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Preschool Instructional and Assessment Practices at Stepping Stones Preschool

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Preschool Instructional and Assessment Practices at Stepping Stones Preschool

Abstract

This phenomenological study included interviewing four individuals involved with the formation and current operation of Stepping Stones Preschool in Sioux Center, Iowa, to determine if their instructional and assessment practices as well as their mission and core values aligned with best practice. Analysis of these practices and experiences was undertaken with the purpose of deepening the understanding of what instructional and assessment best practices look like in a preschool setting. The results of this study show that the best practice recommendations that assessment should be directly connected to the instruction, child-centered, continual, include developmentally-appropriate practices in multiple formats with learning aimed towards the targets and standards are present at Stepping Stones. Additionally, instructional methods as well as assessment tools are designed to meet the needs of the whole child at Stepping Stones Preschool. Finally, the instructional methods and assessment tools align with the mission and core values at Stepping Stones Preschool and exemplify a high-quality model of best practices.

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Action Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education

Preschool Instructional and Assessment Practices
at Stepping Stones Preschool

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Action Research Report
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education
Dordt University
Sioux Center, Iowa
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Abstract

This phenomenological study included interviewing four individuals involved with the formation and current operation of Stepping Stones Preschool in Sioux Center, Iowa, to determine if their instructional and assessment practices as well as their mission and core values aligned with best practice. Analysis of these practices and experiences was undertaken with the purpose of deepening the understanding of what instructional and assessment best practices look like in a preschool setting. The results of this study show that the best practice recommendations that assessment should be directly connected to the instruction, child-centered, continual, include developmentally-appropriate practices in multiple formats with learning aimed towards the targets and standards are present at Stepping Stones. Additionally, instructional methods as well as assessment tools are designed to meet the needs of the whole child at Stepping Stones Preschool. Finally, the instructional methods and assessment tools align with the mission and core values at Stepping Stones Preschool and exemplify a high-quality model of best practices.

With an increase in academic expectations and standards to be learned in the early years, educators face the challenge of integrating prominent academic standards into developmentally appropriate learning experiences for children in early education (Taylor & Boyer, 2019, p. 129). Accountability and assessment are at the forefront of education discussions in recent decades, (Chan et al., 2010, p. 232) and a significant emphasis lies on assessment to improve overall education quality.

Educators have studied what good assessment looks like, how it is conducted in schools, and how it is utilized for accountability purposes. Accountability in early education is defined as the “practice of holding educational systems responsible for the quality of their products—students’ knowledge, skills, and behaviors” (Kirby & Stecher, 2004, p. 1 as cited in Chan et al., 2010). While education systems are held accountable for their instructional practices and quality assessment procedures, each teacher is responsible for meeting the unique learning needs of individual students and for making available the records of this learning.

Traditionally, schools have used standardized assessment practices of testing knowledge, understanding, and abilities at the end of learning (Dennis et al., 2013, p. 189). This is identified as outcome-based assessment (Chan et al., 2010). In the early 2000s, process-oriented assessment came to the forefront as a more authentic assessment (Chan et al., 2010). Within preschool institutions, authentic assessment is measured more thoroughly through play-based, performance-based, and naturalistic learning environments (Dennis et al., 2013, p. 189). Pyle et al., (2017) emphasized free play, or inquiry play, where children learn through imaginative play with unlimited choice and flexibility. The purpose and type of play was considered; then the ways to assess were identified (Pyle et al., 2020, p. 2256).

In the early childhood education field, researchers put much emphasis into developing accountability and assessment procedures that do the following things: (a) validate children's learning process and progress, (b) expand learning and teaching approaches, (c) evaluate the overall curriculum development of the entire school system, and (d) assess the success of federal, state, and district programming (Rous, McCormick, Gooden, & Townley, 2007, as cited in Chan et al., 2010).

In addition to utilizing accountability and assessment procedures, teachers need to focus on the development of the preschool child. As preschool students are generally unable to express themselves solely through writing on pen and paper tests, many types of assessment over time are important to give a clear picture of a child's progress. Some of these assessments include conducting interviews and observations, building portfolios with a variety of information such as photos, videos, checklists, notes added by teachers, parents, and students, and recorded information (Dennis et al., 2013, p. 190) through tools such as running and anecdotal records and iPads (Taylor & Boyer, 2019, p.131). Assessment programs such as the Teaching Strategies GOLD assessment use these varied types of assessments in an online database that can be shared with others (Lambert et al., 2014, p. 27).

Purpose of the Study

Stepping Stones Preschool in Sioux Center, Iowa, has attempted to develop a high-quality preschool education that adequately prepares four-year-olds for further education. Stepping Stones seeks to serve as a model for current and future teachers as well as for other early education facilities. The purpose of this study is to describe whether the instructional and assessment practices of Stepping Stones Preschool in Sioux Center, Iowa, adhere to best practices while also fulfilling their mission and core values.

Research Questions

- 1) What are the criteria of best practice for preschool instruction and assessment?
- 2) Do the instructional practices at Stepping Stones Preschool align with best practice?
- 3) Do the assessment practices at Stepping Stones Preschool align with best practice?
- 4) Do the instructional and assessment practices of Stepping Stones Preschool align with their mission and core values?

Definition of Terms

Asynchronous Feedback is feedback that happens over time. Students complete their work and then the teacher responds later with feedback (Black & William 2009, in Clark, 2015).

ECEC stands for Early Childhood Education and Care (Krieg, 2017).

Formative curriculum is a curriculum that meets the needs of the current learner, enhances literacy and numeracy, supports health and well-being, and maintains the societal and practical skills required for lifelong learning. This type of curriculum drives the classroom practices so that students learn to be responsible adults (Clark, 2015).

Outcome-oriented assessment is assessment that is collected at the end of the learning process (Chan et al., 2010).

Play-Based Learning is child-centered learning that focuses on child development, abilities, and interests through developmentally applicable structuring of academic learning experiences (Taylor & Boyer, 2019).

Process-oriented assessment is a type of assessment that is collected throughout the entire learning process, from before the learning occurs until after it is completed (Chan et al., 2010).

Synchronous Feedback is immediate and spontaneous dialogue between student and teacher (Black & William 2009, in Clark, 2015).

Literature Review

The political interest in early education has increased within early childhood education and care (ECEC) in many countries within the last few years (Lazzan, 2014, as cited by Krieg, 2017, p. 53) due to growing concern with social and economic crises facing many countries. Policy makers are demanding evidence that early childhood programs make a distinct transformation in young children's education (Adamson & Brennan, 2014, as cited in Krieg, 2017, p. 53). In the early 2000s, both United States Presidents Bush and Obama implemented and revised the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which focused on the scores students received on standardized testing in reading and math. One reason this act did not meet great success was because critics denounced education that focused on teaching toward testing. They advocated that students should receive a well-rounded education that encourages them to be healthy, active citizens who are a part of their community (Temkin et al., 2021, p. 53). In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced the NCLB, and said that states must hold schools accountable for the following areas: proficiency in math and reading scores, English language proficiency, progress made in each of those areas, graduation rates (high schools only) and their performance on at least one School/Quality Student Success Indicator (SQSS) which was a "fifth indicator" of the school's choosing that displayed how schools have succeeded in a non-academic area that can be consistent and measurable (Temkin et al., 2021, p. 53).

Schools and teachers of all levels, including early education, are being held accountable for their instructional and assessment practices. The following literature review explores the research concerning the best practices of instruction and assessment in the preschool classroom that gives a clear picture of a child's progress and promotes effective learning in and beyond the preschool classroom.

Historically, teachers gave instruction and then assessed how well the students learned only after the instruction was complete (Pyle et al., 2020, p. 2252). These traditional assessment techniques included worksheets, quizzes, and tests at the end of learning, but did not necessarily give an accurate account of everything a student has learned, as many early education students are unable to show all they have learned with pencil and paper. Instead, best practice in early education recommends that educators need to be looking for multiple types of assessment to show progress of all learners (Notari-Svyerson et al., 2003, p. 39). Bagnato (1994) said that intellectual testing in early education should be stopped altogether and replaced with only alternative assessment practices. Bracken (1994) disagreed and said that testing was still a very important part of the assessment options (Bracken, 1994, p. 103).

In years past, teachers were not taught in specific assessment classes; rather they were taught about each subject matter and how to teach it, with assessment tacked on at the end (Pyle et al., 2020, p. 2259). Assessment education had been lacking, and teachers needed the continued training to empower them to be effective in their use of assessments. Recent studies on teacher preparedness in assessment practices concluded that teachers have gone from confusion to confidence and from uncertainty to excitement (Clark, 2015, p. 92).

There are three well-recognized philosophies that provide the history of early learning methods and assessment practices. These philosophies have been used in kindergarten learning, studying four to six-year-olds, and are still used today: Reggio Emilia, Waldorf, and the most common of the three, Montessori (Deluca et al., 2019, p. 17).

The Reggio Emilia philosophy was first created by psychologist Loris Malaguzzi in 1945 shortly after World War II. It was created in the Reggio Emilia area of Italy, which gave the philosophy its name. Quickly it spread throughout the world. This approach believed children

formed unique personalities during their early childhood years and expressed themselves in various ways. Therefore, a community-oriented style of learning was formed. As student connections, social influences, and student agency were emphasized, assessment and evaluation focused on pedagogical documentation, developed conversation, and meaningful creation between students and teachers. Evaluation in early education was implemented through portfolios, even e-portfolios that include pictures, videos, and work completed (Deluca et al., 2019, p.17).

Following the Reggio Emilia methods of instruction and assessment, Goodman and Cherrington (2017) conducted a study of a New Zealand kindergarten class which focused on e-portfolio documentation for one year. Teachers, parents, and students all had unlimited access to the portfolio and were encouraged to add to it. There were tablets readily available in the reading corner so students could access their work as they wished. It was observed that students connected their portfolios to classroom activities, and half of the students returned to the activities after viewing their portfolio. Some parents viewed and added to the portfolio often; others did not view it at all. The parents who were involved reported feeling very connected to their child's learning and became more comfortable sharing information from home. Teachers played a very important role in supporting the parents to take part in their child's learning. The teachers said the portfolios improved their relationship with students, reassessed prior learning, set goals, and assisted in their students' interests (Goodman & Cherrington, 2017, as cited in Deluca et al., 2019, p. 17).

A further study of Reggio Emilia instruction and assessment was conducted by Deluca and Hughes (2014) who observed twelve different kindergarten teachers in Ontario, Canada. The teachers in the study used play-based learning to meet the learning outcomes and fulfill the

standards, by implementing a variety of strategies including observations, one-on-one testing, and regular documentation to assess student learning. A documentation wall was an important assessment part, which included photographs of students at play (Deluca & Hughes, 2014, p. 445).

The second well-recognized early education philosophy is the Waldorf tradition which began with philosopher Rudolf Steiner in the early 20th century Germany (Deluca et al., 2019, p. 8). Presently, there are more than 2000 Waldorf-based early education programs in 60 different countries. The United States has more than 125 schools across the nation (Deluca et al., 2019, p. 8). The Waldorf approach addresses the needs of children as they move through development on every level: emotional, mental, and physical. Free play, sustenance of the senses, and opportunities for imitation of artistic and creative experiences are emphasized (Nicol & Taplin, 2012, as cited in Deluca et al., 2019, p. 8). Specifically in early learning situations, children learn best by imitating the adults around them and engaging in imaginative play. This originally included activities and daily work around the home, with no specific instruction given (Burnett, 2011; Nicol, 2007; Oldfield, 2001; Parker-Rees & Rees, 2011, as cited in Deluca et al., 2019, p. 8). Assessment includes documentation of notes, photos, qualitative data, and a built relationship with parents through interviews (Deluca et al., 2019, p. 19).

A study of Waldorf-inspired practices was conducted to see how teachers primarily used the tool of observation for assessment. Deluca et al., (2019) conducted this study in Ontario, Canada, and observed two teachers with Waldorf-inspired methods. Both teachers used the metaphor of breathing to describe their teaching practices. When you breathe in, the children take in all that the teacher provides for them, such as listening to a story. When you breathe out, the children create and express themselves through play. One teacher described the in-depth

observations where the staff across the whole school observe a child for two weeks without judgment. Then the staff met together to share their observations and formulate a question worded for the child's understanding to guide extended learning. Overall, the teachers said they remained committed to student-centered assessments, and they were able to know each child well through observation (Deluca et al., 2019, p. 22).

The most popular of the three philosophies, Montessori, is most well-known within the United States having more than 4,000 schools, and even more than double that around the world (Deluca et al., 2019, p. 9). The important components of Montessori learning include self-discipline, child development, and social cooperation through student choice, useful play, and fostered independence. Originally the Montessori learning environment, called a "children's house," was basically a normal house, just with child-sized functioning elements (Montessori, 1914, as cited in Deluca et al., 2019, p. 23). Assessment is conducted through observation and documentation in a portfolio that is shared with parents. Assessment items include long or short narratives, photos, and checklists. Parents are also invited to share experiences to be included in the portfolios which are useful for classroom planning (Issacs, 2015, as cited in Deluca et al., 2019, p. 23). Assessment strengths include positive work habits, internal motivation, community-based vs. only pleasing the teacher, and learning to self-assess (Deluca et al., 2019, p. 26).

In Montessori-based classrooms, teachers use different tools to measure their observations of student learning. One tool is the Assessment, Evaluation, and Programming System, 3rd Edition (AEPS-3). Using the AEPS-3, children are observed between birth and six years of age in eight different skill areas: fine motor, gross motor, communication, math, literacy, adaptive, social emotional, and cognitive. The original AEPS tool was created to work with disabled children, and since it was so effective, later editions were used for children with

and without disabilities (Macy et al., 2022, p. 1036). The AEPS-3 tool includes a thorough curriculum and assessment including a kindergarten readiness assessment and a measure intended for use by caregivers. The component of the readiness assessment is referred to as AEPS-3 Ready-Set and is available for professionals to use by gathering reliable data through natural observations (Bricker et al., 2022, as cited in Macy et al., 2022, p. 1036). Additionally, AEPS-3 Ready-Set has a component that parents complete called the Family Assessment of Child Skills (FACS) (Macy et al., 2022, p. 1036).

Macy et al., (2022) completed a study of 32 teachers and 37 parents from Idaho and Florida to see how well the programs Ready-Set and FACS worked in their classrooms and homes. The correlation between parents and teachers showed statistically significant, positive results, with the highest percent of correlation in the cognitive (83%) and literacy (73%) areas, whereas math (60%), fine motor (55%), and gross motor skills (46%) were lower likely due to the different environments and different observations (Macy et al., 2022, p. 1041). The study also gathered data to see how well Ready-Set and FACS surveys worked. The teachers reported that Ready-Set was easy to understand and use, was a quick and useful assessment, and the results were easy to convey with parents (Bruder, et al., 2021, as cited in Macy et al., 2022, p. 1037). Overall, teachers agreed that Ready-Set met its purpose of measuring kindergarten readiness skills (Macy et al., 2022, p. 1037).

The early education philosophies of Reggio Emilia, Waldorf, and Montessori affirm that appropriate curriculum and instructional practices lead to suitable assessment practices. This is illustrated in a study by Momani et al., (2008) who studied 44 kindergarten teachers in the United Arab Emirates with teachers who reported using a variety of teaching strategies: storytelling, lecturing/verbal discussion, tricks/games, using computers, cooperative groups,

manipulative/concrete objects, play/discovery/field trips, learning centers, puppet theater, and problem solving. Teachers did not generally use one strategy, but a combination of strategies. Then to assess learning, the teachers utilized a variety of assessment tools: student responding to teacher questions, student performance on tasks, student interaction, direct observation, questions asked by students, and portfolios (Momani et al., 2008, p. 239). Just as the instructional methods were varied, so too, the assessment tools needed just as much variation.

While assessment techniques need to be numerous and varied, assessment must follow and support the curriculum. Clark (2015) emphasized that curriculum needs to be formative so that it meets the need of the current learner, enhances literacy and numeracy, supports health and well-being, and maintains the societal and practical skills required for lifelong learning. Formative curriculum is an innovative type that has replaced traditional curriculum in many ways, just as traditional assessment is being substituted with a broader toolbox of assessments (Clark, 2015, p. 94). Clark (2015) gives many examples of formative curriculum which leads to effective assessment practices starting in early education through secondary school. Effective methods of formative instruction used in early education include flexible grouping, teacher/student dialogue, flexible schedules, interactive teacher role, real-world applications, and parents/guardians playing an active role in development and learning of their children. By implementing these methods of formative instruction, classroom practices help students learn to be responsible adults (Clark, 2015, p. 95).

As formative curriculum developed, assessment changed as well. Teachers using formative curriculum are naturally assessing as part of their daily practice. They observe and connect with the students by looking at what they wrote and created and then give immediate or synchronous feedback (Clark, 2015, p. 91). As synchronous feedback is important, it is equally

imperative that assessment be continual throughout the learning process. Pyle et al., (2020) suggested that assessment should be a continual process in multiple formats, with learning that leans towards academic targets and standards, and is committed to child-centered and developmentally appropriate practices (Pyle et al., 2020, p. 2253). Gullo and Hughes (2011) also stated that assessment is a continual process that engages in multiple formats and that the students' learning leans towards the learning targets and academic standards (DeLuca et al., 2019, p. 7). Teachers need to assess understanding and knowledge, abilities, skills, and capabilities in and beyond the classroom. They do this for many reasons including meeting standards, helping students reflect and set goals, sharing successes, giving students ownership, developing independent learners, and teaching them to be active participants in society (Pyle et al., 2020, p. 2253).

More recently, there has been a strong push for play-based learning to help foster the academic and developmental learning of young children. The best types of instruction suited for children include the improvement of language, literacy and social competence learned through acting, storytelling, and play-based activities (Pyle et al., 2020, p. 2253). Through play-based learning, Pyle et al. (2020) listed three very general types of early education assessment: withdrawal, embedded, and observational. Withdrawal assessment happens when a child is removed from play to complete a formal assessment such a test. Embedded assessment includes facilitating play and recording data. Observational assessment focuses upon taking pictures and notes (Pyle et al., 2020, p. 2255).

Withdrawal assessments, often considered curriculum-based assessments, lean toward formal assessment, which allows for regular collection of the child's performance data. They measure data based upon the learning targets. The success of a child is measured by their own

learning of a skill instead of comparing their learning to others. These assessments are not standardized and can be adapted to each child. An example of this assessment is the Assessment, Evaluation, and Programming System (AEPS) for infants and young children (Bricker et al., 2002, as cited in Notari-Syverson et al., 2003, p. 43). These assessments monitor the progress of each child in all areas including children who have an IEP, or Individualized Education Program. They help assess many aspects from gross/fine motor skills to social to cognitive skills. Withdrawal assessments make up one aspect of assessment in early education.

Through embedded assessment, children participate in facilitated play while the teacher records specific data. In performance assessments and portfolios, children are given the chance to express what they have learned in many ways such as building blocks, reciting a story, creating a shopping list, and a drawing a portrait. Many of these tasks allow cognitive, language, social, and motor skills to be measured by collecting observations and notes (Notari-Syverson et al., 2003, p. 44). The benefits of a portfolio include individual progress being measured versus being compared to other children. Portfolios give a good glimpse of progress over time and are easy to share with parents and other interested parties (Gullo, 2006, as cited in Dennis et al., 2013, p. 191). E-portfolios are commonly used for digitally documenting student work and activities. Teachers, parents, and even students themselves can access these portfolios (Goodman & Cherrington, 2017; Hooker, 2017, as cited in Deluca et al., 2019, p. 17). These various types of embedded assessment allow for a wide selection of authentic assessment measures in early education.

Through embedded assessment, play-based practices are a developmental process that observes how the child plays alone, with other children, and with caregivers in structured and free play. These assessments generally happen between the ages of three and six and in natural

environments such as the home, classroom, and childcare (Dykeman, 2008, as cited in Dennis et al., 2013, p. 192). Observers can evaluate many different types of skills such as social, cognitive, language, motor, and beginning academic skills (Mindes, 2011, as cited in Dennis et al., 2013, p. 192). Observation through play-based instruction allows for authentic assessment methods to be used.

Cohrssen & Niklas (2019) conducted a study in Australia which looked at the effect of play-based learning by implementing math games into preschool play. Seventy-nine children were involved in this study. Teachers were split into two groups and given a one-day training to learn how to use the preschool math games in their classroom, and they implemented those games immediately. The teachers of group one implemented the games in all four terms of the year. The teachers in group two took the one-day training at the end of the second term and implemented the games in just the third and fourth terms. To assess the study, the researcher checked understanding afterwards of each of the students. Some items that were measured included counting and number recognition. The results concluded that the children who had the opportunity of playing the math games for all four terms learned significantly more about math than those who did not (Cohrssen & Niklas, 2019, p. 322). Children who are given organized opportunities to play can show their learning in effective ways.

One assessment program which encompasses play-based learning in early education is called Teaching Strategies GOLD, which measures children's learning from birth through kindergarten (Lambert et al., 2014, p. 27). Regularly, teachers gather information about children from 38 research-based objectives. Some of the information they gather is through observations, conversations with children and their families, artifacts collected, and so on. Teachers use the assessment data to individualize instruction, plan experiences, monitor individual progress,

communicate progress to others, and determine when more specific assessment is needed. Of the learning objectives, the teachers collect data from the students upon these different items: social-emotional (expressing and understanding emotion, building relationships with others, appropriate interactions), physical (fine and gross motor skills, coordinator), language (using and understanding language to express oneself and communicate), cognitive (memory, classification, using symbols to represent people, events, and objects), literacy (alphabet, book knowledge, comprehension, beginning writing skills), and mathematics (numbers, operations, shapes, measurement, comparison, and patterns). They summarize information at three different checkpoints throughout the year: fall, winter, and spring using paper or online methods to determine what instruction is needed next, to show the growth of the student throughout a period of time, and to show the parents the learning that has occurred in the classroom (Lambert et al., 2014, p. 28). This program allows for embedded or play-based assessment techniques to show the learning of the whole child.

The following study by Dennis et al. (2013) shows the effective use of observational assessment. A three-year-old boy was recently diagnosed with autism. The teacher in his school had a range of assessment tools that she had used in the past, but she wondered if there could be another approach that could help him better. She decided to try two authentic assessments: interviews and observations. She started out with interviewing the boy's parents and his case worker, using open-ended questions to build a relationship with them (Dennis et al., 2013, p. 190). Interviews gave a thorough view of a child's abilities across different settings. Input came from key adults in the child's life. Before any interviews happened, the teacher was ready with structured and unstructured questions. Through interviews, the teacher and parents developed a relationship which helped them learn important background information (Banks, Santos, and

Roof 2003 as cited in Dennis et al., 2013, p. 190). Through the assessment data from interviews, the teacher was able to collect essential assessment data to get an accurate picture of the whole child.

Next the teacher conducted observations at the childcare center where the boy learns and at his home where he resides with his mother and father. Before she or her team observed anything, they decided on skills and behaviors they would be looking for, things such as social behaviors, transitions, willingness to interact, and fluency of speech (Dennis et al., 2013, p. 190). Observations gave a view of the child in his or her natural environment. Observing a child's response to their natural daily routines was the heart of authentic assessment (Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004 as cited in Dennis et al., 2013, p. 190). Through the data from multiple observations in multiple environments, the teacher was able to conduct authentic assessments.

During observations, a variety of formal data is collected through written descriptions, running records, anecdotal records, ABC (antecedent, behavior, consequence) analysis, and portfolios (Dennis et al., 2013, p. 191). The first way the teacher in this study collected formal data was through running records. She observed multiple book readings with the boy and his parents. Each time she included the activity, participants, date/time, location, and a short description of what occurred. A running record was an observational practice that occurred over time and focused on a sequence of events. The details recorded allowed for an in-depth analysis of a behavior over time. Teachers who conduct these observations must remain objective and careful not to make any judgments. Some important components of a running record included date/time of observation, names of children involved, location of observations, and what was said and done (Clay, 2000 as cited in Dennis et al., 2013, p. 191). By keeping detailed records, the teacher was able to assess the child's learning over time.

Anecdotal records like those used in this study involve shorter descriptions than running records and include one or more children. These records provide behavioral information for the teacher to plan their learning targets accordingly. Information recorded includes the date and time as well as any circumstantial information and facts without judgment. The teacher in this study used anecdotal records while observing the boy and his parents participating in a playdough activity. She gave a description of the observation and then listed some items to help him in the future, such as taking turns, requesting materials, and play transitions. She also made a list of ways caregivers can enhance learning with the boy. These included imitating play, expanding positive feedback, and prompting a response (Dennis et al., 2013, p. 191). By observing and taking notes the teacher was able to record important data for planning further instruction specifically for that child.

An additional way to assess children in the classroom is through ABC (antecedent, behavior, consequence) assessment. Behaviors can be recorded by noting what happens before the behavior took place, the targeted behavior itself, and what occurs after the behavior happens. Looking at each of these things can help a teacher gain insight into the causes of particular behaviors. An antecedent was thought of as the trigger for the behavior (Dennis et al., 2013, p. 192). By the assessing of recording behaviors, a teacher is able to plan additional instruction and assessment to educate the whole child.

Through the variety of withdrawal, embedded, and observational assessment tools, an early childhood educator is able to meet each child where he or she is at in their education and give them the necessary instruction to excel from there. Instructional procedures and assessment tools go hand in hand in early education. The best types of early childhood instruction included those that meet the needs of the current learner, enhances literacy and numeracy, supports health

and well-being, and maintains the societal and practical skills required for lifelong learning (Pyle et al., 2020, p. 2253). While teachers have many assessment tools available to use, assessment should be a continual process in multiple formats, with learning that leans towards academic targets and standards, and is committed to child-centered and developmentally appropriate practices (Gullo & Hughes, 2011, as cited in Deluca et al., 2019, p. 8).

Methods

A phenomenological study and methodology were used to analyze and collect data obtained from past and present individuals involved with Stepping Stones Preschool in Sioux Center, Iowa. A phenomenological method presumes that there are shared experiences of those who have lived a comparable situation and that one may better understand the essence of the lived experiences through careful analysis of their individual accounts. This study involved formally interviewing a purposeful sampling of creators, directors, and teachers of Stepping Stones and then analyzing their responses to discover how their instructional and assessment practices aligned with their mission statement, core values, and best practices.

It was determined that use of a survey alone would provide only a limited amount of information, the inability to ask additional questions based upon individual responses, and limited personal expression involved in the experiences. Therefore, the researcher determined that a phenomenological approach with multiple interviews was the most appropriate and practical method to explore the journey of Stepping Stones, its instructional and assessment practices along with their alignment to Stepping Stones' mission and core values.

Participants

A purposeful sampling method was used in which participants who were directly or indirectly involved in Stepping Stones Preschool were invited to a formal interview. The

participants were chosen based upon their connections to the preschool. Participants included one participant who was part of the initiation of the preschool, one participant who currently oversees the day-to-day operations of the preschool and was involved with the initiation of the preschool, one participant who is the current director, and one who is a current teacher. All these participants were chosen to get a broad perspective of the preschool from multiple perspectives in the past and present.

Procedures

The design of this study was a phenomenological, qualitative study. A process was developed for this research study and was followed at the beginning and end of each interview. The process of gathering information began with emails (See Appendix C) and/or informal discussions with each participant to inform them of this study, to get their initial thoughts, and to check if they would be willing to participate in a 30–45-minute interview. After these initial steps, a time and meeting place were agreed upon.

Participants were informed that participation in the interview was voluntary, and they could discontinue participating at any time, as they wished. They were informed that their names may be used unless they requested to remain anonymous. Participants were given an informed consent form (See Appendix D) and asked to sign and date the form if they wished to participate. Participants were also asked for approval for audio recording purposes.

In the interviews, each participant was asked the same set of prepared open-ended questions (See Appendix E), which were emailed to them at least three days prior to the meeting. Before asking the open-ended questions, the researcher asked basic identifying information of the interviewees, such as the current role of the participant, involvement at Stepping Stones Preschool, and the number of years they had been involved in the preschool. Then the discussion

led into the first two questions, which included the preschool history, along with its mission and core values. The next question asked solely about the teacher history, while the four questions following strived to learn more about the experiences each person had with the instructional and assessment tools used at the preschool. The final three questions were based upon the reflections of each participant. At the end, the researcher asked the participants if they had any further thoughts, relevant information, or questions that might be helpful to the interviewer. While all the questions were crafted ahead of time, there was space for the interviewer to ask further questions that came up along the way and time for the interviewees to add more reflections as they felt needed. While some of the questions were answered easily by some of the participants, other questions were skipped if they felt they did not know enough about that particular topic.

The same interview process was completed with each of the participants. After all the interviews were complete, the researcher transcribed the information to identify themes and compile the information, going through each interview question, to determine if there was enough evidence to answer all the research questions or if more information was needed.

Each interview was video recorded with an Apple iPhone camera app and voice recorded with an Apple iPhone dictate app to convert the voice to text to ensure two levels of data and evidence. The voice-to-text was then cleaned up while listening to the video version, so to add correct spelling and punctuation, as well as any missed words or misinterpreted language. After the text was cleaned up, the researcher began the process of analyzing the data through organization, thematizing, collecting best evidence quotes, and creating notes to align the data with the best practice data from the research. The researcher organized the data by listing each interview question and then the data from the interviewees.

Results

History

In 1995, Dr. Gwen Marra bought Learning Ship Preschool. Buying this preschool allowed Dr. Marra to be in her home raising her own children while owning and operating a preschool facility within her home. The preschool was funded solely by tuition paid by each family. In this preschool, she had eighty students who attended each week, two or three days per week, for the morning or afternoon classes. She had mostly four-year-old classes, with an occasional three-year-old class. Dr. Marra prioritized the four-year-old classes because she wanted to get them ready for kindergarten. For the first 11 years, Dr. Marra taught most of the preschool classes, and in 2006, she hired a director on site while she taught kindergarten for two years (Marra, personal communication, February 28, 2023).

In 2006, in addition to owning her preschool, Dr. Marra became dually involved as an adjunct at Dordt College (now known as Dordt University), teaching early childhood classes such as Introduction to Early Childhood Education, Organization and Administration of Early Childhood Programs, and Early Childhood Literacy Development. In that role, she saw the need for more early education preparation and for qualified early education teachers. She approached the Education Department at Dordt about adding an Early Childhood Endorsement, which she believed they were only two classes short of providing (Marra, personal communication, February 28, 2023). In response, Dr. Marra was hired full time in 2008 as the education professor of early childhood learning. She developed the two needed early education courses for the college while still owning and operating Learning Ship Preschool (Marra, personal communication, February 28, 2023).

When Dr. Marra realized that owning and operating the preschool along with teaching at Dordt University was taking too much time in her schedule, she approached the Sioux Center Christian School Board with a proposal for them to purchase the preschool. They were not interested, as they did not have enough space to dedicate to it at that time and were concerned that it would need to be parent funded. In 2010 when grants from the statewide voluntary preschool program became available for free preschool, Dr. Marra brainstormed with the leaders in the local school district to discuss the possibility of this in Sioux Center. It was decided, however, that Sioux Center was not ready for a large preschool program, and the school district pulled out of the discussion (Marra, personal communication, February 28, 2023).

In 2011, having seen the need for more preschool facilities in town, Mrs. Christy Hulstein, who was working at Learning Ship Preschool, opened her own preschool, Bullfrogs and Butterflies (Hulstein, personal communication, March 3, 2023). Dr. Tim Van Soelen and Dr. Marra, now both education professors at Dordt, wondered if this could be an opportunity to combine these two private preschools under the leadership of Dordt, thus giving preservice college students an authentic opportunity to work in an early education classroom.

In 2012, Dordt bought both of these privately-owned preschools and a new preschool, Stepping Stones Preschool, was born with Mrs. Christy Hulstein as its director. Since they did not have a facility big enough for the combination of two preschools, Stepping Stones met at a local church, New Life Church, for approximately three years. Meeting at New Life Church worked well as Stepping Stones had a great relationship with the church, but was not the most ideal situation, as they had to pack up all their classrooms each Wednesday and Friday so that the church could hold gatherings on Wednesday nights and worship services on Sundays. This

created a lot of work to pack and unpack all their materials multiple times a week (Van Soelen, personal communication, February 27, 2023).

Recognizing the challenges of Stepping Stones meeting in a local church and noting that the community of Sioux Center could use more early education facilities, the superintendent of the Sioux Center Community School District proposed that the school district partner with Stepping Stones and Dordt to build an early childhood center in town which would combine the current school district preschool called Little Warriors, the Head Start program, and Stepping Stones Preschool. This new early childhood center would be designed uniquely for four-year-olds. The bond issue was set at \$5.2 million and the Preschool Learning Center building was built in 2015. Because of these public funds, Dordt University, along with Stepping Stones Preschool, was able to dream bigger than had they built the center on their own. As a result, the center not only accommodated the needs of four-year-olds but also allowed professors and future early childhood educators to unobtrusively observe what was happening within the classrooms (Marra, personal communication, February 28, 2023).

Beginning in 2012, Stepping Stones had three-year-old and four-year-old classes and the schedule was two (Tuesday-Thursday) or three days (Monday-Wednesday-Friday) a week, with morning and afternoon classes. Three years later when Stepping Stones Preschool signed up with the statewide voluntary preschool program, the schedule changed to four days, Monday-Thursday, with morning and afternoon classes (Sjoerdsma, personal communication, March 3, 2023). This change in schedule allowed Stepping Stones to abide by the state requirement of ten hours of instruction per week (more if faith-based instruction was included). For Stepping Stones, this new twelve-hour week meant that they now had time and capacity to teach four-year-olds only (Hulstein, personal communication, March 3, 2023).

As of 2023, Stepping Stones currently has five classrooms, four of which they use for their preschool program with four sections in the morning and two in the afternoon. The fifth classroom is currently leased to the Thrive Center, for applied behavior analysis serving students ages three through fifteen, but mostly the younger students, who are already in the building.

Not only does Stepping Stones Preschool provide education to four-year-olds, but it also allows Dordt students to learn about early education through practical and authentic, hands-on learning. Currently there are two Dordt early childhood classes meeting at Stepping Stones, where they are able to be in the preschool classrooms to practice their skills and learn more about best instructional and assessment practices (Van Soelen, personal communication, February 27, 2023).

Mission and Core Values

The mission of Stepping Stones preschool states, “We strive to develop in children a love for God and a love for learning. We provide opportunities to learn and play together, fostering the academic and social skills needed for school success.” (See Appendix A) The core values or goals (See Appendix A) seek to develop the following areas: a relationship with God and others, large and fine motor skills, care for their physical bodies, solve problems, math, science, vocabulary, and the arts (Van Soelen, personal communication, February 27, 2023).

Instructional Practices

As for instructional practices, Learning Ship Preschool had used a curriculum made by Dr. Marra called *Cycling Through the Alphabet*, which focused on a different cycle for each letter, such as butterfly life cycle for letter B and dinosaur life cycle for letter D, and so on (Marra, personal communication, February 28, 2023). When Stepping Stones Preschool began in 2012, they continued to use teacher-created resources for their instructional practices. Later in

2015 when they joined the statewide voluntary preschool program, they considered two different curriculums which were required by the program, called High Scope and Creative Curriculum. At the time, they adopted Creative Curriculum as the tool to best meet the learning needs of their students and to meet their mission and core values.

The Creative Curriculum is based upon free play where the teachers have all their materials for units, or “studies” and learning cupboards on different wheeled carts that they switch out from classroom to classroom on Fridays (Van Soelen, personal communication, February 27, 2023). The curriculum does not follow a scope and sequence as an elementary grade curriculum does; rather there are different studies that the teachers can pick from—whatever studies that will meet the thirty-six GOLD standard objectives (See Appendix B). Studies could include topics like pets, snow, trees, etc. Objectives like patterning, literacy, or language development can be met with any of those studies. This makes the curriculum very flexible and meaningful. Teachers are very intentional so that everything they do within their studies has an educational purpose. The teachers set up different areas such as blocks, dramatic play, toys/games, library, sand, etc. to meet these objectives (See Appendix B). While the teachers note that these studies are not perfect and there is room for growth, they make modifications as necessary to meet the needs of their class and classroom (Sjoerdsma & Hulstein, personal communication, March 3, 2023).

The Creative Curriculum not only provides studies and activities, but also provides a model of how a teacher sets up their classroom and plans their daily schedule. This feature guided Stepping Stones in their classroom setup and schedule. The schedule includes timing suggestions including that small group should be ten minutes, large group should be between ten and fifteen minutes, free choice time should be one hour, and outside time should be a half hour.

The play-based atmosphere encourages more movement and brain breaks, versus the traditional school model where a student sits at a forward-facing desk with a teacher giving all the instruction (Sjoerdsma & Hulstein, personal communication, March 3, 2023). Creative Curriculum aligns with best practice in early education as it meets the need of the current learner by giving a variety of developmentally appropriate studies and activities with specific literacy and numeracy skills being practiced. Health and well-being are supported by having large and small group instruction, free play, and outdoor time. The societal and practical skills required for lifelong learning are maintained by instructing upon thirty-six different objectives focusing on nine aspects: social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, mathematics, science and technology, social studies, and the arts.

Assessment Practices

When Stepping Stones first began in 2012, assessment practices were limited to a teacher-made rubric with observations of each student and a simple report card that listed minimal items. Current assessment practices include the Teaching Strategies GOLD assessment, where teachers and para educators use iPads to record and analyze learning information based upon thirty-six objectives. Preschool classes meet four days a week, Monday through Thursdays, and the teachers collaborate on Fridays to review the assessment data results, analyze what needs more attention, and then organize their classrooms and materials accordingly so it is ready for the following week. The Teaching Strategies GOLD assessment creates new opportunities for the teachers to be more consistent in their observations and evaluations. The observed data gives great information for the preschool teachers, parents, and future kindergarten teachers (Van Soelen, personal communication, February 27, 2023).

The Teaching Strategies GOLD assessment covers nine different areas: social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, mathematics, science/technology, social studies, and the arts. Another assessment area is ESL (English as a Second Language), which includes two more objectives and can be used if needed (Sjoerdsma, personal communication, March 3, 2023). In each of these areas, there are between three and five objectives for a total of thirty-six objectives (See Appendix B), where teachers record evidence through a video, note, or picture on an assessment app on an iPad or even their phone. Each of the thirty-six objectives has a minimum of three checkpoints throughout the year which need to be assessed (Lambert et al., 2014, p. 28).

After the assessment data is recorded, there is a continuum of rainbow colors, with red being the beginning or infant stage of learning and continuing through the colors as the child gets older. Preschool level is in the blue band, so the goal is to have all the preschoolers at or above the blue band in each of the thirty-six objectives by the end of their preschool years. The color bands do overlap. For example, learning to write your name is not necessarily just a blue band exercise, but can be learned earlier and improved upon over time. Using Teaching Strategies GOLD assessment allows a teacher to easily see what a whole child should be doing in the classroom as well as their growth over time (Lambert et al., 2014, p. 28). Observations and documentation of those observations are happening whenever possible: during large and small group instruction, free play, and even during outside and gym time. All types of reports can be generated to show the growth or needed instruction of a particular student, an entire section, or even an objective in particular (Sjoerdsma, personal communication, March 3, 2023). The Teaching Strategies GOLD assessment meets best practice standards by assessing in a continual process throughout the instruction, free play, and outdoor time, by using multiple formats such as notes, photographs, and videos to record data, by assessing multiple objectives covering many

dimensions of a developmentally-appropriate early education, and by being committed to learning in a child-centered facility.

In addition to using Creative Curriculum and Teaching Strategies GOLD, parents are a vital component of the preschool education at Stepping Stones Preschool. Before the school year begins, the teachers and para-educators make home visits to introduce themselves, to meet the child and their family, to let them know of the preschool expectations, and to answer any questions they may have. The parents also fill out a questionnaire about their child. Twice during the year, parents are invited in for parent-teacher conferences so together they can analyze the assessment data. At the spring conference, parents are very interested in learning what's next—what next level (TK, Junior Kindergarten, or Kindergarten) their child may be ready for (Van Soelen, personal communication, February 27, 2023).

As for the assessment reviews, parent expectations have shifted over time. Before the Teaching Strategies GOLD assessment was in place and in the beginning years of the preschool, parents wanted to see “evidence” of their child doing preschool activities, including items such as worksheets or cute crafts. It also took parents time to adjust to learning through play and free choice time, where students would pick what they want to play and their children did not bring home “evidence” of learning. After experiencing it and seeing the objectives listed and being met, parents, in fact, love that Stepping Stones is play-based. To help parents understand this type of learning, the teachers label each area of the room, with labels listing the objectives that students will learn there. Instead of seeing it as just play time, the parents can then visualize the learning that would be expected to take place and measured accordingly (Hulstein & Sjoerdsma, personal communication, March 3, 2023). The children at Stepping Stones are receiving a well-

rounded education through the instruction and assessment processes, as well as through the involvement of their parents in the process.

Mission and Core Values Alignment with Instruction and Assessment Practices

The mission and core values of Stepping Stones Preschool align very well with its instructional and assessment practices. The mission to create a developmentally appropriate, faith-based education works very well with Creative Curriculum and Teaching Strategies GOLD assessment. For example, a study about balls includes many investigations in the classroom, engages families, and connects using balls in real life. Families are invited to send different types of balls they have at home along with their child for the length of that study. An investigation of how balls bounce includes books about balls in general, large group time charting about different balls and how they bounce, free play time encourages the play of different balls, containers, baskets, and a camera for the children to use, and small group time includes numbered tennis balls at the water table. For biblical integration, they talk about the way we can use balls to keep our bodies healthy through sports and exercise. The way students learn through play fits very well with the developmentally appropriate aspect of it, and the fact that it is faith-based is exemplified by the way the children are taught Bible verses and stories, how to share, relate to their peers, how they take turns, and learn their social skills in a Christ-like manner. The instruction and assessment flow directly out of the mission by giving children a love for God and learning through play-based curriculum and a variety of assessment methods (Van Soelen, personal communication, February 27, 2023). The children learn about God's creation through studies on snow, animals, trees, gardening, roads, music, balls, and much more. Many objectives such as "comprehends language" and "retells stories" can be met by listening to read-alouds in

these studies. The mission and core values are vividly illustrated through the curriculum and assessment tools.

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the instructional and assessment practices of Stepping Stones Preschool in Sioux Center, Iowa and examine whether or not they adhere to best practices. Since Stepping Stones is a teaching preschool, an extension of the Early Childhood program at Dordt University, it is vital that it adhere to best practices in both instruction and assessment to suitably train future early childhood teachers to best meet the learning needs of their students. After researching and identifying the best practices in early childhood instruction and assessment, the researcher sought to determine if Stepping Stones Preschool adhered to those best practices.

Throughout the years of educational research, researchers have suggested that instructional methods are undoubtedly linked to assessment practices (Clark, 2015). Stepping Stones Preschool Creative Curriculum uses units or studies that are easily assessed through their assessment tool, Teaching Strategies GOLD. The curriculum gives ample opportunity for each child to be assessed.

Qualities for effective assessment practices in early childhood include these main qualities: authenticity, relational to children, frequent, and diverse (Deluca et al., 2019). First, authentic assessment should be child-centered with developmentally appropriate practices (Deluca et al., 2019). Stepping Stones Preschool creates an authentic atmosphere through teacher guidance, taking notes, photographing, and videoing of each child individually. This data is added to their individual account and their progress can be measured throughout their preschool year. They learn through large and small group instruction, free play, and outdoor time, based on

different themes such as snow, pets, trees, etc. Each week the teachers switch the classroom manipulatives such as blocks, toys and games, sand and water, and dramatic play items around to fit the specific theme and give the children child-centered, developmentally-appropriate experiences.

Second, students and teachers develop relational skills through varied types of assessment (Banks, Santos, and Roof, 2003 as cited in Dennis et al., 2013). At Stepping Stones, each classroom has a teacher and a para-educator present all the time. These two leaders are constantly with the students throughout their day, guiding them through their learning and assessing what they know. Relationships with the teachers and peers are created and fostered through this play-based environment.

Third, diverse types of assessment give a clear picture of a student's abilities across multiple settings (Lambert et al., 2014). Assessment takes place in large group, small groups, free play, and outdoor time. The children learn through the different studies and manipulatives each week, and children are observed and assessed through recorded notes, videos, and photographs. The diverse types of assessment are conveyed across multiple settings.

Finally, assessment should be a continual process in multiple formats (Pyle et al., 2020). Teachers at Stepping Stones are constantly assessing and looking for the objectives to be met (Sjoerdsma, personal communication, March 3, 2023). Wherever they are, learning and assessment are taking place.

To implement these effective assessment practices in a preschool setting, best practice suggests the use of many tools such as recorded observations, interviews, one-on-one testing, photographs, (Deluca & Hughes, 2014) portfolios, and e-portfolios (Goodman & Cherrington, 2017). Students can be observed and formally recorded (Macy et al., 2022) in different ways

such as running records, anecdotal records, and long/short written descriptions. At Stepping Stones, the teachers are constantly recording notes, either with pen and paper or on the iPad that they carry around. If they jot notes down with pen and paper, they add it to the student's account when they have time. While many of the notes are shorter, some may include more detail to show that the objective has been met. Photographs can be taken of students completing activities, students at play, the progress they made, and the completion of a project or lesson (Pyle et al., 2020). The teachers and para-educators at Stepping Stones use iPads to photograph and video the children to show that objectives are progressing.

Portfolios can be compiled by teachers with a collection of different types of student work which can include but is not limited to pictures, checklists, drawings, worksheets, and notes (Issacs as cited in Deluca et al., 2019). E-portfolios are an online version of regular portfolios which can include a collection of audio and visual recordings and photographs of student work. E-portfolios can be accessed and added to by teachers, students, and parents alike (Goodman & Cherrington, 2017). The Teaching Strategies GOLD assessment tool used at Stepping Stones is an online portfolio of each child's work, organized according to each child and objective.

Interviewing parents, and other adults such as case workers, can give a clearer picture of each child across different settings (Dennis et al., 2013). Before the year begins at Stepping Stones, the teachers visit the home of the students to interview the family, tell about the preschool expectations, and answer any questions they may have. In addition, the parents fill out a questionnaire about their child before the year even begins, to relay any information that may be helpful for their child's preschool education.

Students can be assessed through formal, standardized tests (Deluca & Hughes, 2014). While Stepping Stones Preschool does not use formal testing procedures as best practice

suggests, they are observing the children one-on-one and recording the data to meet the objectives set forth by the state standards.

The play-based instructional and assessment techniques used at Stepping Stones Preschool meet best practice in most ways, as listed in the paragraphs above. Parental involvement is one area in which Stepping Stones has the potential for more growth. While the teachers meet with families before the school year begins to get an initial assessment, they also meet with the parents two other times during the year to show their child's progress. Best practice suggests that parents are able to add to the assessment process from the home environment, as it shows continued learning in multiple environments (Issacs, 2015 as cited in Deluca et al., 2019, p. 23). Stepping Stones could invite parents to send in videos or pictures of their child completing an objective. The teachers could add that to the child's online portfolio as an extra reinforcement of that objective learned.

As for implications for the future, Stepping Stones Preschool is an excellent learning example for future early education students in the way children learn and are assessed in a play-based model. Other preschools who use traditional methods of teaching and assessing can learn from their methods and apply them. If a preschool is using only one method of best practice to assess, they can see how Stepping Stones integrates many methods and prepares four-year-olds for the next steps of their education.

Further preschool assessment research could include the type of preschool units or studies and manipulatives that encourage the most interaction and learning. More research could also be done on the time of day in which students are most involved in learning. The Stepping Stones preschool teachers said their afternoon classes were more involved in the learning processes than their morning classes (Hulstein & Sjoerdsma, personal communication, March 3, 2023).

Research could be done to determine if factors other than instructional and assessment practices contribute to this.

Limitations

The limitations of this research include the study of the instructional methods and assessment tools of only one preschool environment in one part of the country. While best practices were modeled here, it may be helpful to validate these same best practices in other preschools and in other areas.

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Appendix A

Stepping Stones Mission and Goals

Our mission

We strive to develop in children a love for God and a love for learning. We provide opportunities to learn and play together, fostering the academic and social skills needed for school success.

Our goals

We work to ensure that all children receive an education that helps them grow and develop in all areas of life. Here are some of our goals for your child's education:

- To learn to love God and others.
- To make friends, learn how to be part of a group, and develop independence and self-confidence.
- To develop the large and small muscle skills they will need for daily life.
- To learn to care for their bodies by learning about eating nutritious foods, exercising, and practicing proper hygiene.
- To learn to solve problems, ask good questions, and think logically.
- To begin laying the foundation for mathematical concepts and scientific reasoning.
- To build vocabulary and develop listening skills.
- To experience art, music, and dramatic play with their classmates.

Appendix B

Teaching Strategies GOLD Objectives for Development and Learning

<p><u>Social-Emotional</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Regulates own emotions and behaviors <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Manages feelings b. Follows limits and expectations c. Takes care of own needs appropriately 2. Establishes and sustains positive relationships <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Forms relationships with adults b. Responds to emotional cues c. Interacts with peers d. Make friends 3. Participates cooperatively and constructively in group situations <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Balances needs and rights of self and others b. Solves social problems <p><u>Physical</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Demonstrates traveling skills 5. Demonstrates balancing skills 6. Demonstrates gross-motor manipulative skills 7. Demonstrates fine-motor strength and coordination <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Uses fingers and hands b. Uses writing and drawing tools <p><u>Language</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Listens to and understands increasingly complex language <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Comprehends language b. Follows directions 9. Uses language to express thoughts and needs <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Uses an expanding expressive vocabulary b. Speaks clearly c. Uses conventional grammar d. Tells about another time or place 10. Uses appropriate conversational and other communication skills <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Engages in conversations b. Uses social rules of language <p><u>Cognitive</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Demonstrates positive approaches to learning <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Attends and engages b. Persists c. Solves problems d. Shows curiosity and motivation e. Shows flexibility and inventiveness in thinking 12. Remembers and connects experiences <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Recognizes and recalls b. Makes connections 13. Uses classification skills 14. Uses symbols and images to represent something not present <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Thinks symbolically b. Engages in sociodramatic play 	<p><u>Literacy</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 15. Demonstrates phonological awareness <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Notices and discriminates rhyme b. Notices and discriminates alliteration c. Notices and discriminates smaller and smaller units of sound 16. Demonstrates knowledge of the alphabet <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Identifies and names letters b. Uses letter-sound knowledge 17. Demonstrates knowledge of print and its uses <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Uses and appreciate books b. Uses print concepts 18. Comprehends and responds to books and other texts <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Interacts during read-alouds and book conversations b. Uses emergent reading skills c. Retells stories 19. Demonstrates emergent writing skills <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Writes name b. Writes to convey meaning <p><u>Mathematics</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 20. Uses number concepts and operations <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Counts b. Quantifies c. Connects numerals with their quantities 21. Explores and describes spatial relationships and shapes <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Understands spatial relationships b. Understands shapes 22. Compares and measures 23. Demonstrates knowledge of patterns <p><u>Science and Technology</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 24. Uses scientific inquiry skills 25. Demonstrates knowledge of the characteristics of living things 26. Demonstrates knowledge of the physical properties of objects and materials 27. Demonstrates knowledge of Earth's environment 28. Uses tools and other technology to perform tasks <p><u>Social studies</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 29. Demonstrates knowledge about self 30. Shows basic understanding of people and how they live 31. Explores change related to familiar people or places 32. Demonstrates simple geographic knowledge <p><u>The Arts</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 33. Explores visual arts 34. Explores musical concepts and expression 35. Explores dance and movement concepts 36. Explores drama through actions and language
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Appendix C

Email to Participants

February 22, 2023

Dear _____,

My name is Julie Hoogland, and I am a current graduate student at Dordt University. Presently I am completing my action research project under the direction of Dr. Pat Kornelis. This research includes a phenomenological study of the instructional and assessment practices at Stepping Stones Preschool in Sioux Center, Iowa.

In order to complete my study, I am doing a series of interviews to glean more knowledge about the preschool practices. This email is to ask you for your participation in my study, which will consist of an interview lasting approximately 30-45 minutes. You will be asked a series of questions about your previous and current involvement with Stepping Stones Preschool. The interview questions will be sent to you prior to the interview to allow you time to consider them ahead of time. The benefits of your participation in this study will be the contributions of best practice instructional and assessment information to the school community and for other preschool establishments. The findings of the study may be of benefit to you, your colleagues, as well as any new teachers or parents.

The interview will be recorded and transcribed. Your name will be kept anonymous if you choose. There will be an opportunity to review the information gathered to ensure it accurately reflects the information shared during the interviews. The information from the interview will be published as part of the researcher's action research project.

Thank you in advance for your consideration. Interviews will be scheduled at a time of your convenience. Please respond to this email address jordanjulie@outlook.com to confirm your willingness to participate in this study. Please email me if you have any questions.

Regards,

Julie Hoogland

Appendix D
Informed Consent Form

Researcher: Julie Hoogland

Information and Purpose: The interview, of which you are being invited to participate, is on the topic of Stepping Stones Preschool in Sioux Center, IA and its corresponding instructional and assessment practices. The focus will be on examining your knowledge and experiences about the preschool itself.

Your participation: Your participation in this study will consist of an interview lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. You will be asked a series of questions about your experiences and involvement with Stepping Stones Preschool. At any time, you may notify the researcher that you would like to skip a question or stop the interview and participation in the study.

Benefits and Risks: The benefits of your participation in this study will be the contributions of best practice instructional and assessment information to the school community and for other preschool establishments. The findings of the study may be of benefit to you, your colleagues, as well as any new teachers or parents. There are no known risks associated with participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The interview will be recorded and transcribed. Your name will be kept anonymous, if you choose. There will be an opportunity to review the information gathered to

ensure it accurately reflects the information shared during the interviews. The information from the interview will be published as part of the researcher's action research project.

Thank you for your consideration. Interviews will be scheduled at a time of your convenience.

Please respond to this email address jordanjulie@outlook.com to confirm your willingness to participate in this study. Please email me if you have any questions. A signature below indicates your decision to participate.

Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix E**Interview Questions****Demographic Information (each participant)**

Name _____

Current Role of Participant: _____

Involvement with Stepping Stones Preschool _____

of years involved in Stepping Stones Preschool: _____

Interview Questions

1. Preschool History—Tell me what you know about the history of the Stepping Stones Preschool from when it began until today.
2. Preschool History—What is the mission and core values Stepping Stones Preschool? How did they evolve?
3. Teacher History—Tell me about your personal history and experiences with Stepping Stones Preschool.
4. Details of Experience—Describe the instructional practices used at Stepping Stones Preschool. How have the instructional practices changed from when they began until now?
5. Details of Experience—Describe the assessment practices used at Stepping Stones Preschool. How have the assessment practices changed from when they began until now?
6. Details of Experience—Describe how the preschool's mission aligns with the instructional and assessment practices. Describe what is well-aligned with the mission and any areas of improvement that you foresee.
7. Details of Experience—Describe the role of parents in the assessment process. What kind, if any, expectations are set for parents ahead of time?

8. Details of Experience—How does the data gathered in the assessment process get communicated and used?
9. Reflection on Meaning-- How does assessment impact the next steps in the learning process?
Is assessment part of a cycle—what does that cycle look like?
10. Reflection on Meaning—What are the benefits and challenges of the instructional and assessment practices?
11. Reflection and Meaning—Where do you see Stepping Stones going from here regarding instruction and assessment? What changes might be implemented to further your mission and vision?