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Collaborating in Crisis: A Case Study on the Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on
Georgia Pre-Kindergarten Program Providers

A Dissertation Project

Presented to the Faculty of the
Department of Public Policy and Administration
West Chester University
West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of
Doctor of Public Administration

By

Arlene A. Charles

May 2022

Dedication

To Kevaughn, Idris & Abdul Latif:

Thank for continuing to be my inspiration. A mother could not ask for better sons who have each in your own way encouraged me to continually pursue my dreams and goals. Continue to make your mark in the world in your own way.

To Shannon:

Thank you for your continual reminder that I could finish and that I had the power to complete what I started. You are wise beyond your years and the best sister a girl could ask for.

To Tres:

Sisterhood is amazing and I could never imagine gaining so much this late in life.

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Thank you to my Dad, Carl Charles, for encouraging me to face challenges head on with the knowledge that I had everything necessary to achieve and overcome. Through you I learned to “work smarter not harder”.

Abstract

Utilizing a mixed methods approach, this case study explores the level of resiliency demonstrated by Georgia Pre-kindergarten providers while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic based on surveys, interviews, and a review of publicly available information. Quantitative methods were used to identify the cases and to further assess organizational resiliency based on fiscal and enrollment indicators. Case study methodology was utilized to compare two Georgia Pre-kindergarten providers with different business types within two counties with vastly different socioeconomic poverty. Although the programs have access to similar resources, the non-profit entity was better prepared to continue serving students than the for-profit entity. The variables that significantly impacted both programs were leadership fatigue, technology, staffing, and socioeconomic status. Other contributing variables that impacted resiliency include staff feeling toward health and safety, and teacher's ability to meet teaching goals based how COVID-19 impacted students' attendance and classroom participation.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	7
Resources and Agency Oversight	7
Contractual Requirements.....	14
Network Effectiveness	16
Motivation.....	18
Principal Agent Relationship	20
Collaboration.....	21
Chapter 3: Data Collection and Methods.....	30
Participants	30
Site Selection.....	33
Business Indicators.....	35
Data Collection and Analysis.....	39
Limitations and Opportunities for Further Research.....	39
Chapter 4: Results and Analysis	41
Site Profile.....	41
Contracts and Budget	42
Research Question 1	49

Leadership Fatigue	49
Technology	51
Socioeconomic Impact	53
Research Question 2.....	54
Technology	55
Staffing	56
Health & Safety	58
Leadership Fatigue	59
Research Question 3.....	61
Socioeconomic Indicators.....	61
Technology Access.....	61
Summary of Results	62
Research Question 1.....	65
Research Question 2.....	66
Research Question 3.....	67
Dissertations Recommendations	69
References.....	72
Appendix A: IRB Approval.....	81
Appendix B: Electronic Survey Questions	82
Appendix C: Virtual Interview Questions	84
Appendix D: Participant Request.....	85

Appendix E: Participant Informed Consent..... 87

List of Tables

1. Table 1: Georgia Pre-Kindergarten Funded Slots by Provider Type.....	43
2. Table 2: Program funding by Academic Year	43
3. Table 3: Standard Pre-K Teacher Salaries	44
4. Table 4: Lead Teacher Salary Supplement	45
5. Table 5: Teacher Salaries and Benefits.....	46
6. Table 6: Program Spending by Category.....	48

Chapter 1: Introduction

Education is an essential public service provided by local government and implemented based on Federal and State policy. Some state departments of education utilize non-governmental entities to extend public services through collaborations defined as public private partnerships. The State of Georgia, like other government entities across the country, engage in formal collaborations to provide pre-kindergarten classrooms that expand education capacity to communities across their states. Public private partnerships in this context, leverage private provider capacity to increase student preparedness by creating a pathway that ensures more students meet developmental milestones. These milestones increase student readiness for their kindergarten through twelfth grade experience and beyond.

While all students are required to enroll in K-12 education by law, there is no requirement for students to participate in pre-kindergarten programs which places an additional burden on kindergarten programs to prepare students who have not reached a variety of developmental milestones. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER, 2020) indicates that *“without high-quality pre-kindergarten, children start kindergarten with lower skills.”* In the State of Georgia graduation rates have increased over a ten-year period from a low of 69.7% in 2012 to a high of 83.7% in 2021 (Georgia Department of Education, Press Release, October 2021), further longitudinal research could correlate pre-kindergarten effectiveness with high school graduation rates to demonstrate the importance of resilient pre-kindergarten programs.

As indicated by NIEER (2020), pre-kindergarten programs are a necessary component in student skill development and therefore it is essential that programs supporting state capacity be resilient amidst an ongoing crisis like the COVID-19 global pandemic. Georgia Quality Care for

Children (2021) states that “90% of a child’s brain is “hardwired” before the age of 5, setting the groundwork for future learning.” These assertions by institutions committed to supporting quality early education like NIEER and Quality Care for Children emphasizes the importance of resilience in the pre-kindergarten program in the state of Georgia. Quality child care in general is an essential service that crosses all workforce boundaries as articulated by The Conference Board, Committee for Economic Development (CED) (2020).

This study examines program resiliency from the perspective of program directors and lead teachers as they navigate the COVID-19 pandemic from onset through present, to see how well their organization adjusted to their new normal. Additionally, this research examines the compliance process associated with onboarding and monitoring programs to assess any inferences that can be made regarding their resilience and recommendations for program compliance improvements.

Future student outcomes, including graduation rates, could hinge upon the ability of Georgia pre-kindergarten program providers to continue providing pre-kindergarten education to students in conjunction with their Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, Bright from the Start, (DECAL) contract. This research examines the resiliency demonstrated by programs after pivoting to virtual curriculum delivery without advances preparation for themselves, their students, or parents. Teachers unaccustomed to delivering content digitally were then tasked with developing lessons to a population of students who may or may not have technology access based on their socioeconomic status Merfeldaitė, Prakapas, & Railienė (2021). Not only were teachers in unfamiliar territory with regards to delivering their content, but parents were also then forced to provide additional academic support while working from home or going to work every day. Diaz, 2021 found differences in the level of family academic support provided by

“medium-high socioeconomic level, with a higher education level” than those in “low socioeconomic level who lived in rural areas, with basic education level” which serves to expand the digital divide.

As articulated by Merfeldaité et. al. (2021), the immediate need to rely on technology placed significant pressure on the entire network of institutions supporting early learning services. Programs were then challenged with re-opening for service during a time of great uncertainty tied to resources, staffing, health, and safety at a level greater than previously experienced. Programs that were able to re-open could be deemed more resilient than programs who remained closed by the start of the next academic year.

The COVID-19 crisis also provides an opportunity to examine the impact that organizational resiliency has on collaborative public private partnerships charged with delivering pre-kindergarten education services. The study aims to identify any “*phenomena, themes, patterns*” (Bazeley, 2013) related to organizational resiliency in crisis, which exists among the pre-kindergarten providers based on their business type. The research intends to draw conclusions and provide recommendations utilizing the perspectives or experiences of their program directors and lead educators, level of fiscal ability to continue executing financially, or any other contributing variables affecting their resiliency.

Utilizing case study methodology, two pre-kindergarten providers, with different business types within a high (\$119,568) and low (\$42,895) median household income zip code in the State of Georgia serve as sites and participants sharing their journey navigating the COVID-19 pandemic (Census.gov). The researcher hopes to gain an understanding of variables that may contribute to program resilience including business type, staffing, technology, and leadership

fatigue through surveys, semi-structured interviews, and an analysis of publicly available program information.

Specifically, this research intends to compare the challenges faced by a non-profit youth serving organizations with a contract to serve Georgia Pre-kindergarten students compared to a for-profit agency with the same contractual obligations. Utilizing a mixed methods approach, a case study will explore the level of resiliency demonstrated by providers based on their business type from a quantitative perspective and utilize qualitative methods to identify “*themes, phenomenon*” (Bazeley, 2013), or differences that contribute to or detract from its impact the ability to continue fulfilling the terms of their collaborative agreements and meeting the established programmatic outcomes.

Non-profit organizations play a critical role in serving the needs of people in communities by providing public goods when either the government or market fails to supply a public good or service (Worth, 2017, Kettl, 2015, Weisbrod, 1972, Willems, Jergers, & Faulk, 2015). Within the Georgia pre-kindergarten program, DECAL utilizes non-profit and for-profit businesses along side quasi-government entities to increase pre-kindergarten capacity that supplements program local school system capacity. For-profit entity participation in the program can depend on its motivation which may include potential fiscal implications to their business model and the capacity to meet contractual obligations, while non-profit motivation is assumed to be its contribution to the public good. Non-profit motivation can also be based on financial benefits beyond mission as well.

While motivation for program participation may be different, the ability to recover from crisis may depend on multiple variables that contribute to their ability to continue executing the requirements of the contract, educating the students in the program, and sustaining the level of

staff needed defined as resiliency in this study. Government decision makers consider organizational motivation and capacity through an application process to execute a collaborative agreement, but there may be improvements to the process that are necessary to ensure standard service congruency for all students in the program especially in the context of an ongoing health crisis.

This study examines the resiliency of pre-kindergarten providers as an additional variable for further consideration in Georgia pre-kindergarten provider selection and suitability for future public private partnerships. Research of Georgia pre-kindergarten provider resilience in this provides an opportunity to explore other important public administration topics, theories, and practices including the effectiveness of public private partnerships, formal collaborations, partnerships supported by contractual agreements.

Additionally, research regarding motivation, the impetus for completion or participation in a project or program, and the “*free-rider*” concept (O’Leary, 2015) evidenced by the participation of children whose parents could afford paid private pre-kindergarten services are also import theories in practice that impact program resilience (Perry, 2008). Program participation is open to all students regardless of income however, students whose parents who could afford to pay for pre-kindergarten services and would likely pay for private services if this program participation were not available, are enrolled which limits the number of low-income students, whose parents are less likely or unable to enroll their students based on costs.

Relevant literature exists to support this research regarding resources and agency oversight, contractual requirements, network effectiveness, motivation, principal agent relationships, and collaboration (Kettl, 2015, Agranoff, 2007, Agranoff, 2017). Additional pre-kindergarten specific literature regarding staffing, lottery funding, and the sustainability of pre-

kindergarten programs has also been reviewed in conjunction with this study to help contextualize program resiliency amid an ongoing, unpredictable crisis (Beltman, Dobson, Mansfield, & Jay, 2020, Merfeldaitė et. al., 2021, Gearey, 1997, Kimble-Hill, Rivera-Figueroa, Chan, Lawal, Gonzalez, Adams, Heard, Gazley, & Fiore-Walker, 2020, Nold, De Jong, Moran, Robinson, & Aderhold, 2021).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The State of Georgia expands its capacity to deliver early learning pre-kindergarten by collaborating with entities characterized as non-profit, for profit, and quasi-governmental through a public private partnership funded with lottery proceeds. Unlike a natural disaster, a pandemic does not provide a clear path for continuation of services which serves as the imperative for strong resilient collaborations.

Program resiliency and sustainability is dependent upon the selection of the right program providers, compliance with DECAL regulations, and the ability of the selected programs to meet expected programmatic outcomes. Risks associated with program facilitation changes dramatically during a crisis for both the oversight agency and the service delivery provider. This study examines the practices necessary to support effective administration of public private partnerships.

Resources and Agency Oversight

Non-profit organization leadership and boards set goals regarding mission attainment, but no single entity is charged with oversight or delivery of the public good received by its constituents. The current state of the public sector is similar to that of the “Hollow State” articulated by Milward and Provan (2000) where no one is agency is fully in charge and able to deliver comprehensive services needed by the community (Ferlie, Lynn, and Pollitt, 2005). In their research, Milward and Provan (2000) found that effective governance can be achieved in a network with a transparent principal agent relationship governed by a strong stable lead organization that produces its own services. Effectiveness in this example was achieved with infrequent turn over of provider and providers that were well resourced to deliver upon it stated mission and services (Milward & Provan, 2000).

DECAL serves as the backbone organization charged with overseeing the pre-kindergarten program and all compliance for childcare establishments in the State of Georgia. In 1985 the Governor of Georgia, Zell Miller, an educator, championed the need for a statewide pre-kindergarten program to close the extensive learning gap that existed in kindergarten readiness for low-income children in the state (Raden, 1999). In the context of early learning services, the State of Georgia lacked the capacity to provide pre-kindergarten access to all 4-year-old children in the state and depends on its public private partnerships to expand that capacity, therefore effective governance is required for program success.

The initial program proposal was designed and developed for low-income children whose kindergarten readiness was negatively skewed indicating a higher percentage of students who were unprepared for kindergarten which contribute to long-term education attainment (Raden, 1999, Bellm, Burton, Whitebook, Broatch, Young, 2002). The initial pre-kindergarten proposal required three essential elements for successful implementation: funding, legislative support, and classroom capacity (Raden, 1999).

To resolve the funding challenges, the Governor Zell Miller recommended the use of lottery revenue (Raden, 1999). Lottery funding at the time of this proposal provided a significant amount of discretionary funding to the state that could be reallocated, over and above any education funding earmarked for traditional K-12 endeavors (Raden, 1999). Funding for early learning services continues to be challenging for Georgia and many other states as articulated by Bellm et. al. (2002). NIEER (2020) has indicated the universally, pre-kindergarten spending has declined across the United States and that COVID could result in significant cuts that can impact accessibility to quality early learning programs as indicated by (Chesnut, Mosier, Sugimoto, Ruddy, 2017).

Many stakeholders questioned how this program could impact future education funding and programs like Head Start (Raden, 1999). The Georgia Pre-kindergarten program, funded primarily by lottery proceeds, enlists the services of non-profit, for profit, quasi-governmental, and local school systems to expand the needed classroom capacity for implementation and service delivery to provide over 84,000 pre-kindergarten slots throughout the State of Georgia (Georgia Board of Early Learning & Care Minutes 5/14/2020).

Barry (1996) and Fields (1996) as articulated in Stanley and French (2004), tout the use of lottery funds to bolster education resources by states however as articulated by Raden (1999), the use of lottery funds and the issue of social equity would ultimately arise as negative factor as legislative, educator, and private provider stakeholders challenged the provision of service to low-income students exclusively. There are societal challenges to be reconciled from the past and present as lottery funding, according to Gearey (1997), encourages people to spend money they can least afford to lose in pursuit of a financial windfall that may never happen. Alternately, Brady & Pijanowski (2007) speak to the reality of lotteries as a “regressive form of taxation” and negative impact of uncontrolled gambling as expresses by Stanley and French (2005).

Conversely, public figures questioned the provision of services to all students regardless of their socioeconomic status since a higher percentage of people who play the lottery are from low-income communities (Raden, 1999). Although the pre-kindergarten program is not primarily funded through standard government education resources, effective pre-kindergarten programs could have a future impact on the overarching societal goal of increasing high school graduation rates leading to future issues of viability and reliance on funds that while supporting a public good, also has a negative impact on under resourced individuals and communities (Stanley & French, 2004, Gearey, 1997). Further, the reliance on lottery funding could put the future of the

pre-kindergarten program in danger if proceeds drop because of future crisis like COVID-19 that increases unemployment and reduction in income of those who would normally play and indirectly fund the program.

The Georgia pre-kindergarten program was expanded to include all four-year-old students regardless of their socioeconomic status reinforcing the “*free-rider*” (O’Leary, 2015) consequences that potentially reduce the number of lower income student benefitting from revenues primarily generated by low-income people in communities that need the program the most (Raden, 1999, CFE&EP, 2017). The Georgia pre-kindergarten program serves as an example of the legislative negotiating required to gain broad support which can the initial programs stated objective of a public program which in this case was to ensure that low-income student, who are less likely to be ready for kindergarten, and the skills and education necessary to start kindergarten at the same level as their peers.

Extending capacity required the buy in of private providers who did not initially apply to participate in the program based on concerns regarding marketability, branding, quality, and competition in serving elevated level of low-income students (Raden, 1999). This hesitancy by private providers jeopardized the program in its entirety as private classroom capacity served as a lynch pin for programmatic goal attainment as insufficient capacity would render the program inoperable (Raden, 1999). The pre-kindergarten grant is designed to rely on existing capacity of program providers rather than funding stand alone programs (Raden, 1999). The grant, as shown in TABLE 2, funds staff, instructions materials, and some operating funds to providers with existing early care locations.

All organizations that serve as program locations, despite their business structure, are regulated through Bright from the Start, a DECAL division (Raden, 1999). Organizational needs

and motivations have been previously researched while community or client level needs in relation to those service providers has not been as extensively researched (Provan & Milward 2001). For-profit organizations were late supporters of the original program and currently there are over 80,000 students in the State of Georgia, as shown in TABLE 1 served by non-profit, for-profit, quasi-governmental, and local school systems (Board of Early Care & Learning Board meeting, 5/14/2020, DECAL staff reports, section g).

While all providers are contracted to provide the same services based on DECAL rules implemented by Bright from the Start, there is no guarantee that students receive the equivalent impact during normal times and acutely exacerbate learning gaps during a crisis based on organizational resiliency. This lack of equivalent or congruent services can have an impact on the perception of effectiveness as articulated by Kettl (2015) and Ferlie et. al. (2005) and as further noted “final results depend on the efforts by the companies” (Fernandez, Saulo, Carraro, Tourruco & Hilbrecht, 2018, Chesnut et. al., 2017). Hadjielias, Christofi & Tarba, (2022) provide guidance to small business in crisis that links resilience in the business context to resilience of leadership finding that more life balance created the necessary skills needed to handle the challenges associated with the pandemic (Hadjielias et. al., 2022).

During March of 2020, the Governor of Georgia Brian Kemp utilized an executive order to close schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Georgia Office of the Governor, Press Release, March 16, 2020). This action forced many providers to close their doors either temporarily or permanently. This closure caused parents, including frontline workers, to seek alternative care or remain at home with their children. Pre-kindergarten providers transferred their lessons from in-person to virtual and everyone, prepared or not, began to rely on increased levels of technology. This was especially challenging for programs that were not prepared, with the right skills or

equipment to effectively deliver on program objectives remotely. As mentioned in the Board of Early Learning minutes from May 2020, some providers prepared written packets for students without technology. There was no indication that this practice was required of all providers which highlights the potential for incongruent services amid the COVID-19 crisis.

Delivering early learning services requires the presence of a workforce, which at this juncture is predominantly women, some of whom have children (Li, 2020, Hanno, McCoy, Sabol, & Gonzalez, 2021)). The strain of a global pandemic on leadership and teachers can impact the future of early education availability and quality of the education received by students with teachers making decision to leave the profession (Kazouh, Hollowell, Fox, Bentley-Edwards, & Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2020). Li (2020) examined the impact pre-kindergarten program availability had on workforce choices for women with 4-year-old children and found that there was not a significant impact.

Challenges with COVID-19 presents additional opportunities to study the affect and impact on women's workforce choices when early learning and pre-kindergarten programs were not available. Future research opportunities exist to examine the departure of women from early learning roles to identify the reason why they left. This may have been a hard choice for many women, especially those working in early learning and having school aged kids who were also required to participate in virtual learning.

As articulated by Hackler and Saxton (2007), gaps in technology utilization can have a critical impact on non-profit organizational ability to fulfill mission. In the case of the pre-kindergarten program this assessment can also be true for small for-profit organizations involved in public partnerships who may not have prioritized the used of technology in the program or their organization. Technology serves as the lynch pin that universally determined the initial

stages of resiliency for the pre-kindergarten program and society as a whole at the onset and throughout the pandemic. Brown & Englehardt (2017) articulate that technology challenges beyond accessibility and availability of technology resources serve as barrier to technology introduction into the classroom. They identified challenges based on a teacher's willingness to incorporate technology in their lessons due to their own level of comfort utilizing technology (Brown & Englehardt, 2017). These feelings can be a greater challenge when a crisis like COVID-19 forces teachers that lack technology proficiency to rely on its use to reach and engage with their students (Brown & Englehardt, 2017).

Prior studies have examined universal pre-kindergarten programs impact on women in the workforce, pre-service educator insights on their experience with pre-kindergarten programs, and the use of lottery funds in education (Akaba, Peters, Liang, & Graves, 2020, Li, 2020, Chesnut et. al., 2017). In each study, the researchers identify challenges associated with facilitating public program with high market demand but a failure by government to fully fund (Akaba et. al., 2020, Li, 2020, Chesnut et. al., 2017). In the case of the Georgia pre-kindergarten program, gaps in student readiness for low-income students was identified as a community need that could be fulfilled and supported by a formal public private partnership but this service now extends to all students which dilutes the original program intent and has the potential to further marginalize low-income students.

Future research is needed to correlate the benefits received by lower income communities that play the lottery at a higher percentage and therefore primarily responsible for generating the revenues targeted for use in this program (Raden, 1999, Stanley & French, 2004, Gearey, 1997, Ferlie et. al., 2005). Identify the percentage low-income students benefiting will determine the magnitude of the problem associated with this initiative which provides free services to families

that could afford to pay for the services or contribute to the generated revenue at a lower percentage (Raden, 1999, Stanley & French, 2004, Gearey, 1997, Ferlie et. al., 2005, O’Leary, 2015).

According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER, 2020), future funding for pre-kindergarten was already in peril after the Great Recession of 2007 and now the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic threatens to exacerbate those funding losses if pre-kindergarten is not deemed a public policy priority. Georgia has sustained some losses in lottery funding during the pandemic and has cut funding to the pre-kindergarten program demonstrating the risks associated with lottery program funding (Georgia Senate, 2020, Abusaid, 2020)

Contractual Requirements

This research provides an opportunity to explore the impact of public collaboration on service delivery and outcomes among the organizations that are contracted through Bright from the Start to provide pre-kindergarten services based in Fulton and Dekalb Counties which are ranked first and fourth respectively based on population. As articulated by Agranoff (2017), public private contracts need to be well managed in order to provide intended outcomes. DECAL establishes a contractual relationship with providers indicating their agreement to follow rules related to curriculum, staffing, safety, ratios, transportations, and monitoring. As articulated by Milward & Provan (2000) and Kettl (2005), effective governance requires a contractual agreement that accurately reflects the expectations of the partnership.

Since the program aims to provide kindergarten readiness services for pre-kindergarten students regardless of their socioeconomic background, DECAL should consider service congruency in selecting providers. As principal agent theory indicates, the services and experiences by clients may be incongruent since different providers can have various levels of

effectiveness (Kettl, 2015, Ferlie et. al., 2005). The application and policies establish a standard process by which all potential providers are accountable and assessed.

The success or failure of this formal collaboration relies on the effectiveness of the providers and Bright from the Starts ongoing oversight which prior to the pandemic included an ongoing, in person, licensing/monitoring review. The execution of the program in compliance with the contract and the oversight process was interrupted by the pandemic in March of 2020 with the closing of public schools and site are still being evaluated virtually by state monitors (DECAL, Annual Report Inspection FAQ, May 2020).

Forrer et. al (2014) as articulated in Worth (2017) denotes that adequate “*governance and accountability*” (are components of successful public private partnerships. Each provider is required to complete an annual application for funding in the Spring for the upcoming the academic year. Awards are based on the number of potential underserved 4-year-old children through-out a county for which enrollment capacity in the public school system is limited (DECAL, New Applicant Packet, 2021). Fulton and Dekalb County providers qualified for the highest level one funding for counties with less than 55% of potential pre-kindergarten student capacity and more than 60 students awaiting slots (DECAL, New Applicant Packet, 2021). As noted by Milward & Provan (2000), frequent bid cycles can have a negative impact on effectiveness. In the context of this research, there is an opportunity to explore bid the impact of bid frequency further as program providers are required to apply annually.

In the context of a global pandemic, the successful execution of contract requirements can be challenging and have a marked impact on program impact and outcomes. Gaps in pre-award fiscal assessment can lead to grant awarded to agencies that do not have the ability to sustain the program in time of crisis. Resilience in this formal collaboration requires a strong,

nimble, oversight agency able to provide continuous guidance and nimble qualified providers with the ability to fulfil the contracts requirement.

Network Effectiveness

Provan & Milward (2001) articulate the difficulty associated with assessing the effectiveness of networks and the synthesis required at the network, community, and client level.

There is an opportunity to correlate effectiveness and resiliency in the context of a global pandemic. Understanding effectiveness and resiliency of private public collaborations is important to the field of public administration as a result of government reluctance to fully own the responsibility for human service actions by choosing to outsource social services to agencies through principal agent relationships (Kettl, 2015; Agranoff, 2007). By outsourcing pre-kindergarten services, state departments of education are extending their networks and therefore responsible for ensuring that the relationships are effectively incorporated into the existing network.

This research may indicate which variables contribute and correlate more with a programs resiliency to fulfill principal agent contract obligations during the pandemic. This research may also be an opportunity to examine other variables, beyond business type engaged in private partnership collaborations that emerge as a better predictor of resilient service delivery, outcomes, and collective action during a pandemic. As Georgia continues to rely upon non-governmental organizations to supplement the delivery of education services, it will need to assess contingency plans to support program continuity during a crisis.

Provan & Milward (2001) indicate, the highest performing networks with principal agent relationships were overseen by an organization with “direct, non fragmented, external control” (Provan & Milward, 2001, p. 367). Although the Georgia Department of Early Care and

Learning, Bright from the Start (BFTS) serves as the single agency with contractual oversight authority over the pre-kindergarten program and responsible for ensuring programmatic compliance, in the context of a crisis, the benefits derived by having one agency in charge of the program does not guarantee the effectiveness of the program during crisis. Effectiveness in this context is dependant on the ability of the principal, DECAL to hold the agents, pre-kindergarten providers, accountable in times when a fast-moving crisis changed all institutional norms (Willems et. al., 2015, Hadjielias et. al., 2022)

The oversight agency can issue directives, provide additional funding, and recommend supportive procedures but has no real control over delivery and implementation. The oversight that BFTS provides cannot guarantee that a contracted agency has the tools, resources, and capacity to delivery program requirements beyond the classroom in a way that continues to meet programmatic goals and support student outcomes. Public private partnership relationships, as articulated by Fernandez, et. al. (2018), allows government to transfer the inherent risk of operating this program to private sector organizations. In the case of the pre-kindergarten program, DECAL has transferred the risk to its contracted partners who may or may not be resilient enough to continue serving during a global pandemic even for which there is no real or perceived end.

While non-profit organizations supply services primarily as a result of governmental market failure or small government ideology (*principal-agent theory*), there are no mechanisms or requirements to ensure that the institutional supply fits the needs of the community (Salamon, 1987; Provan & Milward, 2001; Kettl, 2015; Gronbjerg, 1990). Further, non-profit agency mission-based services are self-regulated. Therefore, other than legal requirements, tax

requirements, or funding requirements, there are no incentives to consider community needs or to choose specific geographic locations within the community's social service ecosystem.

Organizations that have the ability to make a higher financial investment or are more fiscally sustainable should not be confused with the ability to be more effective or resilient. In the pre-kindergarten context, organizations with more funding or the ability to re-open more quickly than others may not be more effective in terms of service delivery to their clients. As seen in TABLE 2 the for-profit daycare providers received more funding but may not be any better off financially or in terms of service delivery than the non-profit provider.

Motivation

The theory of motivation, in the non-profit context, can serve as a powerful determinant for the work conducted by the team assembled by a non-profit to execute its mission (Perry, 2008). The existence of motivation by the entity to secure the grant funds and deliver pre-kindergarten services acts as a contributing or controlling variable in the service delivery outcomes and its ability to be resilient in a crisis cannot be dismissed. With non-profit motive focused on mission driven objectives and for-profit entities focus primarily on return on investment, comparing these two types of entities can help assess the level of motivation needed to be resilient during a crisis (Worth, 2017). As previously considered, organizations and individuals are motivated to act based on the satisfaction of their hierarchical needs as articulated by Maslow (1943) and examined by Provan and Milward (2001).

From an organizational perspective pre-kindergarten program resiliency requires sustainable resources, the appropriate team, and the right level of motivation to effectively serve the needs of the students in the program (Provan & Milward, 2001). If an organization is not fiscally prudent, able to garner and sustain the resources necessary to meet its mission, it is

unlikely to have the human capital or resources to serve the community thereby unable to achieve its mission or collective community outcomes.

The pre-kindergarten program grant provides funding for staffing, and a small percentage for operating costs therefore grantees must have other means of keeping its doors open. Program providers are likely to provide day care services to families with infant, toddler, and pre-school aged children with classroom capacity to serve pre-kindergarten students and therefore the motivation to create an additional stream of income to support some of its auxiliary operating cost such as food service with new line of business like before and after care.

Non-profits are mission based and therefore invested in service to clients, for profit entities are profit based and while serving clients, are motivated to provide value to its owners and shareholders (Worth, 2017). Within the context of the pre-kindergarten program, both business while motivated for varied reasons and are contractual required to deliver service even in the midst of a crisis. Pre-kindergarten providers without the appropriate level of resources, both monetary and technical, may not have the ability continue to serve the students or have the financial ability to retain their team to meet contractual obligations which directly impacts their resiliency. Fiscal viability prior to the crisis, could correlate directly with fiscal viability during and post crisis. COVID-19 has been an ongoing crisis and therefore its implications on resiliency and sustainability exacerbated for Pre-kindergarten providers.

Staff and Leader motivation to continue working in early learning may present opportunities for future research as the workforce landscape in early learning is changed very quickly with COVID-19. Programs that furloughed or laid staff members off due to the pandemic, may have experienced challenges getting staff members to return to work due to increased financial benefits that may have exceeded their early learning compensation, the lack

of childcare for their own school aged children, or teaching fatigue associated with teaching during crisis. Experienced teachers may have challenges finding the motivation for early learning education they experienced at the beginning of their careers (Kim, An, Bell, Jean-Sigur, & Basch, 2021).

Principal Agent Relationship

Historically, there have been high levels of interest reducing the size of government (Kettl, 2015, Agranoff, 2017). The establishment of principal agent relationships provides the appearance of a smaller government approach but it truly not a reduction in the resources needed to serve the public (Salamon, 1987, O’Leary, 2015, Kettl, 2015, Agranoff, 2017)). The challenge with the small government approach through these types of relationships is that citizens are not guaranteed the same level of service even when resources are evenly distributed (Kettl, 2015, Milward & Provan, 2000).

As Salamon (1987) indicates, community facing, non-profit social service agencies help solve some of the problems experienced by the most vulnerable segments of the population and as such, leveraging community resources without considering a holistic perspective may affect outcomes for individuals within a community. The same can be said for the Georgia Pre-kindergarten program as each grantee is responsible for recruitment of teachers, developing its enrollment policies, and executing its program based on the curriculum defined its application but no two teachers are equivalently effective, and the enrollment process is recommended but not standardized (DECAL, Provider Guidelines 2021-2022).

Future opportunities for research exist for understanding the congruency between public private partnerships and community outcomes. As in this case, DECAL relies on private providers to serve almost 50% of the funded pre-kindergarten slots which would represent a

significant risk should programs fail to reopen and functions during and after a crisis. Findings may be able to further correlate the indicators or determinants needed for resiliency in provider of public good and services.

Collaboration

Non-profit organizations are motivated to collaborate for diverse reasons including legitimacy, capacity, and resources dependency (Guo & Acar, 2005, Provan & Milward, 2001, Sowa, 2009, Stoll, Edwards, Mynatt, 2010, O’Leary, 2015). An organization’s decision to collaborate with other non-profit organizations is not as straight forward as one might expect. Decisions are affected by the competitive nature of resource allocation and role of trust in shared governance (Bunger, 2012, Kettl, 2015).

Collaborations can be characterized as formal, informal, or mandated through funders, motivated by either client-service delivery needs or an organization’s internal needs, and can result in collective community outcomes (Jang, Feiock, Saitgalina, 2016). However, as empirical studies have shown, there is an organizational tendency towards informal collaboration (Sowa, 2009, Bunger, 2012, Jang et. al., 2016).

The Georgia pre-kindergarten program is a formal collaboration with private entities supporting the government with space to delivery educational services. These formal collaborations are mostly indirectly beneficial to the providers as the grant does not provide significant resources for program execution or true operating costs. Primary benefit for the selected program includes access to families with children aged birth to 3 in the families they serve with a free program.

Formal collaborations are intentional engagements by which organizations establish a partnership through a signed agreement articulating the terms and conditions by which they both

agree to abide (Guo & Acar, 2005). Contracts with a governmental entity to provide prescribed services based on agreed terms would be considered a formal collaboration for a non-profit entity. From the government's perspective, this formal arrangement forms a principal agent relationship where the governmental unit is the principal, and the provider organization serves as the agent.

As articulated by Kettl (2015) and O'Leary (2015), successful public partnerships require the government to have the right mechanisms in place to manage the effectiveness of the partnership. DECAL connects programs to other opportunities for formal partnerships to help support low-income families including the federal Child and Adult Food Program (CACFP) to provide funding for food reimbursement and the Childcare and parent services program (CAPS) to assist parents with childcare costs.

Informal collaborations are not supported by a signed contractual partnership agreement but based on an agreement to work together to share information or resources in order to facilitate cooperation between collaborators (Guo & Acar, 2005). These informal agreements do not establish binding deliverables but instead informally agree upon how the parties would work together to advance their shared interest. Organizations in the same geographic location have an opportunity to holistically serve the population and increase opportunities for service delivery by engaging in these types of collaborations (Jang et. al., 2016).

Mandated collaborations include those that require organizations to collaborate or meet certain legal standards in order to qualify for contractual remuneration (Guo & Acar, 2005). Some funders require that organizations collaborate as a condition for funding therefore, collaboration is an essential component of the organization's operations for those funders (Guo & Acar, 2005). Pre-kindergarten providers are not required to utilize mandated collaborations,

outside of the DECAL network, as a result of their contract with DECAL but have a list of mandated requirements for operating the program. According to Taking Measures (2012) from the Georgia Center for Non-Profits (GCN), funders considered collaboration an essential determinant in its funding decision 35% of the time but considered leadership and sustainability 80% and 65% respectively (Georgia Center for Non-profits- Taking Measure, 2012).

Irrespective of the type of collaboration chosen by the non-profit entity or the impetus for collaboration, the first step in the collaboration decision is an assessment of the benefits and the risks. The findings in Jang et. al. (2016) indicate that large non-profit organizations are less likely to choose collaboration as an option when weighing the benefits against the cost while alternately, a small not profit organization may look toward collaboration to extend its administrative capacity and legitimacy through collaboration. Provan and Milward (2001) suggest that networks are more effective when they expand their ability to solve public problems.

The State of Georgia chose a public private collaboration with non-profit, for-profit, and quasi governmental providers as the solution for pre-kindergarten capacity initially to solve the public problem associated with the high level of low-income children who were unprepared for school. Selden, Sowa, Sandfort (2006) explore the potential benefits defined as values, perceived or actual, that the organization and its clients derive from collaboration.

Parents in Georgia regardless of their socioeconomic status, benefit from this free program, but during a global crisis, the benefits could change significantly. Parents who can afford a better experience for their children in the form of tutors learning pods, may choose that option, but under resourced parents with limited or no technology may have no options to supplement their children's learning opportunities.

These benefits could translate into cohesive service delivery that increases the trust between non-profit and client resulting in the client receiving additional benefits that they would otherwise not have awareness of or access (Selden, Sowa, and Sandfort, 2006). Unlike for-profit businesses, the products produced by non-profit organizations are harder to quantify as outcomes rather than outputs. However, Guo & Acar (2005) emphasize the economic and psychological benefits associated with reduced costs to serve and can be view as the opposing reason for non-profit collaboration. The perceived quality associated of a free service versus one that parents might pay for has not prevented pre-kindergarten parents in Georgia with financial means from accessing or utilizing the program. Further research is required to assess who is truly benefiting from the Georgia pre-kindergarten program.

Quantifying the outcomes achieved by clients as a result of the services they receive requires in depth assessment and evaluation over time for human service agencies. Agencies have a specific mission, yet clients are not monolithic. There are complex needs that may require the overlapping solutions that programs may not be equipped to provide. Sowa (2009) articulates the need for organizations to understand how collaborations are beneficial in the organizational and programmatic context, but organizations must also understand the benefits to clients and their outcomes to understand the effectiveness of their programs and organizations.

An agency that serves the homeless cannot simply provide permanent housing, they must understand all social determinants associated with the client that may prevent them from maintaining permanent housing. If an individual cannot sustain gainful employment as a result of behavioral health challenges, they may be unable to sustain permanent housing.

An agency serving this population needs to assess the challenges as perceived by the agency and the individual so that a sustainable path to permanent housing can be developed.

Similarly, a pre-kindergarten program charged with educating students in person, may not be prepared to pivot to virtual learning since this is not a core competency for programs and the accessibility to technology for organizations and parents may be unavailable or unreliable. As reflected by Brown and Engelhardt (2017), many teachers in training had difficulty incorporating the use of technology into their lesson plans and one could infer that if technology was not currently a part of a program, pivoting during a crisis would be very difficult.

Organizational awareness, service and funding competition, and organizational capacity are some of the barriers that impede collaboration by non-profit organizations (Guo & Acar, 2005, Stoll et. al., 2010). Organizational awareness can be defined as an organization's knowledge of its service area and the providers within that service area to which they could refer their clients for additional services for which they are not a direct service provider (Stoll et. al., 2010). Program providers have access to support from external resources like Quality Care for Children to support its program and challenges how ever in the midst of crisis, how much they can rely upon organizations that are experiencing the crisis is the same way is questionable.

Pre-kindergarten programs for whom technology is not a primary part of their program may not have access or awareness of how to get help beyond the support received from DECAL Bright from the Start could impact their resiliency. DECAL provided funding support during the crisis but was unprepared to support program technology. It is important to note that according to the Board of Early Learning February 2020 minutes, DECAL, in compliance with the State of Georgia cyber requirements, was in the process of upgrading its central technology systems.

Service providers lacking information on available services and providers in geographic proximity to their service location, described as "*existence awareness*" by Stoll et. al (2010). Providers miss an opportunity to extend their organizational capacity as articulated by Alter and

Hage (1993) in Thellufsen et. al (2008), as awareness serves as the primary prerequisite for establishing organizational collaborations. DECAL program provides significant support for programs through their website however, it is unclear how the program encourages providers who may be in the proximity to one another the opportunity to collaborate beyond annual required training opportunities.

This lack of awareness creates risk for organizations that rely primarily on “*internal awareness*” through informal collaborations with partners in an existing network (Stoll et. al., 2010). When an organization relies only on organizations based on familiarity, their clients may lose essential services if that provider closes its door or changes its service portfolio. For programs without existing partners beyond DECAL, securing cleaning supplies, and personal protective equipment was a challenge in the midst of the pandemic. With fierce competition for dwindling resources, trust can be a barrier preventing organizations with complimentary services from collaborating, but scholars indicate that organization’s resource dependence can be the impetus they need to reduce their resource dependence risk (Sowa, 2009).

Resource dependent organizations may need to collaborate out of necessity if they want to receive funding and may not have the option to walk away from collaborative opportunities through partners with whom they have no experience (Sowa, 2009). Large organizations with sufficient resources can be more intentional about their partners by choosing to forgo partnerships with organizations that threaten their resource security (Sowa, 2009).

Organizational Effectiveness

Non-profit organizations must also consider competition for the services they provide. In the context of a non-profit serving pre-kindergarten students, the product, or education they deliver is standardized but parental program selection will depend on the perceived effectiveness

and competency of the provider by parents or guardians in search of their services. Clients may choose one provider over another based on the rapport, and relationship created with the service provider that translates into trust. Parents can choose their pre-kindergarten provider but in Year 1 of the pandemic the Georgia Governor Brian Kemp halted the program, centers closed, and parents who were required to go into work were left without care for their children. Existing choice and competition exacerbated by the pandemic reduced childcare options and increased competition for childcare providers.

From a client perspective, the theory of *rational choice* utilized to choose providers may not be clear based on provider availability (Kettl, 2015, pp. 86-87). In a market where government supply of service is nonexistent, and other providers are ill-equipped, a client has three choices, use the existing provider, pay for services through a for-profit provider or go without needed services (Weisbrod, 1972, Agranoff, 2017). This challenge is more acute in high poverty areas where providers are scarce, and clients do not have the resources to secure paid services (Lee, 2017). Poverty leaves clients without options if government does not serve as a provider of social services.

Considering the barriers to service delivery, a diminished presence of non-profit entities in communities with lower socioeconomic status suggests that communities that have the highest need may not have available services to serve those in need which then exacerbates the historical problems suffered in communities like the Westside of Atlanta (Lee, 2017). This inference creates opportunities for further research on how well the non-profit organizations located in communities with high levels of poverty are performing, strategies leveraged for sustainability, and positive community outcomes.

Scholars have examined the effectiveness of the non-profit sector through studies that examine collaboration, effectiveness, awareness, collaborative governance, sustainability, and organizational/geographic networks (Guo & Acar, 2005, Provan & Milward, 2001, Sowa, 2009, Lee, 2017). Little research exists to examine the broader organizational characteristics that effect service delivery and community outcomes from the institution, community perspective and client level. The COVID-19 pandemic has created the need to further study the impact on kindergarten preparedness for students enrolled in the Georgia pre-kindergarten program facilitated by private businesses as compared to those fully incorporated into the public school system.

Effectiveness measured from the organization's perspective may leave a gap that fails to explore the experience of the communities and individuals who are receiving services (Provan & Milward, 2001). Therefore, measurement should occur at all stakeholder levels and most importantly, at the community-wide level, and at the client level to ensure that stakeholder needs are met (Provan & Milward, 2001). In this study, the pre-kindergarten program grantee effectiveness is interpreted in terms of resiliency. More research is needed to bridge the gap between organizational collaboration and community outcomes to gain a better understanding of how smaller non-profit organizations can leverage their collective resource to improve community outcomes.

There is no one measurement tool or resource for clients to assess the effectiveness of their selected provider, nor is there one single standard to which the voluntary sector subscribes. For those organizations that provide some form of health services, the standard of care is established by regulatory agencies external to the industry like the Joint Commission for Hospitals, but for organizations providing education and advocacy service for example, there is no specific standard of care.

DECAL sets the standard for Pre-kindergarten providers and requires compliance with rules and regulations; however, DECAL relies on the effectiveness of its providers to ensure the delivery of services based on its standards which can vary based on the experience of the provider and could significantly change in the times of crisis. Ultimate effectiveness of the program is measured by students reaching pre-kindergarten milestones; therefore, program resiliency is a required element to reach those milestones.

Additional research to examine the effectiveness of early learning collaborations and the effect on community and client outcomes is required (Provan & Milward, 2001, Diamond-Berry & Ezeh, 2020). For networks with a single agency charged with leading the network, Chen and Graddy (2010) emphasize the importance of determining the variables that contribute to network effectiveness including appropriate partner selection. DECAL requires partners to complete an application process to determine their appropriateness, but the process is not risk free and in the context of a global pandemic, reliability can be questioned. Scholars agree on the challenges associated with measuring outcomes, but few have researched, community and participant level outcomes (Provan & Milward, 2001, Chen & Graddy, 2010, Weisbrod, 1972, Diamond-Berry & Ezeh, 2020). This gap in research, leaves an opportunity to further research student level outcomes as they related the program resiliency in the Georgia pre-kindergarten program.

Chapter 3: Data Collection and Methods

Utilizing case study methodology, this research examines the ability of two Georgia Pre-kindergarten providers, one located in Fulton County Georgia and the other located in Dekalb County Georgia to meet their contractual obligations in the Georgia pre-kindergarten lottery funded program by demonstrating resilience through their continued service to students in Year 1 (Academic year 2020) and Year 2 (Academic year 2021).

The provider's ability to be resilient was defined as its ability to restart operations for the 2020-2021 academic year after closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic. From a qualitative perspective, interviewing leaders and teachers shed light on the role the participants have on organizational resiliency during a crisis to answer the three research questions:

1. What was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Pre- Kindergarten providers with DECAL contracts?
2. What variables impacted providers ability to continue educating pre-kindergarten students?
3. Were students from any one socioeconomic group over another unable to return to the programs?

Participants

This research seeks a deeper understanding of the level of resiliency demonstrated by Pre-kindergarten providers contracted through DECAL to continue providing pre-kindergarten services virtually and in-person. Using mixed methods this research deploys quantitative methods to compare the used of grant funds and qualitative case study methodology to examine the similarities and differences in how the organization, its director, and lead teacher experience

the COVID-19 crisis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, Bazeley, 2013, Johnson, 2015, Hesse-Biber, 2017).

Case study methodology was chosen to understand resiliency from the organizational, Director and Lead Teacher perspectives. How an organization functions is directly related to the competence of its leaders (Kettl, 2015, Agranoff, 2007, Weimer & Vining, 2017). In the Pre-kindergarten program, the Director is responsible for programmatic oversight by ensuring compliance with all contractual obligations with regards to administration, safety, staffing, and curriculum. The Georgia pre-kindergarten program relies on existing early learning programs who may be serving other populations of children from birth to 3 years of age.

Only a portion of the program director's salary and time is dedicated to the pre-kindergarten program and their salary is a fraction of the annual salary paid by the provider. Organizational resiliency may depend on leadership decisions and the human capital needed to execute program goals (Hadjielias, Christofi, & Tarba, 2022). Lead teachers are on the front line with students ensuring that the curriculum is delivered, ratios are maintained, and student milestones are achieved. Lead teachers, with the help of one assistant teacher, are responsible for classroom management and managing the education milestones along with the normal behavioral challenges associated with early learning.

During a crisis, when families are experiencing sickness, loss of life, health and economic challenge, the lead teacher retains deep insight into the student's ability to reach their milestones. The teachers in this study serve as the direct service providers and as such were directly impacted when forced to facilitate curriculum using technology, they may not be accustomed to while experiencing the natural challenges associated with achieving early learning milestones.

Initial emails were followed with an additional email and then a call for participants who started but did not complete the survey to ensure that sufficient participation in the study is obtained. Participants were asked to schedule a 30-minute interview. No follow-up interviews were necessary and therefore not scheduled. The participants in the study were identifiable to the Researcher, and Faculty advisor only and no identifiable information is presented for cases as a part of the study.

Participant perspectives are an important mechanism utilized in this study to assess their perspectives on and contribution to organizational resiliency. Interviews with the Program Director is conducted to assess the impact on the program from a leadership perspective. Leading in crisis is difficult but leading in a crisis may require changes in organization operations that requires a level of agility that all leaders may not demonstrate.

Interviews with Lead Teachers were conducted via Zoom to examine their experiences as frontline providers of services to students through a mode from which they are not accustomed. The impact and implications of teaching online includes challenges students and the Teachers. All Teachers may not be adept in deploying digital tools and parents may not have sufficient technology resources. The interview seeks to understand how well Teachers transitioned from in-person to virtual instruction and the impact to student participation.

Responses from Directors and Lead Teachers from different programs were analyzed to compare and contrast their experiences serving and leading during and through the pandemic. Insights from the participants will help the researcher assess the impact of their experiences on the organizations ability to be resilient throughout the pandemic since success of the program relies heavily on the availability of qualified staff to manage and instruct students.

Site Selection

DECAL, the oversight agency responsible for administering the pre-kindergarten program, maintains a website with a searchable database with qualified providers. This database provides information on each provider, their quality rating, business type information, and other compliance reports detailing the funded classrooms, Child Adult and Food Program (CACFP) status, and other important organizational information. Utilizing this publicly available data on the DECAL website is an important step in population selection for this study.

To gain maximum exposure for the study, an email was submitted to the head of a well-respected early learning resource organization to distribute the initial email to request to providers. After four weeks had passed and no responses received, the pre-kindergarten provider database was downloaded from the DECAL website, sorted by programs with pre-kindergarten programs that were open as of February 2020. The electronic survey was sent to 51 random programs identified. Participants received an email requesting their consent to participate in the study, once electronic consent was received, the survey automatically transferred the respondent to either a director survey or a lead teacher survey.

Once completed, survey respondents were contacted for virtual interviews to provide the researcher with a deeper understanding of the challenges experience meeting the obligations of their contracts and their organization's ability to continue serving pre-kindergarten students since February of 2020. The two sites selected for interview represented the programs for whom the electronic survey was received from both the director and the associated lead teacher. Two additional program directors were scheduled for a Zoom interview cancelled or did not show up for their appointment. One director indicated that due to COVID-19 she did not have the bandwidth to participate further which demonstrates the COVID-19 related challenges

experiences by program leaders. These cases were eliminated from further study as the director's virtual interview was not completed and the associated lead teachers did not submit survey responses.

The primary selection criteria for participation are from providers with active pre-kindergarten program contracts as of February 2020. This study intends to understand the different experiences of the organizational staff based on the business entity type. Fifty-one invitations were distributed via email, 9 responses were returned. One response declined the consent, one response was unsigned, incomplete and invalid and the researcher decided to complete an in-depth comparison on the two programs for which both the Program Director and Lead Teacher completed the online survey. The cases have varying degrees of experience from leadership to teaching staff, have similar number of funded slots but different business types.

This researcher is interested in understanding the future implications and impact to formal education collaborative partnerships. This study examines the resiliency of providers who represent two business types providing services to families at all income levels and their shared experiences fulfilling their contracts during crisis. Opportunities for further research would include opportunities to examine the other

Submission of the IRB approved informed consent document through Qualtrics serves as consent to participate in the study. Once participants consent, they immediately receive a link to the initial survey that gathers framework information for the Zoom interview follow up interview. There are no identified or anticipated risks to the participants in this study and the researcher acknowledges experience working for a non-profit agency administering a Pre-kindergarten contract in Fulton County Georgia with a previous employer.

The impact of socioeconomic status is not a primary goal of this research, examining the level of resiliency in organizations that participate in the Child and Adult Food Program may provide insight into the exacerbation of education gaps in lower income children for further study. All households are not the same and technology not universal which presented an ongoing barrier for students whose parent do not have computer and internet services.

Business Indicators

Examining the resiliency of the organization will require the examination of the financial constraints experienced by the organizations. Although the contract does not provide 100% organizational funding, if the provider relied upon other funding sources to fund its organizations, that lack of funding has a direct impact on their ability to keep their doors open and execute the pre-kindergarten program.

Directors interview questions inquire about the programs stability through its ability to maintain enrollment, staffing, and resource supplies needed to maintain a safe environment for execution of the contract. Governance will also play a part in the accessibility of resources. In the case of a for-profit organization, the owner and the Director may not be one in the same placing the decision making for program needs on the owner rather the Director experiencing the front-line challenges of managing in crisis. In the case of the non-profit, its governance is tied to a board of directors with no front-line experience managing in crisis.

The case study compares two different business types: a church related non-profit and a for profit entity with two classrooms each to develop *vignettes* (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p.252) by which their programs are categorized. Resilient organization would include providers with the ability to fill the funded slots at a percentage closest to the pre-pandemic level. Organizations unable to enroll students at a lower percentage, could have difficulty sustaining or

fulfilling their contractual obligations. A quantitative approach will examine how the provider business type or structure may or may not have a significance in terms of organizational resiliency.

Each business type depends on varying revenue sources. Resiliency depends on how well an organization is funded and will have a direct impact on their ability to recover in times when revenues are strained. For organizations like non-profits that rely of philanthropic revenue, crisis can touch each area of revenue when an individual donor is unable to give, when a corporate donor suffers a loss and is unable to meet a pledged obligation, or when constituents are no longer able to pay fees.

Directors are asked questions regarding their feelings regarding the organizational resources and the future of the pre-kindergarten program. For-profit entities and quasi governmental organization may have the same challenges as their funding opportunities are directly correlated to the ability of consumers to pay or utilize their services. This type of crisis unified business types in a way that previously served as a differentiation, potential for revenue generation.

As articulated by Kettl (2015) successful private public partnerships require government to have the right mechanisms in place to evaluate and monitor the partnership. The blank application for the program was reviewed to identify the criteria utilized to evaluate each provider. Program year end reconciliations were reviewed to examine how the cases expended the grant funds received and changes in spending from Year 1 to Year 2. DECAL utilizes an application, executes a contract with the providers, conducts ongoing monitoring, and provides both standards and education in its partnership with pre-kindergarten providers. In determining

an organizations readiness for the future, financial statements or organization fiscal viability could help the state determine an organization's ability to survive a significant crisis.

Examination of the application and process will provide insight into the depth of evaluation done by the State of Georgia to ensure that organizations are fiscally prepared to sustain the contract from a financial perspective. This variable provides an opportunity to examine contractual implications from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. Examination of the contract language will shed light on any gaps that may leave the partnership vulnerable, and evaluation of the provider grant reconciliation shows how much of the grant was spent, how resources were allocated and any changes from Year 1 of the pandemic to year 2 of the pandemic.

With resiliency serving as the independent variable in this analysis, organizational survival could depend on how well programs pivoted their academics to virtual platforms, what level of reserve resources they had in place prior to the pandemic for organizational fiscal sustainability, and the ability of leadership and educators to maintain operations and communications in a way that fostered internal and external organizational confidence. Resiliency also depends heavily on the availability and motivation of a healthy staff who are primarily women working in a low wage industry.

Every provider in the program has the same responsibilities, compliance, and contractual obligations. In the context of their business structure the ability to operate in crisis based on leadership abilities, fiscal resources are all different, and staff motivation and continuity are all different. This study looks to identify the steps taken to continue operating while preparing their students for kindergarten and seeks to gain a greater understanding and create "*thick descriptions*" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, Bazeley, 2013, Johnson, 2015) of the impact of the

COVID-19 crisis on organizational ability to meet their formal collaboration obligations while meeting the overall expected outcome of preparing children for kindergarten.

Provider contracts are structured based on classrooms that serve a maximum of 22 students per classroom supervised by two instructors. One instructor serves as the lead teacher and the other serves as an Assistant Teacher. Each provider has from one (1) to eight (8) funded classrooms. Both providers within the study have two classrooms, one provider participates in the CACFP program, and the other does not. Programs are eligible to participate if 25% of their students meet the requirements for reduced or free lunch. It was important to ensure that providers with both characteristics were included in the study to see if there is a correlation between a higher percentage of students qualified to participate in CACFP and attendance rates.

A qualitative approach on this topic is significant because the impact of COVID-19 goes well beyond the ability of an organization to sustain itself. This crisis has directly and indirectly affected all people at varying levels which influences and informs their approach to problem solving. In this context, subjects are experiencing challenges, uncertainty, and trauma in their own lives while managing and navigating the challenges of keeping an organization open, paying employees, and keeping all involved safe in an environment when safety recommendation rapidly evolve, understanding those nuances are best captured in interviews. Some subjects are navigating technology in a way that they previously had not been required and the anxiety that comes along with the use of technology cannot be diminished.

The pre-kindergarten childcare provider list provides data for all of the providers with Pre-kindergarten lottery funded classrooms evaluated in this study. Data was further analyzed to examine, and segment providers based on the funded classrooms available, percentage of available slots, and their participation in the CACFP. In defining and examining resiliency, it is

important to review the number of funded and available slots pre-crisis versus funded and available slots available for the subsequent school year.

Data Collection and Analysis

Programs providing pre-kindergarten services are registered with the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), and their contact information is publicly available on the DECAL website. Using publicly available data on the DECAL website, existing data was analyzed to identify entities contracted to provide Pre-kindergarten services. The data included contact information for each entity, the number of funded pre-kindergarten slots the organization was contracted to serve, and the existing operational status of potential study participants.

Limitations and Opportunities for Further Research

While this research is limited to two business types and two counties in the State of Georgia, its findings could be used the study could be replicated in other counties and states to identify more broadly, likely variables leading to higher or lower levels of resiliency in executing public private education partnerships. COVID-19 played a significant role in obtaining interviews for the study with respondents cancelling appointments and general fatigue associated with leading in crisis.

This research may provide future researchers approaching education disparities to expound on the impact of a pandemic crisis on marginalized communities. The pandemic required all educational programs to close and utilize technology to deliver virtually what has been traditionally deployed in-person. The students in under resourced families without technology resources are more likely to be left behind although some schools deployed internet hot spots and computers.

Examining the impact of the pandemic on low-income families is an important aspect of future research once the pandemic is under control. While this research will not specifically focus on the impact to this segment of the population, the level of resiliency demonstrated by providers who participate in the CACFP can be a good indicator of how under resourced students have fared during this crisis. Providers that serve underserved students will be asked to share their assessment on the impact on low-income populations during their interview if their center participates in the CACFP.

The ongoing pandemic had a direct impact on the number of respondents to the original survey request as well as the respondents who ultimately agreed to participate in the virtual interviews. The strain and challenges experienced by early learning providers had a direct impact on potential participants willingness to find the time to voluntarily respond to a study when their daily challenges included staffing and the health and safety of their staff and students in their programs. The lack of responses to the survey created an opportunity to complete an in-depth case study two cases with different business types, Case 1 is a church based non-profit while Case 2 is a for-profit entity.

Chapter 4: Results and Analysis

Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning executed contracts with both providers in this study to provide in-person pre-kindergarten preparation services that would prepare up to twenty-two 4-year-old students per classroom for kindergarten. On March 16, 2020, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp issued an executive order closing schools through March 31, 2020. Programs were required to pivot to from in-person learning to virtual delivery of lesson plans. By March 26, 2020, COVID-19 cases were rising, and a new executive order was issued closing schools through April 24, 2020 (Office of the Georgia Governor, Press Release, March 2020). This closure forced programs that have never operated virtually to close their early learning business and pivot their pre-kindergarten students to virtual learning with the same resources they had budgeted for prior to the onset of the pandemic.

Study results are organized to provide a site profile, assessment of the use of grant funds and then an analysis of the themes that emerged in this study as they apply to each research question. As expected, some themes overlap in each research question to inform the variables that affect program resilience including leadership fatigue, technology, staffing, socioeconomic impact and indicators, and health & safety.

Site Profile

Case 1, a church-based non-profit located in an affluent section of metro Atlanta, is led by a Director with significant early learning experience, well versed in the needs of her center. Case 2, a for profit early learning center located in a section of Metro Atlanta with a significantly higher level of poverty than Case 1 is led by a Director with less than two years working at the Director level and significant experience as a lead classroom teacher. Both lead teachers in the study have experience in pre-kindergarten, with one teacher with over 20 years of early learning

teaching experience which can translate into a quality environment for students as seen in the findings of research conducted by Manning, Garvis, Fleming, & Wong (2017). In Manning et al., (2017) higher quality early care correlates with the qualification of the teacher and benefits to students which leaves an opportunity to further research to the results when in crisis.

The following represents the results obtained through a structured survey, virtual interviews, and publicly available information retrieve independently or requested through a series of freedom of information request from DECAL:

Contracts and Budget

Resilient programs require financial resources and Provider contracts are structured based on the number of classrooms that the provider serves enrolled students. Currently, there are over 80,000 funded pre-kindergarten slots managed by childcare learning centers (CCLC), local school systems (LSS), the department of defense (DOD), and universities (UNIV) as shown in TABLE 1. The majority of funded slots are managed through local systems in traditional learning school environment. The next highest number of slots are managed by childcare learning centers licensed to provide early learning services through DECAL - Bright from the Start. Both cases in this study are classified childcare learning centers.

Annually, programs submit applications during the Spring of 2019 prior to the upcoming academic year which begins in August of the same year. Programs in this study planned for the upcoming academic year consistent with expenses they would normally anticipate for the academic year and not for expenses associated with a prolonged emergency response. Applicants are required to re-apply annually, contrary to one of the elements of an effective network articulated by Milward and Provan (2000) which could negatively impact governance and consequently, resilience.

Table 1: Georgia Pre-Kindergarten Funded Slots by Provider Type

	Currently Funded Slots	Available Slots	Current Enrollment
Child Care Learning Centers	38,878	976	37,902
Department of Defense	396	9	387
Local School Systems	41,374	816	40,558
Universities	110	3	107
Total	80,758	1,804	78,954

Adapted Pre-K data download from <https://families.decal.ga.gov/Provider/Data>

Case 1, a non-profit church-based organization located in North Georgia received \$170,789 to provide two classrooms and services to 44 students in Year 1 and \$180,462 in Year 2 for the same classrooms. As shown in TABLE 2, Case 2, a for-profit entity located in two separate East Georgia locations, received \$86,659 for 1 classroom with 15 (.70 of 1 full class enrollment) students at location 1 and \$104,909 plus \$8,000 in start-up costs to provide one classroom for 22 students at location 2. Case 1 received an increase in grant award in Year 2 of 6% and Case 2 experienced an overall 3% increase for two locations (Location 1 received an 4.6% reduction and Location 2 a 9.6% increase). Although Case 2 received more overall funding, computers were not purchased for use by its teachers during the pandemic.

Table 2: Program funding by Academic Year

	Funded Slots	Academic Year 2019/2020	Funded Slots	Academic Year 2020/2021	% Change
CASE 1	44	170,789	44	180,462	6%
CASE 2-Location 1	15	86,659	22	82,676	-4.6%
CASE 2-Location 2	22	104,909	22	115,031	9.6%
	37	191,568	44	197,707	3%

Adapted from DECAL Year End Reconciliation reports not publicly available and received via email in response to a FOIA request.

Awards primarily cover the salaries for one lead and assistant teacher per classroom, a portion of the Director's salary, other administrative expenses, and operating expenses. Teacher salaries, detailed in TABLE 3, are standardized by DECAL to align salaries for private programs with those of the public school system based on education credentials as a teacher retention

strategy (Bellm et. al., 2002). Award allocations vary as teacher salaries are adjusted and supplemental payments increase based on teacher longevity.

Programs are required to pay lead teachers a minimum of 90% of the salary recommended based on five categories, insufficient, Associate Degree, Bachelor's Degree, Certified (T4), and Certified (T5) (DECAL-Rate Chart). Certified T4 and T5 Teachers have a bachelor's degree or a master's degree and a Georgia Teachers Certifications respectively (DECAL- Rate Chart). Assistant teachers are paid at the insufficient rate for lead teachers (DECAL- Rate Chart). Resiliency in pre-kindergarten programs depend on its ability to higher and retain qualified staff, which in the midst of the pandemic, can be difficult as expressed by both program directors.

Table 3: Standard Pre-K Teacher Salaries

	ACY 2019	ACY 2020	ACY 2021
Insufficient	15,873	16,190	16,190
Associate	21,450	24,450	24,450
Bachelor	27,316	30,316	30,316
Certified (T4)	35,821	38,821	38,821
Certified (T5)	40,343	43,343	43,343

Assistant Teachers are compensated at the Lead Teacher Insufficient Rate.

*Adapted from DECAL rate chart years 2018 to 2021
2021-2022_RateChart.pdf (ga.gov), 2020-2021_RateChart.pdf (ga.gov),
2018-2019_RateChart.pdf (ga.gov)*

Both cases have lead teachers with at least a bachelor's degree and Case 2 has a Certified (T5) Lead Teacher with twenty plus years of experience. Programs are bound by the salary minimum guidelines and required to provide the lead teacher supplemental pay based on their years of creditable teaching experience (DECAL- Rate Chart). Like salaries, annual supplements are also based on the education level of the teacher ranging for a minimum of 2 years of experience to 20 plus years of experience as detailed in TABLE 4. Supplements provide additional

incentive funds to encourage longevity in Pre-kindergarten Teachers working in private programs comparable to those Teachers in the Public School system (Bellm et. al., 2002).

Table 4: Lead Teacher Salary Supplement

Years of Service	Associate	Bachelor	Certified (T4)	Certified (T5)
2 to 3	644	819	1,075	1,210
4 to 5	1,306	1,664	2,181	2,457
6 to 7	1,989	2,533	3,322	3,741
8 to 9	2,692	3,428	4,496	5,063
10 to 11	3,416	4,351	5,705	6,426
12 to 13	4,162	5,301	6,951	7,829
14 to 15	4,931	6,279	8,234	9,274
16 to 17	5,722	7,287	9,556	10,762
18 to 19	6,537	8,325	10,917	12,295
20+	7,377	9,394	12,319	13,875

Adapted from DECAL rate chart years 2018 to 2021

2021-2022_RateChart.pdf (ga.gov) 2020-2021_RateChart.pdf (ga.gov)

2018-2019_RateChart.pdf (ga.gov)

The teacher salary supplement serves as a critical incentive measure implemented to ensure that the existence of a pool of Certified Teachers continue to serve in the public private partnership and can serve as a positive variable in the organizational resilience. The supplements can range from \$643 for teachers with an Associate degree to \$13,875 for a certified teacher with a master's degree (DECAL, Rate Chart). Case 1 paid \$3,825 in ACY 2020 and \$5,705 in supplemental pay to one of its T4 Certified Lead Teacher who had between eight and 11 years of teaching experience. Case 2 paid \$13,875 in supplemental pay to one its T5 certified Teacher with a master's degree (DECAL – Rate Chart). Both programs had a new lead teacher not yet receiving supplemental pay.

Assistant Teachers must be paid the minimum salary for a Lead Teacher with insufficient credentials (DECAL – Rate Chart). As seen in TABLE 3, the Assistant teacher salary for ACY 2020 was \$16,190 which is an increase from the ACY 2019 salary of \$15,873. Unlike the

policies in place to retain continuity in Lead Teacher roles with salary enhancement, the same cannot be said for the Assistant Teacher salary.

The current standard assistant teacher salary is currently lower than the Federal Poverty Level for a family of two per HealthCare.gov – Federal Poverty Level at \$17,420. Increasing Assistant teachers’ salaries and providing supplements for assistant teacher longevity could help mitigated the risks associated with teacher turnover and create a pipeline of experienced teachers for the lead teacher role when vacancies exist. TABLE 5 shows that both programs paid their Assistants more than required by the contract which could serve as a positive variable in resiliency through the program staff continuity by creating a pipeline of qualified staff who could step up into the lead teacher role if a lead teacher leaves the program.

Table 5: Teacher Salaries and Benefits

	CASE 1			CASE 2		
	Academic Year	Academic Year	% Change	Academic Year	Academic Year	% Change
	2019/2020	2020/2021		2019/2020	2020/2021	
Lead Teacher Salaries	71,854	79,128	10%	70,118	69,908	-0.30%
Lead Teacher Supplement	3,825	5,705	49%	13,875	14,695	5.91%
Substitute Lead				5,605	10,356	85%
Assistant Teachers Salaries	54,921	49,828	-9%	37,787	36,880	-2.40%
Substitute Assistant				2,540	12,485	392%
Teacher Benefits	12,626	13,857	10%			
Total Teacher Salaries & Benefits	143,226	148,518	4%	129,925	144,324	11.1%

Adapted from DECAL year end reconciliation reports not publicly available and received via FOIA email Request 12/2020.

Staff fringe benefits are optional for program providers and could serve as a contributor to staff turnover. Programs that opt not to pay for staff fringe benefits can reallocate budget funds to cover other operating costs per the application (Personal email communication from FOIA request on 12/8/2020). Case 1 included benefits in its reconciliations which includes primarily the program statutory employer state and federal taxes. Case 2 did not include any benefits in their reconciliation leaving an open question on how the statutory expenses were

paid and from what source of funds. Case 2 is a for-profit entity and the director indicated that the overall finances were handled by the owner.

Programs utilize substitutes when Lead and Assistant Teachers are absent. Case 1 did not utilize substitutes in Year 1 or Year 2 of the pandemic indicating that either no substitutes were used, or the Director served as substitute. Both Directors indicated that in addition to their regular duties, they have provided classroom coverage to ensure that state mandated ratios were met. Conversely, Case 2 utilized substitute staff for 5% of the program award during Year 1 of the pandemic and 10% during year 2 indicating that their teachers were out, and classroom coverage required for a portion of the academic year. Program Directors noted that attendance issues existed in both programs however, Case 1 did not report payments to substitutes. Staffing attendance and continuity can be considered a variable in a program resiliency as programs are reliant on teacher delivered education services and they must always maintain staffing ratios to ensure classroom safety.

Case 1 operating expenses for Year 1 and Year 2 were consistent at 7% of the total grant award. Case 2 operating expenses ranged from 4% and 6% in Year 1 for location 1 and 2 respectively 12% and 13% in Year 2 for Location 1 and 2 of the grant awards reflecting more than a 100% increase in operating expenses from Year 1 to Year 2. Overall, Case 1 spent 7% over their allocated grant to administer the program in ACY2020 while Case 2 did not spend the entire allocation instead returning 1% of the grant. In year 2 of the pandemic, Case 2 spent less than \$500 more than their awarded grant while Case 2 broke even. Although Case 1 Director indicated that some technology was purchased during Year 1 of the pandemic, no technology expenses were recorded in Year 1 or Year 2 for either program.

Table 6: Program Spending by Category

	CASE 1			CASE 2		
	Academic Year	Academic Year	% Change	Academic Year	Academic Year	% Change
	2019/2020	2020/2021		2019/2020	2020/2021	
Instruction	6,033	3,801	-37%	4,330	2,000	-54%
Teacher Salaries	145,915	152,156	4%	163,972	159,072	-3%
Support Staff Salaries						
Operating Costs	13,223	14,157	7%	9,832	24,839	153%
Director's Salary	5,745	5,494	-4%	8,755	9,796	12%
Admin Costs	11,973	5,334	-55%	1,125	2,000	78%
Grant	(12,100)	(480)	-96%	3,554	0	-100%
Surplus/Deficit						

Adapted from DECAL year end reconciliation reports not publicly available. Received via FOIA request.

It is important to note that overall operating costs are not enough to cover the annual costs to house a program in a stand-alone facility which is one primary benefit provided by the private public partnership capacity expansion. This formal collaboration relies on daycare providers with existing programs with capacity to house pre-kindergarten classrooms. Future review of these costs may present challenges for providers as the pandemic has an impact on their other lines of business that can supplement the costs associated with the program.

If program providers sustain losses in their ability to provide childcare services, that change can have a direct impact on pre-kindergarten program resiliency and service delivery to existing students in the program. It is likely that parents with pre-kindergarten students would utilize paid daycare services at the same program location if these services were needed. DECAL maintains a database that provides parents with the ability to locate services throughout the state, but in the event that a program closes, capacity for their student may not be available.

Research Question 1

What was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Pre- Kindergarten providers with DECAL contracts?

The COVID-19 pandemic caused both organizations in this study to close their doors, furlough employees, and pivot to virtual learning for their childcare business and the Georgia Pre-kindergarten lottery program existing within their business. During this closure, the DECAL continued to provide funding for pre-kindergarten teachers throughout the initial closure. DECAL supplemented grant funds with a Stable grant intended to provide money for the purchase of personal protective equipment (PPE).

Leadership Fatigue

The consistent theme identified leadership fatigue by case 1 and 2 directors, is the challenge COVID-19 had on their ability to lead and manage their organization while facing staffing shortages, leadership fatigue and pivoting to the use of technology to initially continue delivering the remainder three months of the 2020 academic year. The transition from in-person learning would not be easy for programs not currently reliant on the use of technology-based tools in support of their programs.

Leading in crisis can be challenging for many but for organizations charged with delivering educational services in an industry with typically low wages, the challenge of leading in a crisis can serve as an existential threat to the business and program (Bellm et. al., 2002, Akaba, et. al, 2020). Interviews revealed the level and challenge and stress that childcare Directors are facing during the global pandemic. In the industry, program must follow the rules as established by DECAL and receive funds to expand the capacity of government provision of education through a public private partnership. In their findings, Hanno et. al., (2021) found a

that workplace stress can have an impact on student outcomes as it related to teacher professional development. Future study opportunities exist to assess the standard workplace stress to workplace stress experience through crisis.

The first variable in resiliency for any organization is the capability of its leadership to make the necessary changes, assess the risks, and deploy mitigating plans to manage the entity (Hadjielias, et. al., 2022). In the context of Pre-kindergarten Directors, the stress of managing can be exacerbated by the type of business, staffing resources, fiscal capacity and other challenges that stand in the way of running a successful business. During this study's interviews Case 1 Director shared that she was giving notice and that she intended to leave her role after her 60-day notice period. It was clear that she struggled with her decision but the challenges arising from COVID-19 regarding staffing issues and the challenges with COVID-19 caused her to reconsider her passion for the work. *"The most difficult part for me, other than getting classrooms covered is really trying to find the balance when people are late or don't show up. I have call outs constantly"* (Case 1 Director). As articulated by Hadjielias et, al. (2022), *"our findings highlight the need for owner-managers to strike an inner (psycho-emotional) balance and a personal work-life one before practicing leadership in the midst of the pandemic."* Based on the surprise nature of the pandemic, leaders who did not already have a self care mindset, could likely feel an enormous amount of pressure for which they had no tool to manage.

Case 2 Director indicated that the pandemic did not really affect her ability to lead, her answer to the question referenced the people and children who contracted COVID-19 and the number of cases the program experienced. Additional questions addressed the challenges faced with both enrollment and staffing. It was clear that being on a recorded interview impacted her

responses but once she was off camera, her responses were more transparent about the frustration related to staffing, technology and gaining the appropriate supplies to protect the staff.

The pandemic is causing a lot of people not to want to come into work. People will come in and then they'll end up quitting. The staff that's been there, the longest more dependable but new hires are more difficult to rely on. Once the drug screens and background is complete, they might show up for a week but never come back. That has big impact because have to stay over a lot more and I've had to into a classroom to teach and cover lunch breaks. (Case 2 Director)

Technology

According to Case 1 Lead Teacher, transitioning from in person to virtual was not difficult as they were already providing some virtual support. Case 1 Lead Teacher was very confident in her technology skills, she said, “*I’m not sure what this program would have done if I were not here during this time.*” Conversely, Case 2 Lead Teacher indicated great difficulty in transitioning as the organization was not prepared with equipment for teachers to use. The researcher noted the significant difficulty that Case 2 Leader Teacher had getting onto the virtual call and throughout the interview leaving no question in my mind that technology was a major for Case 2 in facilitation of lesson plans for students using her personal technology.

We don't have any technology. Teachers are using their own laptops. The pre-kindergarten students that went virtual were on their parents' technology, school aged children used school equipment, but we haven't prepared for that at all. (Case 2 Director)

Case 2 Teachers were required to utilize their own equipment to continue serving students and Case 2 Director articulated a marked difference in attendance for students once the

class transitioned to virtual learning. The marked attendance issues experienced by Case 2 in the words of the Case 2 Director, *“I think during the pandemic when we went virtual only three families that showed up”* were not mirrored in Case 1 whose Director and Lead Teacher indicated high attendance while virtual learning. Case 2 Director was very concerned about the lack of technology and the responsibility placed on teachers to utilize their own technology during the height of the pandemic and continuing through present day.

The Director of Case 1 indicated that their program did not experience student attendance issues during their virtual transition and experienced waitlists upon returning to in person learning as they pivoted to create virtual classrooms for siblings of students in K-6 who were learning virtually. With comparable funding and comparable contracts, two of the variables that stood out in comparing the cases was the location of the program and the socioeconomic status of the students served. Further, Case 1 was able to add their location as a space for school aged siblings to attend when parents needed to go into work. This pivot created an unplanned stream of revenue that contributes to organizational resilience.

Case 2 was unprepared from a technology perspective and placed the responsibility for program continuity on to its staff by requiring the use of their personal technology to facilitate classes. This transference of responsibility demonstrates a lack of resiliency for the organization as it relies on the availability of staff technology and does not address challenges that staff may have at home. Further, there was a marked impact on attendance as only 3 children were present consistently for virtual Pre-kindergarten at case 2 location 1.

Case 1 Director purchased additional equipment to support its staff in their delivery of the pre-kindergarten curriculum, but once students came back into the program in-person, use of

technology was limited. Case 1 Lead Teacher expressed the frustrations with transitioning back from virtual to in person.

It's been hard just because we pivoted our focus to teaching virtually and making everything virtual and not getting those hands-on experience and so now being back in the classroom dealing with a totally different group of kids, some with behavior issues well beyond what we normally experience. (Case 1 Lead Teacher)

Additional Funding Support

It is important to note that DECAL continued to support pre-kindergarten programs with funding through the current grant cycle, additional grants to support the purchase of PPE, and an enhanced STABLE grant to support the higher costs associated with staff and other expenses costs. Case 2 was the least prepared of all cases based on their lack of technology prior to the pandemic. It is important to note that the Director of Case 2 indicate that Teachers are still using their own technology almost one plus years into the pandemic. The grant reconciliation for both cases indicated that neither program used grant award funds to purchase technology in Year 1 or Year 2 of the pandemic.

Case 1 Director indicated that they were able to secure the PPP Loan, Stable grant, and United way support to support operational support. Case 2 Director indicated that as far as she knew, the program was financially stable. It is important to note that Case 2 Director reports to the private owner and does not have the level of transparency or access or oversight of the organization's finances and therefore less able to confidentially respond to specific financial questions.

Socioeconomic Impact

The pre-kindergarten program serves up to 22 student per classroom with a Lead Teacher and Assistant Teacher, pre pandemic program enrollment for Case 1 was an average of 22

students per classroom and Case 2 was an average of 15 for location 1 and 22 for location 2. As of Year 2 of the pandemic, Case 1 had a large waitlist and Case 2 had difficulty filling spaces in location 1. Case 2 is located in an underserved area of Dekalb county where there are more children of color. This phenomenon creates an opportunity to conduct deeper research regarding the impact of COVID-19 on communities of color and the barriers experienced related to both technology and transportation.

Although the pre-kindergarten program is free, higher incidences of unemployment due to the pandemic could have a direct impact on low-income families to internet in their home or money for transportation to get their kids to school. In contrast, Case 1 parents who are in a higher socioeconomic community are likely to have a higher income base, up to date technology, and transportation. Each program indicated that they were financially stable throughout the pandemic and able to re-open for in person services prior to the start of the new academic year.

Research Question 2

What variables impacted providers ability to continue educating pre-kindergarten students?

The primary variables and themes that emerged in conjunction with Research Question 2 include leadership fatigue, staffing, and technology as outlined in the findings for Research Question number 1. Additional contributing factors included perspectives on health and safety, student behavior, and socioeconomic status. Both directors and lead teachers had similar concerns in these areas but lead teachers, as the front-line provider interacting with students and their parents, experience the challenges related to student behavior at a higher level. In the interviews with Case 1 and 2 lead teachers, they expressed concern for how student will adjust after the pandemic.

As articulated by Case 1 Lead Teacher, behavioral challenges occurred in the transition from virtual to in-person learning. While a distinction was not made with regards to the gender of students that experience the most behavioral challenges, additional opportunities to correlate behavior changes in kindergarten readiness as an extension of the research conducted by Nold, De Jong, Moran, Robinson, & Aderhold (2021) in which behavioral challenges were experienced by boys at a higher level than girls.

Technology

Technology emerged as a major barrier to organizational resiliency for Case 2. Although Case 2 is the for-profit entity, no investment was made in technology for the classroom or teachers prior to the pandemic and as a result they were not prepared when the program closed and went to virtual curriculum delivery. The responsibility for technology was placed on Case 2 teachers which left the Teachers dependant on their own resources to sustain the contractual service delivery. Case 2 Director and Lead Teacher 2 indicated that virtual attendance was an issue but did not indicate if packets were provided to students who may not have access to technology. There was also no follow-up with parents to see why their students were not in attendance.

Case 1, while not having all of the technology needed at the onset of the pandemic, already had some experience with remote learning and was able to purchase additional equipment to fully resource its staff to facilitate virtual learning. Case 1 Director indicated that they had some technology prior to the pandemic and was able to make additional purchases to support virtual learning. Case 1 Lead Teacher was very confident in her ability to deliver the curriculum virtually and indicated that there was strong support from parents. Case 1 was more

prepared than Case 2, however the use of technology was not continued once the children returned to the classroom fully in Year 2 which Case 1 Lead Teacher identified as an area of concern and missed opportunity to keep the students engaged utilizing technology.

Lead Teacher 1 felt that continued technology use in the classroom could help the children continue to advance their skills while being prepared to use technology should another closure be required. Case 2 Lead Teacher expressed dissatisfaction with the use of her personal technology. Neither program allocated funding in Year 1 as the budget was established prior to the pandemic and although experiencing the challenges associated with technology neither program budgeted for technology in Year 2 after experiencing the increased need for equipment. Neither case budgeted for technology as a part of their grant spending as reflected by Year 2 grant reconciliation.

Staffing

Both case Directors articulated significant challenges in maintaining staffing throughout the pandemic which had a direct impact on state required supervision ratios. The current ratio for 4-year-old students is currently 1:18 per DECAL Rules for Early Learning Center (year, p. 61), which is one staff member to 18 students requiring all classrooms with 22 students to have 2 staff people present. Case 1 Director indicated that after furloughing staff, some staff members opted not to return, which required her stretch herself to recruit and step into the classroom as needed to maintain required ratios. As stated by the Case 1 Director:

One of the people that did not initially return when offered her position after the furlough, I was not sad to see her go, she wasn't awful and now I'm begging her to come back. Just a few months ago she was somebody that I wouldn't consider but now I need her. (Case 1 Director)

Case 2 Director had similar experiences and additionally indicated that staffing was extremely difficult after the selection process with candidates changing their minds or taking roles that pay more. Case 2 Director said the pandemic is *“causing a lot of people not to want to come into work. People will come in and then they’ll end up quitting. The staff members who’ve been there the longest those are the more dependable ones.”* When leadership is forced to keep staff members they would otherwise let go or hesitate to hold the team accountable of fear of turnover, program effectiveness can be jeopardized.

Staffing concerns are having a marked impact on the early learning industry as early learning teachers may find opportunities outside of the industry that pay higher wages further the impact on Directors is significant as articulated by Case 2 Director stating *“some of the teachers been had to stay over a lot more. I’ve had to actually go into a classroom to cover some days teach or relieve for lunch breaks as well.”* Reductions in staffing directly impact the number of students allowed in the classroom, and as articulated by Case 1, waiting lists for available slots. The future impact of staffing could be significant if additional steps aren’t taken to increase salaries and create a robust pipeline of early learning teachers (Robbins & Schmit, 2020).

Staffing could also have an impact on families, particularly low-income family’s ability to secure childcare as result of the higher wages needed to stabilize care (Robbins & Schmit, 2020). During the pandemic, women have been disproportionately impacted because childcare is one of their greatest needs required for employment if they have children (Robbins & Schmit, 2020). For low-income single mothers, without an adequate support system, this could mean the difference between their ability to work and provide for their families or dropping deeper into poverty (Robbins & Schmit, 2020).

The State of Georgia recognized that issues related to early learning recruitment and retention by incorporating salary increases in the FY 2021 budget for both lead and assistant teachers as stated:

Funds to adjust the state base salary schedule to increase salaries for certified personnel by \$2,000 and assistant teachers by 5 percent effective July 1, 2020.

(Increase funds to adjust the state base salary schedule to increase salaries for certified personnel by \$1,000 and assistant teachers by 3% effective July 1, 2020.

(Georgia Senate, HB 793, p. 3)

It is important to note that salary is not the only reason a teacher might choose to stay in an early learning career path. The pandemic has been hard on teachers and programs are experiencing the same challenges that all employers are experiencing with staff retention. DECAL and programs will need to assess what benefits and other incentives might be more attractive to both directors and teachers to ensure that programs have the right staff needed to effectively facilitate the program. As articulated by Beltman et. al. (2020), resilience among early childhood educators requires systematic changes in the workload challenges experiences by early learning teachers, creating a supportive environment where teachers can support one another, and investment in personal self-care strategies to improve personal wellness.

Health & Safety

In addition to the impact on staffing, both cases were impacted by the ability to secure disinfecting supplies and personal protective equipment for their team as seen in the increase in operating expenses for both cases in TABLE 6. Both centers benefited from grant funds to purchase additional supplies although Case 2 Director indicated that supplies were an ongoing challenge. This challenge is directly related to the lack of budgetary control as articulated by the

Case 2 Director. While Case 1 Director had more autonomy, she expressed frustration with the understanding her Board has of the challenges faced everyday with resources and staffing.

Lead Teacher Case 1 spent a significant amount of time teaching virtually and expressed mixed concerns regarding a return to the classroom saying *“surprisingly at the beginning, I wasn't sure how I would feel especially because I had been home for a year. We wear masks here like if we're in like a common area, my assistant and I were both vaccinated.”* Lead Teacher Case 1 also expressed the positive impact that parental commitment has on health and safety *“I think parents do take it seriously like, I've already had some parents proactively keep their kid home if a sibling is waiting for a test.”* Additionally, Lead Teacher Case 1 expressed the impact of the program’s commitment to following established policies stating, *“we have the guidelines and what to expect we're constantly sending home the CDC policy so that parents know.”* Lead Teacher 2 expresses that she *“feels safer than I thought I would.”*

Lead Teacher Case 2 articulated her concerns about getting COVID-19 and the challenges she faced every day trying to get the students to keep their masks on to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 saying:

Even though I try to encourage them to keep a mask on it doesn't work, so I just have them pull them up because they are playing with them, and of course they love hugging and stuff. To be honest with you, I just pray, I just try to keep my mask on. (Lead Teacher, Case2)

Leadership Fatigue

Case 1 Director was transparent in her interview about the toll that the pandemic and its challenges has had on her ability to lead. Case 1 Director at the time of our interview articulated that she had submitted a sixty-day notice of her departure. Leadership challenges for Case 1

included being more cautious in performance management conversations to maintain staff. She articulated that her management style pre and post COVID-19 were in opposition to who she is as a leader. Pre pandemic, she felt free to address issues like attendance and performance quite freely. Post pandemic, Case 1 Director is more accommodating and cautious in feedback in hopes that staff, even low performers return to work everyday. Gaining understanding from the Board of Directors presents an additional challenge for Case 1 Director saying:

I brought them news articles and all kinds of things, talking about stopping and how difficult it is to work in childcare these years has been. I'll be honest with you the most difficult part is thinking I'm going to have to shut my doors. (Case 1 Director)

Case 2 Director expressed similar frustrations in leading her team and expressed the additional challenge in getting the Center Owner to infuse more resources into the program to ensure additional staffing and supplies. Case 2 Director now spends more of her time leading and working in the classroom requiring her to work significant extra hours on program and grant administration after standard working hours. This additional time taken away from her family and contributes to her re-evaluation of her career goals. Case 2 Director indicated that she was also looking for new employment as leading in this crisis was difficult. Through research conducted by Rodriguez, Rojas, Rabadi-Raol, Souto-Manning, & Brotman, (2022), it is clear that early learning workforce needs additional support with their mental well being and their work-life balance as articulated by Willems e.t al., 2015).

Research Question 3

Were students from any one socioeconomic group over another unable to return to the programs?

Socioeconomic Indicators

Census data indicates that the median household income for Case 1 location is \$113,000 while the median household income for Case 2 is \$44,000 (Census.gov- Quick Facts Alpharetta and Stone Mountain Georgia). The percentage of people in poverty for Case 1 and Case 2 are 5.5% and 12.8% respectively (Census.gov). Additional indicators that demonstrate the socioeconomic status of students include Pre-kindergarten provider participation in the federal Children and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) as well as the Childcare and Parent Services program (CAPS). CACFP provides nutrition reimbursements to programs with 25% or more of their students qualified for free or reduced lunch and the CAPS program pays childcare fees for parents, based on their income (DECAL- CAPS Program). Case 1 accepts CAPS payments but is not listed as a CACFP site while Case 2 location 1, participates in CACFP and accepts CAPS.

Technology Access

Case 1, located in an affluent area in the metro Atlanta area, consistently maintained its attendance through pandemic Year 1 and 2 based the interviews Case 1 Director and Lead Teacher. Conversely, Case 2 located in a less affluent area in metro Atlanta had been unable to maintain connection with its students virtually at the onset of the pandemic and had enrollment issues once the program reopened for in-person learning. This finding is consistent with findings expressed by Sosa-Diaz (2021). Students in Case 1, located in a more affluent area, had no issues with students connecting and support from parents while Case 2, located in a lower socioeconomic area, had very few students show up for class.

The DECAL board of directors asked the DECAL Commissioner to address the support for students for with technology issues during its May 14, 2020, meeting and the response to the inquiry included the voluntary provision of paper educational packets to families who may not have technology access (Board of Early Care and Learning Meeting Minutes, 5/14/2020, DECAL Staff updates, section e). The paper solution for under resourced students met the immediate need during the crisis but serves as the differentiator between program parent access and affluence but did not address the fact that this action was voluntary and not mandated across the system to ensure equitable access.

Summary of Results

Based on the definition of resiliency defined in this study both programs demonstrated resiliency by providing services virtually at the on-set of the pandemic, and then reopening subsequently to provide in-person learning. Surprisingly, the non-profit entity was more prepared from a staff and resource perspective as Lead Teacher 1 felt very confident delivering lessons virtually based on her level of technology proficiency. The responses from the participants indicated serious staffing concerns and an impact on the Director's ability to effectively rely on staffing in the current crisis climate. The pandemic has placed significant strain on directors and teachers. Further research may examine the transformation of the early learning workforce based on this crisis.

Technology requirements proved to be a major issue for Case 2, a for-profit entity and in turn impacted virtual learning delivery to their students. The program did not have equipment for its teachers and was unable to keep attendance numbers up during the crisis. There was no indication from Director 2 that a paper packet was provided to the parents. DECAL did not

establish standards early on in the pandemic for staying in touch with children and parents, instead it relied upon the judgement of program providers.

While both programs were resilient based on the definition in this research, additional research and practices are required to ensure that under resourced students continue to benefit from the program. The current evaluation process is a one size fits all approach that that does not explicitly address the needs of the population served.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Discussion

Resiliency in this study was defined as the ability of pre-kindergarten providers to continue providing education services based on their contractual relationship with DECAL. Private program providers included in the research study represent 48% of the total providers in the Georgia pre-kindergarten program and their ability to be resilient could have a significant impact on program execution, sustainability of this public private partnership, future student outcomes, early learning workforce, and the future availability of childcare solutions to support women and families in the workforce in the State of Georgia.

The State of Georgia government continues to rely heavily on public private collaborations to extend public services to pre-kindergarten aged students. A strong backbone organization must be nimble in the face of a crisis to provide evergreen guidance and evaluation to address gaps in education service for some of the most vulnerable members of the population, children. Resilience in this program is required to ensure that students achieve their developmental milestones and that public funds are protected. Both cases were able to continue serving both virtually and in-person through pandemic year 1 and 2 and therefore resilient based on the definition established in this research. Resiliency in this instance can help programs assess gaps in preparedness and seek additional support, this support could come in the form of technology enhancements and employment enhancements to strengthen the staff pipeline especially for programs that are serving higher number of under resourced families.

Resiliency demonstrated by the provider organization during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic can depend on a myriad of variables and as such, provides an opportunity to examine the steps taken by providers to fulfill their contractual obligations during a global pandemic. The State of Georgia's Department of Early Care and Learning facilitates an application process

annually, executes contracts, monitors program activity, and conducts a reconciliation review of grant expenditures and audits to ensure programs operate within established guidelines. While these are all good practices, the contract is missing critical questions regarding an organizations financial state and could also be used to compare a new request with prior years grant reconciliation.

While the contract procedures and terms are the same for each provider, their business structure varies from non-profit, for-profit, and university (quasi-government). Further study is required to examine the impact the change in program during Year 1 had educational attainment of the students in the program since it is clear from the Director responses that although each program met the basic definition of resiliency and experience similar challenges, information technology proved to be a significant gap in service delivery for Case 2 and an inference can be made the availability of technology in the homes on student attendance.

Research Question 1

What was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Pre- Kindergarten providers with DECAL contracts?

While each program was resilient, pivoted entirely to virtual at the onset of COVID-19, and fully open for business by the next academic year, there were clear differences in how the crisis was managed, and the burden placed on leadership and staff. Both cases communicated challenges experienced in managing and securing staffing to support program execution. Both cases pivoted to virtual learning at the onset of the pandemic however Case 1 was more prepared for virtual learning as their Lead Teacher had previously taught virtually and describes herself as tech savvy. Case 1 also maintained enrollment and did not experience significant attendance

issues. Case 2 was unprepared to switch to virtual learning, was unable to provide equipment to teachers and experienced significant attendance challenges.

The pre-kindergarten program as a whole must consider the salaries for their assistant teachers. Both programs chose to pay their assistant teachers more than the amount the grant requires as a retention tool. The lack of financial incentives like the supplement provided for lead teachers can have a direct impact of the assistant teacher's employment decision and consideration for returning to work after a crisis. Further, investing in assistant professional development can create a pipeline of additional lead teachers to support the program. By creating a pipeline of qualified staff who could step up into the lead teacher role if a lead teacher leaves the program would make the program more resilient as a whole.

Research Question 2

What variables impacted providers ability to continue educating pre-kindergarten students?

Several themes emerged from the interviews with the Directors, but leadership fatigue and staffing emerged as the most challenging issues that the two cases have in common. Case 1 Director, after facing COVID-19 related challenges, gave her notice by the time of our interview. The strain and challenges she faced were evident from her responses and frustration expressed from the inability to lead in a way to which she was accustomed to leading in her career.

Staffing is a major issue for the programs and as Case 2 Director indicated, recruiting, and retaining staff presented great challenges in her ability to lead. The strain on Directors to lead and serve as a back-up when teachers don't come to work or need to be relieved can lead to an exodus from the early learning career all together. The pre-kindergarten program is reliant on

qualified staff to facilitate the program and without staffing, programs are in jeopardy of not being unable to keep their doors open.

Research Question 3

Were students from any one socioeconomic group over another unable to return to the programs?

Based on the data collected it is clear that Case 2 students had attendance issues at the onset of the pandemic. Case 2 program is located in Dekalb County where the poverty level is much higher than that of Case 1 whose students continued attending virtually. DECAL (2020) indicated that for programs where parents did not have available technology, programs voluntarily prepared paper packets were prepared and distributed by programs. This is a solution that was implemented directly at the program level and there was no information available to assess whether the entire network implemented this practice.

This voluntary solution provided by programs to support their students indicates a gap in oversight by DECAL to ensure that all students continued to meet milestones during the pandemic. Although DECAL provided support to programs, via funding, and web-based guidance, there as no mechanism to ensure students, especially those in underserved communities, had either the technology needed to log into classes virtually or to receive and complete the paper lessons if provided by their program.

Additional considerations for the Georgia funding model are required as Governor Kemp reduced the DECAL budget by 14% in year 1 of the pandemic which reduced capacity by about 4,000 students (Board of Early Care and Learning Meeting Minutes, 5/14/2020, DECAL Staff updates, section g). Exacerbating the budget reductions, with the rising unemployment rate due to the loss of jobs statewide, lottery proceeds fell 17% in March of 2020 causing lotter agencies

to change games and its rules for winning (Abusaid, 2020) Future review and examination of the lottery funding structure is needed to assess how the pre-kindergarten program is funded if lottery funds continue to decline.

The Federal CARES act infused DECAL with \$114 million dollars to provide support to early learning programs throughout the state, DECAL made STABLE grants available to all providers, and continued pre-kindergarten grant fund distributions through onset of the pandemic to sustain early learning providers (Board of Early Care and Learning Meeting Minutes, 5/14/2020, DECAL Staff updates, section c). The level of continued funding support will have a direct impact on resiliency for providers of pre-kindergarten services.

Further exacerbating the challenges, an organization's business type and available resources have a direct impact on the service each entity is contracted to provide as the grant does not provide significant funds for operations. DECAL relies on organizations with existing locations who can cover substantial facility costs. Each provider agency is required to submit an application by which the agency evaluates a proposal to provide Pre-kindergarten services, but the application process does not require questions that could serve to assess the organizations effectiveness to provide the requested services, nor its reserves or resources needed to react and respond in a crisis.

The grant contract requires applicants to complete several open-ended questions regarding program oversight, fiscal oversight, enrollment, recruitment, staffing, and additional information in support of the program ability to serve pre-kindergarten students. Although applicants are required to assure that they will utilize fiscal integrity in the execution of their business, the application does not require the submission of financial statements or other

documentation that allows the department to assess viability of the business prior to awarding the grant. The DECAL grant agreement (2020) states:

Furthermore, in accordance with O.C.G.A. § 50-20-3(b), Contractors expending \$100,000 or more in State funds during their fiscal year agree to have an entity-wide audit conducted for that year in accordance with Generally Accepted Auditing Standards issued by the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants. Contractors expending at least \$25,000 but less than \$100,000 in State funds during their fiscal year agree to prepare unaudited entity-wide financial statements for that year. Assertions concerning the basis of financial statement preparation must be made by the president or other corporate official. (DECAL Agreement, 2021)

The audit requirement articulated in the grant agreement is after the fact and does not reflect a review of program viability prior to the grant award. It is not clear from a review of the website whether any enforcement actions are taken based on a failure to submit financial audits. At the conclusion of the award year, programs are required to complete a grant reconciliation that outlines how the funds were used. It is important to note that programs are required to submit an audit to the Georgia Department of Audits & Accounts at the end of the year, but the contract does not articulate that submission as a requirement for returning grantors which points to a gap in the oversight process and potential for extending awards to programs that have not met all requirements.

Dissertations Recommendations

If ever there was a time for government to consider the implications of service congruence in private public partnerships, it is now. It is clear, in this limited study, that even

with a strong backbone organization with oversight capabilities, provider effectiveness can vary based on the strength, leadership, and resources of the provider. Resiliency only recognizes the ability to re-establish previous standards, not potential new standards required to solve unfamiliar problems as a result of an ongoing crisis like COVID-19 that has no defined ending.

With a limited study that represents two pre-kindergarten providers in a program that serves over 80,000 children annually, there are improvements that can be made both by DECAL and providers to improve upon prior service standards and explicitly define evergreen standards to address contingencies. How does one crisis proof a program? The answer to that is complicated and begins with the application process which needs to ask more substantive questions not just about the organization, but about the population they serve. Broad based technology standards must be adopted to ensure that under resourced students have comparable learning opportunities similar to their affluent counterparts.

DECAL can implement requirements that ensure emergency plans are in place in the event of a similar crisis in the future beginning with an upgrade to the annual application process to include financial questions regarding the organization's fiscal health, staff turnover rates, and organizational support for parents and students through networks. The new application process should not just reflect a request for renewal funds for returning providers but serve as a comprehensive review of the current request and past results, enrollment processes, and adequate technology for use by staff and students whose families may be under resourced.

Future opportunities for research exist to compare the experience of the private providers staff experiences in local school system and government classrooms with regarding the technology and staff turnover. Reid, Melvin, Kagan, & Brooks-Gunn (2019) explored the

implications differences experience by private versus public providers in New York and this level of study could help DECAL make improvement to support provider resilience.

Additionally, there are opportunities to further review levels of program resilience in to help program leaders identify support for low-income parents who may be experiencing challenges. Specifically with technology, transportation, and other resources that may prevent them from prioritizing the education of their children. The greatest opportunity for future research exists for comparing the findings in the Georgia Department of Audits *COVID-19's Impact on K-12 Education* report published in November of 2021 to a case study level examination of the pre-kindergarten program to establish some system wide solutions for program resiliency.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval

IRB-FY2021-88 - Initial: Initial - Expedited

do-not-reply@cayuse.com <do-not-reply@cayuse.com>

Tue 6/1/2021 8:12 AM

To: Charles, Arlene A. <AC896788@wcupa.edu>; Crossney, Kristen B <KCrossney@wcupa.edu>



Office of Research and Sponsored Programs | West Chester University | Ehinger Annex
West Chester, PA 19383 | 610-436-3557 | www.wcupa.edu

Jun 1, 2021 8:12:28 AM EDT

To: Arlene Charles
Public Policy and Administra.

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - IRB-FY2021-88 Collaborating in Crisis: An examination of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic on the Georgia Pre-Kindergarten program providers in Fulton County, Georgia

Dear Arlene Charles:

Thank you for your submitted application to the WCUPA Institutional Review Board. Since it was deemed expedited, it was required that two reviewers evaluated the submission. We have had the opportunity to review your application and have rendered the decision below for Collaborating in Crisis: An examination of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic on the Georgia Pre-Kindergarten program providers in Fulton County, Georgia.

Decision: Approved

Selected Category: 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,
WCUPA Institutional Review Board

IORG#: IORG0004242
IRB#: IRB00005030
FWA#: FWA00014155

Appendix B: Electronic Survey Questions

This survey may require that you have access to specific enrollment and financial data for your program.

Program Director Questions	Lead Teacher Questions
What is your organizations business type? Non-profit, For-Profit, Quasi-Governmental (Higher Ed), Other	
On February 1, 2020 was you GA Pre-kindergarten program open and operating with a minimum of 90% of funded slots filled?	On February 1, 2020, how many years had you served as a Lead Teacher in the GA Pre-kindergarten Program?
If, No What % of slots were filled on that date?	On February 1, 2020, how would you have rated your proficiency in the use of computers? 1- Proficient – Very Comfortable with the use of computers and productivity software 2-Competent – I knew enough to get my job done and send out email communications. 3-Fair – I used primarily for email and use of a smart phone. 4-Low – I preferred not and was not required to use computers regularly.
How many funded classrooms did your organization have on 2/1/2020?	Did you feel confident in delivering virtual instruction? YES or NO
How many funded classrooms did your classroom have on 8/15/2020?	What percentage of your class regularly logged in for virtual instructions
Did your program close immediately when the pandemic hit? YES or NO If yes – Did you have the IT infrastructure in place to go virtual and have employee work from home? YES or NO If No – How many students continued to attend? #	On August 15, 2020, how would you have rated your proficiency in the use of computers? 1- Proficient – Very Comfortable with the use of computers and productivity software 2-Competent – I knew enough to get my job done and send out email communications. 3-Fair – I used primarily for email and use of a smart phone. 4-Low – I preferred not and was not required to use computers regularly.

If you closed your program and pivoted to virtual, did students log in to receive virtual instruction? YES or NO	
How many teachers worked directly with your Pre-kindergarten program on 2/1/2020?	
How many teachers worked directly with your Pre-kindergarten program on 8/15/2020?	
Were the same teachers employed on 2/1/2020 as 8/15/2020? YES or NO If No, how many teachers were the same on 2/1/2020 as 8/15/2020? #	
Does the Pre-kindergarten grant cover 100% of the costs associated with the Pre-kindergarten program? YES or NO If No, how did you fund the difference?	
Do you have other sources of organizational revenue in addition to the Pre-kindergarten grant that supports that program? YES or NO Mark all sources of additional revenue sources: Fee for Service, Government Grants, Private Grants, Other	
Did you loose any other revenue sources during the pandemic?	
Did you apply for the PPP Loan? YES or NO Did you Receive it? YES or NO	
Did the organization have financial reserves before the pandemic?	

Appendix C: Virtual Interview Questions

Director Questions

How has the pandemic affected your ability to lead?

Have you noticed a marked change in your employee's behavior pre- and post-pandemic?

Was your organizations prepared to pivot to virtual learning?

Has the organization made changes to its technology since the pandemic?

How has enrollment changed in your program?

Does the organization have financial reserves?

Have you tracked attendance data during the pandemic?

Has the organization created an emergency plan in the event closure is required?

If you remained open after March 15, 2020, what steps were taken to keep children and staff safe?

What concerns do you have about the viability of the program and your organization?

Teacher Questions

How has the pandemic affected your ability to be an effective teacher?

Have you noticed a marked change in your student's behavior pre- and post-pandemic?

Was your organizations prepared to pivot to virtual learning?

Has the organization made changes to its technology since the pandemic?

How has enrollment changed in your classroom?

Do you think your organization was prepared for a crisis?

Have you tracked attendance data during the pandemic?

Has the organization created an emergency plan in the event closure is required?

If you remained open after March 15, 2020, did you feel safe?

What concerns do you have about the viability of the program and your organization?

Appendix D: Participant Request



Study Participation Request

Project Title: Collaborating in Crisis: An examination of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic on the Georgia Pre-Kindergarten program providers in Fulton County, Georgia.

Investigator(s): Arlene Charles, Principal Investigator
Dr. Kristen Crossney, Faculty Sponsor

Dear Pre-K Provider or Lead Teacher,

My name is Arlene Charles and I am a Doctoral student at West Chester University in West Chester, PA completing my Doctorate in Public Administration degree. I am writing to ask you to participate in a mixed methods study of Pre- Kindergarten providers in Fulton County Georgia. This research intends to conduct a case study of Georgia Pre-Kindergarten providers with current public private contracts with the GA Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) as of February 2020. This research seeks to examine and understand the resiliency of providers, during crisis, defined as how providers continued to meet the obligations of their contract to deliver Pre-K educations by meet student service delivery and outcome standards.

Your willingness to participate in this study could advance theory and practice in the administration and management of public private partnerships and may help governments and similar organizations navigate and sustain operations in the event of future crisis. Study expectations include completion of a survey by the Program Director and one Pre-K Lead Teacher, completion of a virtual recorded interview, a review of publicly available data for your organization, and a follow-up interview if needed. You, your Lead Teacher and your organization would remain anonymous to the public because all participants and organizations will be identified through a coding process.

I thank you in advance for your consideration and would appreciate your completion of the Informed Consent Form through this survey link to [\\$1://SurveyLink?d=Take the Survey}](#). Once you have completed the informed consent, you will be provided a survey based on your organizational role that should take no longer than 30 minutes. If you are a Program Director, you may need organizational financial and program data available to complete the survey. Please forward this email to the Lead Teacher in your organization who might be willing to participate in this study. Once the survey is complete, I will contact you all for an initial and follow-up interviews which should be no longer than 1 hour each.

I hope that you consider participation in this study as this information may help your

organization and other similar organizations be well prepared for future crisis and emergencies that affect your ability to operate. If further information is needed to consider this request, please contact me, Arlene Charles, Principal Investigator at (908)531-6328 or AC896788@WCUPA.EDU or my Faculty Sponsor, Dr. Kristen Crossney, at (610) 430-5838 KCROSSNEY@WCUPA.EDU.

Sincerely,

Arlene Charles

Follow this link to the Survey:

[\\${1://SurveyLink?d=Take the Survey}](#)

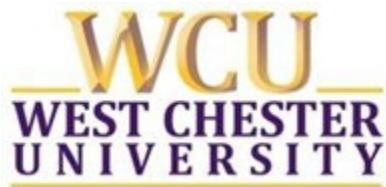
Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:

[\\${1://SurveyURL}](#)

Follow the link to opt out of future emails:

[\\${1://OptOutLink?d=Click here to unsubscribe}](#)

Appendix E: Participant Informed Consent



Informed Consent

Project Title: Collaborating in Crisis: An examination of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic on the Georgia Pre-Kindergarten program providers in Fulton County, Georgia.

Investigator(s): Arlene Charles, Principal Investigator
Dr. Kristen Crossney, Faculty Sponsor

Project Overview:

This voluntary research study is being done by Arlene Charles as part of her Doctorate in Public Administration degree to look at the level to which Georgia Pre-Kindergarten providers, with current public private contracts with the GA Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) as of February 2020, were able to continue remain open during the pandemic. This research wants to see how providers were able to continue Pre-K classes for students in their programs, see what challenges they faced, and how the organization and the staff was affected.

This study will only take 2.5-hours of your time and could help you evaluate the steps you need to take in a crisis to help students keep learning and help the organization be more prepared for future crisis and emergencies that could stop the Pre-K program. This research will help advance theory and practice in the administration and management of future government programs and may help governments and other organizations decide how to support Pre-K programs in the event of future crisis.

You and your organization would remain anonymous to the public because all participants and organizations will be identified through a coding process. If you would like to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this consent form. You may ask Arlene Charles any questions to help you understand this study. If you do not want to be a part of this study, it will not affect any services from West Chester University. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

Study Purpose:

The study wants to know:

1. How COVID-19 affected Pre- Kindergarten providers with state contracts in Fulton County GA
2. What things impacted the continuous education of pre-kindergarten students in state contract programs in Fulton County GA.
3. Which steps taken to continue operating the Pre- Kindergarten contract were more successful than others.

4. Which programs were able to stay open through the crisis to identify potential reasons?

If you decide to participate you will be asked to do the following:

1. Completion of an electronic 30-minute survey. Program Directors will need access to enrollment data.
2. Completion of a 1-hour virtual interview scheduled at your convenience.
3. Follow-up 1-hour interview to clarify responses

Experimental (Medical):

There are no medical risks to you.

Other Risk Considerations:

There are no known risks or associated with participation in this study, but participants will be asked to respond to questions about business practices, training and organizational resiliency that may feel some level of hesitancy responding to questions that question their decision-making process and choices.

If you become uncomfortable and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Arlene Charles, PI at (908)531-6328 or AC896788@WCUPA.EDU or the Faculty Sponsor, Dr. Kristen Crossney, at (610) 430-5838 KCROSSNEY@WCUPA.EDU. If you experience discomfort, you have the right to withdraw at any time.

Study Benefits:

Benefits to you may include additional information to help you through future crisis and emergencies that make it difficult to manage your program. Other benefits include helping organizations and governments understand how to continue operations in the event of future crisis. This study can benefit government agencies in their selection process and decision related to future public private partnerships.

Privacy Protection:

Your records will be private. Only Arlene Charles, Dr. Kristen Crossney and the West Chester University, Institutional Review Board will have access to your name and responses. All data will be password protected and stored where accessibility is only open to Arlene Charles and Dr. Kristen Crossney. Study related materials will remain confidential. All identifying data, including your name will be excluded from all public reports. Records will be destroyed three years after the study is finished

Study Compensation:

Participants will not be compensated to participate in this study.

Research Related Injury:

There are no risks identified with participating but if you have concerns or feel you have been hurt by this study please contact Arlene Charles, Principal Investigator at (908)531-6328 or AC896788@WCUPA.EDU or the Faculty Sponsor, Dr. Kristen Crossney, at (610) 430-5838

KCROSSNEY@WCUPA.EDU. If you experience discomfort, you have the right to withdraw at any time.

Identifiable Information/Biospecimens - Not Applicable

Data from this study is not intended to be used in the future research study.

If you have any more questions regarding your rights in this research study, please contact the West Chester University, Office of Sponsored Research at (610) 436-3557.

YES, I have read the description and details regarding this research study have read description and details regarding this research study have been informed of the risk and benefits of participation. I understand that my participation is voluntary, and I may withdraw my consent at any time. I acknowledge that any question I may have had have been answered to my satisfaction and that I can ask additional questions to further clarify my understanding. I understand that at this time, there are no known risk associated with this study, and acknowledge that I voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that clicking YES provides my consent, and that I will receive a copy of my signed consent form.
form. \${m://FirstName} \${m://LastName} \${m://Email1}

NO I do not consent