanted to provide certain “games,” but they could not because some children may not have been at the appropriate developmental age. Providing this balance for students can be extremely difficult when considering there are differing goals for each students’ developmental stage. If teachers feel as though they cannot adequately provide “games” or lessons that all students can access, this leads to feelings of failure and a subsequent change in teacher behavior and strategy in the hopes of noticing a change in student behavior.

Both Teachers 5 and 6 expressed similar struggles in trying to balance and provide access to lesson plans for all their students. Teacher 5 expresses the difficulty of providing for varying interests and developmental stages when she states:

But I also think it's really difficult in a way because, there's just a wide variety of interests, like you have kids who are two and a half who don't know how to cut things out, but then you have kids who are writing full paragraphs. So like, they know how to write their moms and their dads name and like, all of these things. And so, it's just like, kind of like balancing where to meet in the middle that still gets them where they need to be before they leave us.

With this quote, Teacher 5 demonstrates the struggle of knowing the expectations and where students “need to be at” before they leave preschool and head, most likely, into public schooling but having difficulty providing balance due to the age grouping. Not only is there a level of pressure to provide adequate academic and social-emotional care, but to do it for three differing ages and interests while continuing to model self-regulatory skills and conflict resolution, all to prepare students and further reinforce their identity as teachers and feelings of success. Teacher 6 demonstrated similar struggles when she discussed what circle time looks like in a multi-age classroom:

I think that there's so many different personalities now. And there's so many different developmental ranges. So, when you're trying to do like a circle time, and half of them are sitting and trying to listen and half of them are crawling away on the floor, like that's frustrating. And then it's kind of frustrating to come back in that moment to be like, well, some of them are two, and some of them are five. And that's kind of a hard thing to keep consistently reminding yourself, especially when the older ones are more capable. And then the younger ones are like, I can't do it. And you're like, Well, why? Like, why can't you? So, to constantly have to remind yourself, that's kind of hard.

Even though the behavior described in this scenario is developmentally appropriate for each age that Teacher 6 described, there is a level of expectation of what student behavior should look like. Since that is not being confirmed during circle time, Teacher 6 feels frustrated. This frustration leads to feeling as though she has not successfully fulfilled her role of teacher and needs to change her strategy to have her students behave in a way that is deemed satisfactory.

Limitations

There are two major limitations of this research, one being the participants' lack of diversity and the second the lack of diversity of schools. Since the participants were chosen based on who was available to be interviewed and which schools were willing to participate, I was limited both aspects of diversity. The participants were all similar, although their level of experience varied. To deepen the discussion of the impacts of students' behavior on teacher identity development, a more diverse set of participants would be necessary. I note also that all participants were teachers in private rather than public early childhood education settings. Considering that public preschool can be as, if not more effective than private preschool programs when given the same resources and quality of programming (Barnett, 2008), this warrants further research to explore the perspectives of public early childhood educators. It is often difficult to separate personal identity from professional identity, especially when considering marginalized identities; my research only scratches the surface of what could further be investigated about teacher identity development, SEL, and classroom dynamics.

Conclusion

The goal of this research was to highlight and explore the perspectives of early childhood educators in different age groupings about supporting social-emotional development and classroom dynamics. The interviews provided rich context and valuable experiences that led me to not only highlight the teachers' perspectives but discuss my findings in the context of teacher identity development. The added complexities of age grouping and supporting developing young minds allowed for theory building around teacher identity development and the impacts of student behavior on teacher identity. Through the expansion of my two hypotheses, I explored

both positive and negative feedback cycles that reinforce and impact teacher identity. Teachers are positively reinforced and validated in their professional identity when students behave in ways they deemed satisfactory or self-regulatory, which is modeled after what the teacher has taught. However, when students do not behave deemed satisfactory or self-regulatory after teachers have modeled the behavior, feelings of frustration and failure lead to the invalidation and further need to confirm teacher identity. This leads teachers to change their own behavior or teaching strategy in the hopes of changing student behavior and to further confirm their teacher identity. Furthermore, as I have discussed throughout this thesis, this need or pressure to successfully fill the role of teacher comes out of both the de-intellectualization of the early childhood profession and the commitment to proving competency whether that be intellectual or emotional in the classroom.

Teaching is a profession of care, especially for those who teach early childhood education. This understanding of teaching as care is often misunderstood for lacking intellect or validity, because of the necessity of emotional learning within the profession. When teachers know and are confident in their identity, both in and out of the classroom, as well as professional and personal, they can maintain a sense of self-efficacy within the classroom that ultimately leads to further commitment and passion for teaching (Day et al., 2006). Therefore, there should be a focus on exploring and building confidence in teacher identity to further facilitate confident teachers. More specifically, early childhood educators should be recognized for the deeply intellectual work that they do to support the academic, social, and moral development of future generations. The care and emotional labor, alongside the deep understanding of development and academics that students need to be successful, often go unnoticed. We must recognize the importance of the foundations that early childhood educators build.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Teacher Perspective on Social Emotional Development and Classroom Dynamics in Mixed Age and Single-Aged Classrooms Consent Form

Jessica Martinez
 Supervisor: Howard Drossman
 Colorado College Department of Education
 Department Phone Number: (719) 389-6146
 j_martinez@coloradocollege.edu

Key information about this research study

The following is a short summary of this study to help you decide whether to be a part of the study. More detailed information is provided later in the form.

You are invited to take part in a research study about preschool teacher perspective on classroom dynamics, specifically the social emotional development of students in mixed age and single age classrooms.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to research the similarities and differences between teacher perspective of classroom dynamics in mixed age and single age classrooms. There will be a focus on the dynamic of social-emotional development in students. I want to hear the experiences of teachers and gather their varying perspectives from different classroom styles.

What will you be asked to do if you participate in the study?

If you participate in the study, you will be asked to engage in a 30–45-minute interview. The interview will be recorded and transcribed.

How long will it take you to participate in the study?

The interview should take between 30-45 minutes.

What are reasons you might choose to volunteer for this study?

Volunteering for this study would enrich the literature on mixed age and single age classrooms.

What are reasons you might choose not to volunteer for this study?

We do not expect you to experience any kind of harm or discomfort if you participate in this study, beyond what you would experience in everyday life.

Do you have to take part in the study?

Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You should only decide to take part in the study because you want to do so. If you choose to be in the study, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. Participants can choose to skip any question. Participating in this study does not mean that you are giving up any of your legal rights.

What if you have questions, suggestions, or concerns?

The person in charge of this study is Jessica Martinez. You can contact Jessica at j_martinez@coloradocollege.edu or (719) 389-6146

If you have any questions about whether you have been treated in an illegal or unethical way, contact the Colorado College Institutional Research Board chair, Dr. Amanda Udis-Kessler at 719-227-8177 or audiskessler@coloradocollege.edu.

Detailed information about this research study

Why are you being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being asked to participate in this research study because you teach preschool age students in either a mixed-age or single age classroom.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to research the similarities and differences between teacher perspective of classroom dynamics in mixed age and single age classrooms. There will be a focus on the dynamic of social-emotional development in students. I want to hear the experiences of teachers and gather their varying perspectives from different classroom styles. There are many reasons for how and why schools choose to group their students. I want to research the impact this has on teachers' perspective on classroom dynamic and student's socioemotional development.

What will you be asked to do if you participate in the study?

Participants will be asked to thoroughly answer 12 questions in a 30-45 minute interview, with some possible follow up or clarifying questions.

I will be using audio recording during the interview. Participants can choose not to be recorded or to stop recording at any time.

Will you be told everything about what is happening to you and about what you will be asked to do in the study?

This study does not involve any deception. This consent form describes exactly what you will do and what will happen to you in the study.

How long will it take you to participate in the study

Participation will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete.

With whom will you interact during the study?

Jessica Martinez

Is there any way that being in this study could cause you harm or discomfort?

We do not expect you to experience any kind of harm or discomfort if you participate in this study, beyond what you would experience in everyday life.

Are there any ways that being in this study will benefit you?

Volunteering for this study would enrich the literature on mixed age and single age classrooms. There will be no personal benefits of this study.

Who will know about your participation in this research, or about what you said or did in the research?

All recordings from the interview will be kept on a personal computer and destroyed once transcribed.

Any report of this research that is made available to the public will not include your name or any other individual information by which you could be identified unless you have specifically given permission to be identified publicly.

Besides I, Howard Drossman would view the transcriptions of the recordings.

I expect to have 8 total participants in this study, due to the low number of participants this could make it easier to be identified.

What will happen to your information after this study is over?

Once the study is complete the information will be destroyed; both identifying information and other research information will be destroyed.

I may share your research information with other researchers without asking for your consent again, but it will not contain information that could directly identify you.

What happens if you do not want to participate in this study?

You do not have to participate in the study if you do not want to and nothing bad will happen if you do not participate.

What happens if you start to participate in the study but change your mind?

Participants can leave the study at any time they wish and do not have to continue participating if they do wish too. If any part of the study was audio recorded and the participant withdraws from the study all recordings will be destroyed immediately.

What happens if you participate in the study and get injured or have other problems as a result of your participation?

The likelihood of physical, psychological, or any other form of harm occurring from this study is little to none. If there is any harm done, please contact me as soon as possible.

Who can you talk to if you have questions about the study?

If there are any questions about the study please contact me, Jessica Martinez. My email is j_martinez@coloradocollege.edu. You may also contact the Department of Education at Colorado College at (719) 389-6146.

If you have any questions about whether you have been treated in an illegal or unethical way, contact the Colorado College Institutional Research Board chair, Dr. Amanda Udis-Kessler at 719-227-8177 or audiskessler@coloradocollege.edu. Dr. Udis-Kessler can be reached by mail at the following address:

Dr. Amanda Udis-Kessler, IRB Chair
Colorado College
14 E. Cache la Poudre Street
Colorado Springs, CO 80903

Statement of Consent to Participate: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions. If I have more questions later, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older and I consent to take part in the research study of teacher perspective on mixed age and single age classrooms. I understand that I will be given a copy of this form to keep for my records.

Participant's Signature

Participant's Printed Name

Date

This research involves audio recording. Check one of the following options.

I agree that my participation in the study may be audio recorded.

I do not agree that my participation in the study may be audio recorded but I am willing to participate if audio recording is not used.

I, Jessica Martinez, have explained the study to the participant and have answered all of their questions. I believe that they understand the information described in this consent form and that they freely consent to be in the study.

Researcher's Signature

Researcher's Printed Name

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a teacher? Why did you choose to be a teacher?
2. What are your experiences in either multi-age classrooms or single age classrooms?
3. What is your classroom's daily routine?
4. How would you describe your classroom dynamic?
5. What strategies do you utilize for supporting social-emotional development in your students?
6. When you are lesson planning, what are the goals you hope to reach with your students?
7. How would you describe the social and relational dynamics between your students?
8. What is your conflict resolution style in the classroom?
9. What is the most difficult part of your classroom's dynamic and why?
10. What is the most rewarding part of your classroom's dynamic and why?
11. What is the most difficult part of supporting social-emotional development?
12. What is the most rewarding part of supporting social-emotional development?

Appendix C

Code	Frequency
Best Quotes	35
Benefits of Co-Teacher	2
Calm Space in Classroom	10
Communication b/w Co-Teachers	1
Students Thrive in Big Groups	1
Feeling Safe 1st Priority	3
Outside Adults in the Classroom	5
Predictable and Calm Environment	7
Tour of School	1
Explaining Learning Differences	4
School Feels like Family	5
Student Feed off Teacher Emotion	3
Student Roles in Classroom	3
Teacher Encouragement of Role Modeling	4
Turnover for SA Difficult for Students	1
Flexibility in EE	1
MA Harder to Assess	2
Multi-Age Experience	7
SA Easier to Assess	2
Single Age Experience	9
Teacher Preference	3
Long Term of SE Skills	2
Loved the Children	2
Parent Satisfaction	3
Parent Teacher Relationship is Rewarding	6
Preschool as Family Support	3
Relationship Building	10
Student Enjoyment of School	6
Student Growth is Rewarding	16
Students Feeling Prepared for Kindergarten	11
Teacher Satisfaction	1
Why Teach	9
Benefit & Disadvantage of CT	1
Circle Time	17
Circle Time Different between Ages	2
Breakfast	9

Brush Teeth	1
Lunch	7
Nap	8
Small Groups	5
Snack	4
Whole Class Activity	6
Bond Starts at 3	1
Daily Routine is Consistent	3
Daily Routine is Helpful	2
Established Friendships	5
Explore the Centers	1
Focused on Building Connections	4
Goals for Age Group	1
Jump from Toddler to PK	1
More Complex SE Skills (5yr)	3
More Guidance for Younger	1
Regression for 5yr	1
Student Reflection	4
Student Social Problems Similar (SA)	4
Students Solving SE Problems	20
Teaching Classroom Mechanics	4
Younger Learning SE Skills	1
Language Barriers for Students	1
Using Kind Words (5yr)	2
Using Words	10
Verbally Processing Emotions	18
Breathing Techniques	6
Calm Space is a Choice	2
Coping Strategies	1
Exploring Different Emotions	3
Naming Emotions	6
Recognizing Emotions	9
Aftermath of Processing Emotion	1
Student Seek Emotional Support	4
Student Seek Teach for Safety & Comfort	3
Student Self-Regulation	4
Play Based in Development	1
Sense of Responsibility for Older	8
Know How to Play	4

Learning to Play	5
Older Baby Younger	1
Older Have Influence	2
Older Provide Challenge for Younger	1
Older Students Frustrated w Younger Students	2
Student Group Together by Age	10
Younger Learning From Older	4
Younger Seek Play From Older	2
Blocks	1
Cooperative Play (5yr)	2
Destructive Play (4yrs)	1
Interactive Play (4yr)	1
Outside Play	11
Parallel Play (3yr)	3
Play House	2
Structured Play (Centers)	12
Unstructured Play	9
Dynamic Changes Cyclically	2
Dynamic Depends on Students	3
Dynamic Differs between SA & MA	2
Dynamic Not a Factor in Reward	1
Dynamic Shifts More (MA)	1
Positive Dynamic	7
Students Won't Always Mesh	1
Wide Age Range	4
Address Conflict in the Moment	2
Empathy	6
Encourage Students to Play Together	3
Friendship Skills	8
Modeling Conflict Resolution	17
Redirection	2
Solution Based Mindset	8
Student Solve Problems 1st	9
Students Not Forced to Play with Each Other	2
Creating Access to Lesson	4
Goal is Confidence	1
Goal is Progression	4
Goal is Students Can Perform Alone	1
Goal is Understanding	2

Structured Curriculum	5
Lesson Plan Goals for MA	4
Lesson Plan Goals for SA	5
Teacher Personal Goal	1
Balancing Differing Developmental Stages	8
Individual Goals	5
Knowing Student Academic Level	3
Mix-Up Small Groups for Challenge (SA)	1
More Individualized (MA)	2
More Individualized SA	1
More Time for Growth	3
More Time with Students (MA)	2
Pairing Students Up (SA)	3
Separate Children Based on Personality (SA)	1
Separating Students	5
Specific Goals for Students	2
Student Academic Level Similar (SA)	1
Adapt to Student	3
Book Boat	1
Incorporating Challenge for Students	1
Lesson Plan Based on Student Interest	4
Lesson Planning (MA)	4
Lesson Planning (SA)	8
Manipulate Lesson Plans	5
Read Books	1
Scaffolding in Lessons	1
Student Choice of Book	1
Addressing Conflict as Group	1
Behavior Management	2
Books About Feelings	1
CD More Effective than TO	1
Conscious Discipline	5
Decompartamentalize Emotions	1
Deescalating Big Emotions	1
Discuss Both Pos & Neg Emotions	1
Noticing Student Behavior	2
Pyramid Plus	2
Respect	2
Schoolwide Policy on Conflict & SE	5

SE 1st Academics 2nd	4
SE Deemed Unimportant in Past	2
SE Lesson	2
Second Step SE skills	3
Solution Bracelets (3yrs)	1
Teacher Prep for SE Conflict	2
Teaching SE Skills from Bottom Up	3
Tucker Turtle	2
Validating Emotions	8
Repetition	3
Students Reflections of Parents	4
Support from Directors	3
Teacher Feelings of Overstimulate & Overwhelmed	5
Teacher Self-Regulation	9
Teachers Feelings of Failure	5
Teachers Still Working on SE Skills	2
Transitions Difficult	1
Always Taught EE	1
Creating Inclusivity Difficult (SA)	1
Developmental Issues Not Trained For	4
Family Dynamics in Classroom	2
Hesitant to Teach MA	1
Lack of Support for Students with Learning Differences	3
Lack of Support from Administrators	2
MA Gets Easier w Experience	1
No Planning Period for PK	1
Role Modeling	5
Stumbled into Preschool	2
Teacher Prep for MA	1
Undiagnosed Behaviors	1
Years of Teaching	8