

FROM PRE-K TO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL
LEADERSHIP AND SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS

By

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FROM PRE-K TO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP AND SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS

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The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions and expectations of public elementary school administrators in Nebraska regarding the role of the elementary principal in successful transitions from Pre-K to kindergarten education programs throughout the state. The overarching question for the research was: Do elementary principals perceptions and expectations have an effect on transition plans for Pre-K to kindergarten children and families? The study provided information on elementary principal preparation for supervision and support of Pre-K students' transition to kindergarten classrooms, knowledge of best practices related to early childhood education programs, factors that influence their level of support for such programs within their school and their role in the transition of Pre-K students to the elementary classroom setting. Demographic data was gathered from all public school administrators who completed the cross-sectional survey so common group data, such as school district population, rural and non-rural disaggregated data (as identified by Nebraska's TEEOSA formula), and Title 1 and non-Title 1 schools (as identified by the Nebraska Department of Education) to better analyze results and identify restraints to implementation of Pre-K programs in local schools.

An explanatory, sequential, mixed methods study was conducted during the fall and winter of 2015. The study initially gathered data using an online, cross-sectional survey sent to all public school elementary principals in Nebraska. Surveys were distributed through administrators' school email addresses via the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) website (NDE, 2015a). Interviews with a purposeful selected sample of Nebraska public school elementary principals were then conducted following the survey to expand on the data results gathered from the quantitative study.

Dedication

To my wife, Courtney Snyder, you are my rock, my source of inspiration and unwavering support.

To Deb Snyder and the late Pete Snyder, the source of my existence. Your steadfast belief in me and unfailing words of encouragement fueled a passion for learning in me that remains burning bright.

To my two beautiful and intelligent daughters, Madelyn Ann and Ellie Kay, this is proof you can achieve anything you set your mind to.

Words cannot express...

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The quality of a person's life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence, regardless of their chosen field of endeavor.

Vince Lombardi

The road to this accomplishment has not been straight and narrow. There have been twists, turns and detours along the way. Life is a journey and none of us knows exactly “how” or often “where” it will end, though we do our best in traveling the path we are presented with. While traveling this path there have been numerous people, too many to mention individually, who have provided guidance and support!

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of Problem and Purpose

The Nebraska State Legislation only mandates that public schools require kindergarten programs (79-728), there currently is no federal requirement that public schools support all children prior to entering kindergarten. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act's (IDEA's) (Child Find) does mandate that states and local schools identify, locate and evaluate students with disabilities (birth through age 21) (Wright & Wright, 2007, para. 6). Currently, in the state of Nebraska, it is the decision of the local school district to provide for voluntary pre-school education programs. This leaves ample room for variance in program delivery and transitions from Pre-K to kindergarten on the part of the building-level administrator who is often overseeing such a program. According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) (2014), "Most principal knowledge of child development and the Pre-K-3 learning continuum remains largely self-taught." National Education Association (NEA) President Dennis Van Roekel said,

High-quality early childhood education and full-day kindergarten are fundamental to a student's long term success and shouldn't be determined by their parents' income. Investing now in preschool programs will end up saving states and the federal government billions over decades—and most importantly, doing all we can to ensure all children have the tools they need for academic and social success, is the right thing to do. (NEA, 2013b, para. 4)

Given the framework in which Pre-K systems are designed in Nebraska public schools (*it is the decision of the local school district to provide for voluntary pre-school or Early Childhood Education programs*), it is imperative to better understand the role of

the Pre-K educational transition process through the eyes of the administrators who lead such programs.

Relying on schools as the critical link between family, community, and children in the first eight years of life, this project (the Douglas/Sarpy County Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan) seeks to reduce or eliminate income-based achievement gaps affecting children living in poverty by implementing national, evidence-based models; evaluating how well the models are being implemented; and engaging in efforts with others to create policies at the state and local levels that provide long-term support for this initiative. (Douglas/Sarpy County Superintendents, 2014, p. 11)

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Education Plan aims "to create a comprehensive program within the Learning Community designed to eliminate or reduce income-based social, cognitive, and achievement gaps among young children at risk" (Douglas/Sarpy County Superintendents, 2014, p. 2). One essential component within this program is the role of the educational leader in the process. "We will seek to enhance public school principals' knowledge about early childhood development and early care and education" (p. 6).

Closing the achievement gap, raising test scores and improving schools is the message of each day in the life of an educator. Educators, legislators, researchers and families current engagement in the quest to close the achievement gap and "the disparity in academic performance between groups of students" (Education Week, 2011, p. 1), has led to numerous studies on approaches that yield the greatest effects. Such studies have pinpointed numerous influencers that both reside within and beyond the classroom and school walls (Aronson, 2004; Barton, 2003; Barton & Coley, 2009; Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Schwartz, 2001).

On a national perspective, three early childhood programming studies conducted in the 1960's, 1970's, and 1980's are still showing benefits to this day. While varying in delivery and key features, the High/Scope Perry School Project, Abecedarian Project and the Chicago Longitudinal Study all focused on providing high-quality early childhood education programming. The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993) provides an interesting perspective into the impact of a Pre-K education program on the lives of 123, African American, 3-4 year old children who were born into poverty and had parents with similar background characteristics between 1962-1967 in one Michigan school district. One group was provided with a preschool program and one group was not. The study followed and interviewed these participants throughout their life and one final time at the age of 40. The program model included two and one-half hour weekday classes for children and one and one-half hour weekly home visits to each mother and child on weekday afternoons, incorporating Jean Piaget's active learning and developmental principles based on the natural development of young children (Schweinhart, 2003). Long-term study results indicated that children who attended the program "improved their educational performance, contributed to their economic development, helped prevent them from committing crimes, and provide(ed) a high return on taxpayer investment" (Schweinhart, 2003, p. 4). Findings are referenced in Appendix A (Major Findings: High/Scope Perry) and Appendix B (High/Scope Public Costs & Benefits).

Another study, similar in structure to the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study is the Abecedarian Study, which was conducted 10 years later (1972-1977). This study also

looked at Pre-K programming for children in poverty and examined longitudinal data for those attending the high-quality intervention program. The results of the Abecedarian study reinforced those from the High/Scope Perry Preschool project in revealing that children of high risk who attended a high-quality preschool program showed higher cognitive test scores from toddler to 21 years of age and better academic achievement in the areas of math and reading from early elementary through young adulthood (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling & Miller-Johnson, 2002).

Yet another study, the Chicago Longitudinal Study (Reynolds, 1999) was conducted between 1985-1986 with 1,539 low-income minority children (predominantly African-American) who exhibited at-risk characteristics for future school success. All children in the study attended Title I, public school programs that were governmentally funded and were a part of the Chicago Child-Parent Centers Program. This program has also shown long-term social and educational benefits with greater high school completion rates than those not in the program, lower rates of felony arrests, lower rates of depression and a \$10.83 return on investment to society (Reynolds, Temple, White, Ou, & Robertson, 2011, p. 12).

The role of the elementary principal in supporting Pre-K students and families during the transition to a kindergarten classroom is essential. The relationships an elementary principal establishes and maintains during the transition process is paramount to getting parents, students, teachers, central office administrators, community members on the same page. The *Starting Schools Research Project*, a University of Western Sydney study, conducted from 1998-2000, focused specifically on investigating, “the

perceptions and expectations of all those involved in young children's transition to school" (Dockett & Perry, 2001, para. 7). Within the initial phases of the study, a wide variety of stakeholders, including children, parents, and early childhood educators were interviewed to determine what each group deemed important as children began school. From these interviews and a review of the essential literature, a questionnaire was developed and disseminated across New South Wales, Australia. The interview and questionnaire responses were then compiled and analyzed to reveal "the most important issues for children, parents and educators as children start school" (Dockett & Perry, 2001, para. 9). The categories identified by the groups are located in the following graphic taken from *Starting School: Effective Transitions* (2001) (see Table 1).

Table 1

Overview of Categories and Response Groups

Children	Parents	Early Childhood Educators
Rules	Social Adjustment	Social Adjustment
Disposition	Educational Environment	Disposition
Social Adjustment	Disposition	Skills
Knowledge	Physical	Educational Environment
Physical	Family	Physical
Skills	Skills	Knowledge
	Rules	Family
	Knowledge	Rules

Source: "Starting School: Effective Transitions," by S. Dockett & B. Perry, 2001, in *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 3 (2), 2001. Used with permission. Retrieved on 27 July 2015, from: <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v3n2/dockett.html>

Of interest, though perhaps not surprising, is the variability between the adult and child groups regarding what was actually important. While the interview and questionnaire results yielded important information regarding the perspectives and experiences of youth, educators and parents, it also introduced the following themes, “a belief and commitment that starting school is not just an experience for the individual child. Rather, it is a community experience, involving a wide range of people (family and community)” and “effective transition programs focus on relationships” (Dockett & Perry, 2001, para. 14). The importance of relationships in a successful transition for children from a Pre-K program to kindergarten cannot be underestimated. As the central leader within the school building, the role of the elementary principal should be strongly considered. “Effective principals ensure that their schools allow both adults and children to put learning at the center of their daily activities” (Wallace Foundation, 2011, p. 8). The Wallace Foundation goes on to identify the following key functions of educational/principal leadership.

1. Shaping a vision of academic success for all students, one based on high standards.
2. Creating a climate hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail.
3. Cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision.
4. Improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost.
5. Managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement. (2011, p. 4)

These key functions embody the role of the principal leader in all parts of the school community.

When considering the positive impacts noted in the High/Scope Perry, Abecedarian and Chicago Longitudinal studies, thoughtfulness must return to the central phenomenon of early childhood education in Nebraska where the fundamental scope and availability of such programs *is a decision left to the local school district*. As of the 2015-16 school year there are 245 public school districts within the state of Nebraska with 555 elementary schools whom are making Pre-K programming decisions independent of one another (Nebraska Department of Education, 2015c). Elmore (2005) suggested,

The leader's responsibility is to set the conditions in place that allow him or her access to the work that teachers do. The leader's effectiveness depends in large part on his or her capacity to learn how to function at higher levels as an enabler of teacher learning, and the leader does this in part by examining his or her own knowledge and skills as a leader based on understanding of individual teachers' practice. (as cited in Fuhrman & Lazerson, 2005, p. 286)

Embracing a system in which the school leader takes on such a supportive role would potentially impact the role of principal leaders by moving them away from positions of control. Unless the system already has the necessary school attributes that set it apart from others in the realm of accountability, the leadership will be necessary to, in some way, develop the internal accountability "necessary to improve instructional practices, coordinate agreement on aims of the school, and visible norms and practices for monitoring the work of teachers and students" (Elmore, as cited in Fuhrman & Lazerson, 2005, p. 288). The strength of the school system will then largely depend on the relationships and collaboration between teacher, leader, family and school community.

This study addressed the current deficiencies in research regarding the elementary principal's role in the successful transition of Pre-K students and families to the kindergarten classroom.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions and expectations of public school elementary principals in Nebraska regarding their role in the Pre-K education program and the transition of students from preschool to kindergarten programs. The overarching question for the research was: Do elementary principals' perceptions and expectations have an effect on transition plans for Pre-K to kindergarten children and families? The study provided information on elementary principals' knowledge of best practices related to early childhood education programs, factors that influence their level of support for such programs within their school and their role in the transition of Pre-K students to the elementary classroom setting. Demographic data was collected for each elementary principal participant so common group data for public school elementary principals can be used to more thoroughly analyze results. Common group perceptions were also gathered, using the data to identify barriers and challenges to implementation of Pre-K transition programs in schools.

Research Questions

For the purpose of this study, seven sub-questions were used to guide the research:

1. What is the background and experience of the principal related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs, training and professional development?

2. Are there differences in elementary principals' perceptions for Pre-K transition plans, knowledge of research, and availability of resources between:
 - a. districts with higher percentages of Free and Reduced Lunch percentages and at-risk children and districts with lower percentages of Free and Reduced Lunch percentages and at-risk children?
 - b. rural and non-rural school districts?
 - c. Title I and non-Title I schools?
3. What Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs are in place in Nebraska public elementary schools?
4. To what extent do the current Pre-K to kindergarten transition practices in place in Nebraska public elementary schools align with the work done by Dockett and Perry (2014)?
 - a. Indicators of an effective transition program for kindergarten students:
 - 1) Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships
 - 2) Partnerships
 - 3) High expectations and equity
 - 4) Respect for diversity
 - 5) Ongoing learning and reflective practice
5. To what extent do transition programs impact the school readiness of students entering kindergarten?
6. To what extent do Nebraska public school elementary principals believe financial, facility or human resources impact Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs in Nebraska schools?

7. How do the perceptions and expectations of elementary principals impact their role in the successful transition of Pre-K children to kindergarten?

Method

This study was conducted during the fall and winter of 2015 and an explanatory, sequential, mixed methods research design was selected in order to address the primary and secondary research questions. Quantitative data was collected via a cross-sectional survey developed by the researcher and delivered to all Nebraska elementary principals via email. A “cross-sectional” survey allows the researcher to collect data “at one point in time” (Creswell, 2014, p. 157). After survey data was collected, organized and analyzed, interviews were conducted with specifically selected elementary principals. The researcher used what Creswell (2013) referred to as a “stratified purposeful” sampling method to select the elementary principals for the qualitative interviews in the study. Current elementary principals were specifically selected based on the following criteria: Those whose survey responses indicated either a high level or a low level of implementation of Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans as well as the demographic information of the district. It was desired to have ample representation of the various rural and non-rural school districts in the state of Nebraska. The further exploration of collected quantitative data through qualitative research methods allowed the researcher to better study the experiences and perceptions of purposefully selected respondents. “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). This qualitative focus on individual experiences

allowed the researcher to gather in-depth information or “stories” related to events and experiences.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions are given:

Early Childhood Education—The period of a child’s life from birth through age eight (8).

High-quality early childhood care and education programs—Pre-K programs that demonstrate specific criteria, which has been proven to produce short- and long- term positive effects on children’s cognitive and social development (NAEYC, n.d.).

Kindergarten programs (K) —Programs serving five- and six-year olds.

Pre-K - For the purpose of this study, Pre-K will specifically refer to the preschool years, children ages three through five.

Preschool—Pre-K programs serving children beginning at 36 months through 5 years of age.

Public Education—Education that is publicly financed, tuition free, accountable to public authorities, and accessible to all students.

Rule 10—Regulations and procedures for the accreditation of Nebraska schools

Rule 11—Regulations for any Pre-K Program in Nebraska schools.

School Community—The various individuals, groups, businesses, and institutions that are invested in the welfare and vitality of a public school and its community—i.e., the neighborhoods and municipalities served by the school (“School Community Definition - The Glossary of Education Reform,” 2014, para. 1).

Title I Schools—Schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Transition—Changes between different types of activities as well as changes between educational services received throughout the day. Vertical transitions are changes over time, such as moving from preschool to kindergarten and horizontal transitions are changes that occur within the same time frame (a given day) (Brown & Amwake, 2005, p. 5). For the purpose of this study, transition refers to the activities begun by the elementary school or early childhood community to provide better preschool to kindergarten transition experiences.

Transition Activities – the events undertaken by children and their families, often initiated by educators or leaders in the school community, to bridge the gap between preschool or home and kindergarten (Riley & Feeney, 2004, p. 117).

Transition Planning—Helping to prepare children and families for change (Brown & Amwake, 2005, p. 18).

Transition Teams—A team of people, generally consisting of parents, principals, teachers, and childcare providers, who work to improve the transitions of students through planning and implementation (Brown & Amwake, 2005, p. 19).

Assumptions

Having served in the elementary setting for 13 years as a classroom teacher, high ability coordinator and principal, this researcher came to the following assumptions:

1. The survey and interview tools used for this study will yield accurate information from elementary principals regarding Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs/practices.
2. Participants will answer the survey questions about their Pre-K to kindergarten transition program/practice experience and perceptions truthfully.
3. Participants are familiar enough with Pre-K to kindergarten education transition processes to answer the survey questions.
4. Based on a review of the literature, it is possible to measure the knowledge elementary principals have related to implementing high-quality Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans.
5. The information gained in this study can be used to support the effort to better prepare elementary principals with the knowledge and skills directly related to successful Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs/practices and the essential partnerships in the process (family, community, school).

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations and delimitations are discussed to analyze possible threats to the study's validity and to acknowledge existing flaws to the research design.

Limitations. Limitations are conditions that restrict the scope of the study or may affect the outcome and cannot be controlled by the researcher. The researcher acknowledges these limitations in this study.

1. Only Nebraska, public elementary principals will participate in this study, thus results are limited to state boundaries.
2. Quantitative results were limited to those elementary principals who have access to the survey and those who take the time to complete the survey.
These factors may have inhibited the sample population.
3. Compilation of the research was limited to the willingness of the participants who completed the survey; this may impact the follow up interviews.
4. Some elementary principals may have limited access to the survey, limiting the data accumulated.
5. Two school districts chose not to participate.
6. Some elementary principals may not have answered truthfully or at all.
7. Qualitative data is subject to a variety of interpretations.
8. Some school districts were represented more than once if there were multiple elementary principals from the same school district who chose to participate.

Delimitations: Delimitations are restrictions/bounds that researchers impose prior to the inception of the study to narrow the scope of a study. The researcher acknowledges delimitations to the study:

1. Only Nebraska public school elementary principals were used for the sample population, thus eliminating private and other school districts outside the state that may share different perceptions about Pre-K education.
2. An email survey does not guarantee that the most knowledgeable administrator within the school district participated in the study.

3. Participation in the survey is voluntary.

Target Audience

The target audiences for this study were elementary principals in Nebraska public schools, superintendents, faculty of educational administration leadership programs from higher education institutions and Department of Education essential personnel. These specific groups can gain an understanding of what elementary administrators currently know and understand about successful Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs and what needs to be implemented in school leadership and administration curriculum to further promote and develop school leadership skills and knowledge in this area. State departments of education may utilize the findings to support and facilitate transition related services and school improvement efforts linked to Pre-K to kindergarten transitional programs.

Significance of the Study

The long-term impact research studies on the benefits of early education programs affirm that quality Pre-K programs can positively influence academic achievement for children, especially those most at-risk. Currently, it is not clear what public elementary school principals in Nebraska know about effective Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans and the extent of their knowledge about Pre-K to kindergarten transitional program research. This study aimed to gain an understanding of what Nebraska public school elementary principals know and understand about this information and their role in a successful transition for students and families from Pre-K to kindergarten. Thus, local school districts and institutions of higher education can benefit from having an enhanced

understanding of what elementary principals currently know and what information they need to enhance their skills and knowledge in the area of successful Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans.

With 245 current school districts and 555 elementary public school buildings in Nebraska (Nebraska Department of Education, 2015c), it is essential that school administrators understand current research findings and high-quality programming criteria in order to yield the positive results from their early education program. During the fall of 2015, the Nebraska Department of Education (2015b) unveiled an accountability system titled, Accountability of Quality Education System for Today and Tomorrow: A QuESTT for Nebraska! (AQuESTT). This specific accountability system is founded on six tenets: Positive Partnerships, Relationships & Student Success; Transitions, Educational Opportunities and Access, College and Career Ready, Assessment and finally Educator Effectiveness. Three of the tenets specifically outlined in AQuESTT relate directly to the researcher's current study. This study focused on elementary principal actions related to creating: Positive Partnerships, Relationships & Student Success, Transitions, and Educational Opportunities and Access.

Additionally, state departments can benefit from this study by developing more insight related to the potential factors that are currently influencing administrators who are charged with leading Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans within their school.

The gathering of common group data can be used to identify potential limitations and boundaries for high-quality early childhood education programming across districts and schools with early childhood education programs in place. It can also be used by

schools and school districts to better inform the decision making process related to supporting Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs in the future. The significance of this study is supported by a lack of current research and information available related to effective transitions from Pre-K to kindergarten school programs.

Summary

As legislators, economists, educators and school families further comprehend the impact of early education programming in closing achievement gaps and supporting a successful transition to elementary school, it is important to better understand the role of the elementary principal in this transition process. If we hold true the notion that the success of our nation is related to the impact and effectiveness of our school system and the educators within this system and that the goal of our school program is to create contributing members of society; we must consider the impact of those who are working directly with and overseeing the transition process. School leaders are an important cog in this process, “The administrative role is so important that the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) has declared Pre-K to be a significant responsibility for elementary principals” (Kostelnik & Grady, 2009, p. 24). “Simply implementing programs or policies is not the measure of their success; whether they result in improved student learning is the true test” (Conley, 2003, p. 95). In order to provide the necessary tools and leadership training to best meet this goal and be effective in meeting this ‘charge’ we must first gauge what administrators know about successful Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Introduction

School structure and the purpose of schooling have been ever changing. Much of this change has come from the different wants and needs of society. As the country has changed, so too have society's demands for its educational system. We have moved from an educational system, which allowed scripture lessons to be read and supported religious ideals, to one that created improved workers, to a current system that focuses on improving the economic conditions of our current society. All along, transitions have been a part of the school process. Children have entered school and moved through the systems, old and new. Largely, in all of these situations, the importance of school readiness and the ability to transition successfully has related to the successes of each student.

The National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER) and Dr. Steven Barnett (2013), have stated the following regarding the impact of a high-quality early childhood experience on the children engaged in such a program, "rigorous studies find that strong preschool education programs can meaningfully enhance early learning and development and thereby produce long-term improvements in school success and social behavior that generate benefits to individuals and the broader society far exceeding costs" (p. 3). The impact of high-quality early childhood education programs cannot be denied and the role of the elementary principal in bolstering such programs must be considered.

Research studies have clearly demonstrated the need for a cohesive and systematic approach to transitions for children from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2014; LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer & Pianta, 2008; Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, Rimm-Kaufman, Gercke & Higgins, 2001; Pianta & Cox, 2002). The effectiveness of the transition process for these young learners is undoubtedly related to the expectations that are established and upheld by the adults who are involved. Instituting systems that support both vertical and horizontal transitions is necessary in an effective transition process. Vertical transitions include changes children experience over time, such as moving from preschool to kindergarten and horizontal transitions include changes that children might experience within the same time frame (a given day) (Brown & Amwake, 2005, p. 5). Providing positive supports and experiences for students transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten is not a task to take lightly and is not something that magically occurs. It takes careful planning, a focused vision and the building of relationships to create an effective transition process. “The transition to kindergarten is a complex process that involves coordination and collaboration on many levels” (NDE, 2010, p. 27).

Effective transition guidelines have been developed by Sue Dockett and Bob Perry (2001), Robert Pianta and Marcia Kraftt-Sayre (2003), and are not new to the world of education. Sue Dockett and Bob Perry (2014) have also recently introduced a framework focused on effective transition plans. The commonalities between these guidelines is focused on establishing and fostering positive and collaborative relationships with all stakeholders that are built on respect and trust, actively involving

stakeholders in the process through open and ongoing two-way communication, facilitating a program that honors family strengths while also focusing on the strengths of the individual child, and identifies and accesses resources (financial and human) to meet funding and resource needs. These guidelines maintain a focus on the overall importance of the transition program's need to remain flexible and responsive. When in place, guidelines such as those suggested can lead to positive results for students and families when transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms.

Brief History of Public Schools

Nancy Kober stated in an article from the Center on Education Policy, *Why We Still Need Public Schools* (2007), "From the early days of the nation, public education has played a vital role in American democratic society" (p. 1). She also goes on to say that the focus has been on "promoting the common good" including, "preparing youth to become responsible citizens, forging a common culture from a nation of immigrants and reducing inequalities in American society" (p. 1). While there is no doubt various constituents (teachers, administration, families, politicians, business owners, etc.) view the role of public education as essential in "promoting the common good," it's also fair to say that the purpose and direction of education has changed dramatically since the completion of the penning of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which under Article 3 indicates, "Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged" (Ordinance for the Government of the Territory of the United States, 1787, n.d.).

The concept of a publicly funded educational system continued to grow and develop through the 1830s when Horace Mann advocated for what was known as a “common school” which was largely under local control, funded with public tax dollars and delivered a common curriculum (Kober, 2007, p. 4). The “common school” reformers regarded universal public education as a method for promoting the “common good.” These schools “would transform children into moral, literate, and productive citizens; eliminate poverty and crime; quell class conflict; and unify a population that was becoming more ethnically diverse” (Kober, 2007, p. 5). The same goals would appear to align with our current hope and vision for schools. The notion remains that public schools are a system, which will benefit all citizens and maintain many of the overarching goals of public education from inception to today (youth preparation, citizenship development, promoting common culture, and reducing inequalities).

The 1950’s and the Civil Right’s movement of the 60’s and 70’s brought about immense changes regarding access to public education by groups of students who had either previously been denied an equal educational opportunity. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court declared, in *Brown v. the Board of Education*, “segregated schools to be unconstitutional” (Kober, 2007, p. 6). The ruling brought about educational opportunities for minority children that were not available in the past and with it opportunities for educational equality.

During the past 50 years we have continued to see the federal government enact laws to improve the quality of educational opportunities for “poor children, migrant children, students with disabilities, Native Americans, limited-English proficient

children, and women and girls” (Kober, 2007, p. 6). Most recently we have seen the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the requirements for school districts to measure and improve student achievement in reading and mathematics, measure and raise the adequate yearly progress of all students towards proficiency of state assessments. The end goal is 100% proficiency by all students (Kober, 2007, p. 6).

The policy changes through both federal and state mandates have required administrators and district leaders to change the way they do business. They now must focus on other roles and responsibilities that 20 years ago were not on the table. I have spoken to numerous retired school administrators over the past five years who have shared the following message, “I’m not sure I could be a principal in today’s educational world.” As we are most likely not going back to the “way things used to be” anytime soon, we must consider our options.

Historical Overview of Kindergarten

The history of kindergarten programs is often traced back to Friedrich William Froebel of Germany and the first kindergarten, which opened in 1837. Kindergarten, as Froebel eventually named it, is defined as “garden of children.” It was largely based around play and a series of simple activities, which later progressed to more challenging games. He was a proponent of children learning through play and described the teachers as gardeners in the “garden of children.” Froebel was a believer that teachers should nurture the “seeds” of the garden and provide activities, which enabled and encouraged children learning. “Froebel saw the importance of parents as the first teachers, for careful

sequencing of work to meet the abilities of young students, and the educative value of active self-education” (Hewes, 1992, p. 16).

The first kindergarten in the United States is said to have been founded in Watertown, Wisconsin by Margaretha Schurz, a German immigrant, in 1856 “for her own daughters and their four cousins” (Hewes, 1992, p. 17). This first kindergarten was taught in German and utilized methods that Mrs. Schurz had learned in Germany. In 1860 the kindergarten concept being utilized by Margaretha Schurz was discovered by Elizabeth Peabody and was introduced in Boston, Massachusetts for English-speaking children. In 1873, Susan Blow is credited with founding the first publicly funded kindergarten in the United States in St. Louis, Missouri. “She was one of the early pioneers of the Kindergarten Movement, which made kindergarten a constituent part of childhood education. The Movement led to the formation of the New York Kindergarten Association and an International Union” (Blow, 2013, para. 13).

During the time between the first kindergarten arrived in the United States and today, we have seen the purpose of kindergarten morph from one that was completely child-centered and focused on play to one that places an emphasis on academic standards and focuses on preparing children to be successful academically in first grade. Elementary principals’ ability to understand these historical changes is an important link to implementing an effective transition process as well as supporting children and families in their transition from Pre-K to kindergarten.

Closing the Achievement Gap or Opportunity Gap

Closing the achievement gap, raising test scores and improving schools is the message of each day in the life of an educator. Educators, legislators, researchers and families current engagement in the quest to close the achievement gap, “the disparity in academic performance between groups of students” (Education Week, 2011, p. 1), has led to numerous studies on approaches that yield the greatest effects. Such studies have pinpointed numerous influencers that both reside within and beyond the classroom and school walls (Aronson, 2004; Barton, 2003; Barton & Coley, 2009; Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Schwartz, 2001). Engaging in these processes requires the ability of stakeholders to effectively communicate and collaborate on a common program vision.

When considering the role of government in closing gaps, Educare Omaha Executive Director, Gladys Haynes said,

Across Nebraska there is debate over whether the government or the parents should be responsible for nurturing a young child. But more and more there’s support for government playing a role in reducing the ‘opportunity gap’ between poor and more affluent children.

I think we have more and more school leaders, politicians that are understanding it. But it’s an ongoing battle yet; we haven’t hooked it. But I think we are much closer than we were two or three years ago. (Dejka, 2013, para. 25-27)

The importance of providing high-quality, early childhood learning opportunities is well-documented and investing in such programs has shown great promise in the goal of closing the achievement gap for all children entering public school systems.

Impact on Society (Investment and Return on Investment)

When considering potential strategies for closing the achievement gaps in our educational system, there is often discussion centered on the potential benefits a

commitment towards early childhood education programs would yield. Such discussion often centers on early childhood education as an investment and then from a fiscal standpoint the discussion can shift to what the potential return on investment (ROI) might be. To better understand this notion, we must first better understand what ROI might look like in the early education setting and we must also define it. The Center for High Impact Philanthropy at the University of Pennsylvania defined them in the following way,

In the strictly financial sense, an investment is an outlay of money from which one expects a return of some kind, in addition to the original amount allocated. The return on investment, or ROI, is a common performance measure used to evaluate and compare the efficiency of financial investments. (2015, p. 1)

When considering the purpose of numerous early childhood education programs in Nebraska as reaching those students who are most fragile and at-risk, it is important for school leaders to consider the impact of their investment in the area of early childhood education. Economics studies have identified a high return on investment for early childhood education programs. The High/Scope Perry (2004) study showed a return on investment of seventeen dollars for every one (1) dollar invested, with 80% of these returns coming back to the general public. The Chicago Longitudinal study (1999) showed a return on investment to society of greater than ten (10) dollars for each dollar spent on children receiving high-quality early childhood programs. As U.S. House Representative from Virginia, Bobby Scott (2015) stated, “Early investments in education are not only good for our children and families, it’s also good for the future of our nation’s economy” (as cited in Committee on Education and the Workforce Democrats, 2015, para. 5). The impact of such high-quality early childhood programs is clearly

described in the rate of return on investment produced by these studies. The expansion of economic studies on early childhood education investment is culminated in the words of Dr. James J. Heckman of the University of Chicago, “Early childhood education is an efficient and effective investment for economic and workforce development. The earlier the investment, the greater the return on investment” (Heckman Equation, n.d., p. 2).

The National Education Association (2013a), the nation’s largest professional employee organization, “is committed to advancing the cause of public education” and “improving early childhood education” (para. 7). The NEA (2013a) indicates the importance of early childhood education with the following recommendations:

- Free, publicly funded, quality kindergarten programs in all states.
- Mandatory full-day kindergarten. Just 14 states require school districts to offer full-day kindergarten.
- Optional free, publicly funded, quality “universal” pre-kindergarten programs for all three- and four-year-old children whose parents choose to enroll them. Three states are moving toward such a program - Georgia, New York and Oklahoma.
- Federal funds to make pre-kindergarten programs available for all three- and four-year-old children from disadvantaged families. State and local governments should provide the additional funds necessary to make pre-kindergarten available for all three- and four-year old children.
- Dedicated funding for early childhood education. Public schools should be the primary provider of pre-kindergarten programs, and additional funding must be allocated to finance them in the same manner as K-12 schools.

“High quality early childhood education represents one of the best investments that our country can make. NEA believes it’s a common sense investment we can’t afford to pass up” (NEA, 2013a, para. 7).

Promoting School Readiness

One central factor to a student's successes when transitioning from a Pre-K to kindergarten setting is "readiness to learn." "Stakeholders at the local, state and federal levels agree that a child's future academic success is dependent on being ready to learn and participate in a successful kindergarten experience" (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005, p. 1). Much of school readiness can be attributed to a child's access to high-quality early childhood programming. There have been calls from the public to increase the school readiness of children, especially those below the poverty line. This has also been a central focus of bipartisan legislation introduced in May of 2015. The Strong Start for America's Children Act (2015),

would fund preschool for four-year old children from families earning below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), and encourage states to spend their own funds to support preschool for young children with family incomes above that income level. (Committee on Education and the Workforce Democrats, 2015, para. 2)

Programs like the Strong Start for America's Children Act require those in decision-making capacities to understand early childhood programming best practices. Such an understanding enables local educational leaders to make educated decisions regarding educational and transitional programs.

The importance of developing school readiness for a student set to enter an elementary school, as a kindergartener, is essential in that student's overall school success. Children's early performance in both academic and social domains have been associated with later academic and social outcomes as they make the transition from Pre-K to formal instruction in kindergarten and first grade (Downer & Pianta, 2006).

Preparing students for this transition and developing the relationships with parents which are necessary to continue the steps of success that have been put in place should be strongly considered by school administration and others in charge of making decisions regarding the voluntary pre-school program within their school district.

Children who enter kindergarten with poor language and literacy skills tend to show poor reading achievement during the early grades. “The combination of deficient decoding skills, lack of practice, and difficult materials results in unrewarding early reading experiences that lead to less involvement in reading-related activities” (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997, p. 137). On the other hand, children who begin their school journey with fundamental literacy skills are quicker to develop strong literacy and reading skills. This foundation then leads to future academic successes and competence (Downer & Pianta, 2006). While developing such skills promotes early and continued successes in school, the opposite is true for children who enter school with gaps in performance compared to their peers. It’s documented that children from low-income families often perform below the achievement levels of their middle-income peers on national mathematics assessments as early as the preschool years. These gaps can often carry over into early and late adolescence (Downer & Pianta, 2006).

Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment

Curriculum. Under Nebraska’s Rule 10 Section 004.01, K-12 Curriculum must meet a quality indicator requirement. This requires that,

The curriculum is comprehensive, coordinated, and sequential and is directed toward locally approved goals and standards for student learning. The instructional program focuses on achievement and provides for the needs of all

students including learners with disabilities and high ability learners. It draws upon research, best practice, and reputable theory. (NDE, 2014b)

Such a comprehensive approach confirms a systemic and cohesive plan. This process ensures there are high standards for all students throughout the school system. Including the Pre-K realm in this discussion will help to solidify the transition by outlining clear expectations and learning targets for those students who will be entering kindergarten.

Establishing curricular expectations, which are consistent and aligned with specific learning objectives and outcomes will provide opportunities for students to learn the foundational skills that will promote future academic and social successes in school.

Instruction. Instructional leadership cannot be overlooked in an effective school community. The mission, vision and guidance provided by the school leader are a core component of that building's successes. The Nebraska Department of Education has reflected this importance in its Performance Framework for Principals (2011a) under Standard 3: "Instructional Leadership - The Principal provides leadership to ensure the implementation of a rigorous curriculum, the use of effective teaching practices, and accountability for results" (NDE, 2011a, p. 2).

The importance of leadership in the public school setting is further supported in the work *Leadership Matters* (2013) that was supported by both the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP).

In today's climate of heightened expectations, principals are in the hot seat to improve teaching and learning. They need to be educational visionaries; instructional and curriculum leaders; assessment experts; disciplinarians; community builders; public relations experts; budget analysts; facility managers;

special program administrators; and expert overseers of legal, contractual, and policy mandates and initiatives. (NAESP/NASSP, 2013, p. 2)

Establishing and agreeing upon a common instructional framework or model for K-12 institutions can be challenging considering the number of frameworks currently available for purchase or implementation. No matter which framework is agreed upon, the role of the adults in each cannot be underestimated. The Nebraska Department of Education (2013b), when speaking of the adult's role in the learning environment, stated, "The role of the adult is to promote and stimulate children's development and facilitate their learning" (p. 3). The adult's role is crucial to the success of the student and the effectiveness of the instructional framework being implemented. The role of the adult, as suggested by the Nebraska Department of Education (2013b) is to "guide learning experiences using strategies that encourage children to think creatively, problem-solve, make decisions, and expand their thinking skills" (p. 3).

The role of the elementary principal is to support the intended instructional method through instructional observations of teachers, understanding the needs of the staff (instructional materials, training, etc.), and further communicating with staff to identify additional areas of need.

Assessment. Learning to incorporate and interpret formative and summative assessments in meaningful ways is an essential component in successful transitions. "Assessments must help us accurately diagnose student needs, track and enhance student growth toward standards, motivate students to strive for academic excellence, and verify student mastery of required standards" (Stiggins, 2005, p. 15). The assessment literacy of teachers must be ensured if we are to put our money where our mouth is. With a wealth

of data at our fingertips, it becomes even more important for teachers to begin to use data with precise intentions. We must begin to consider the following shifts in assessment use and response when students don't learn.

The central focus of many teachers around the country has no doubt been changing with much of the discussion shifting away from teachers wondering if they followed certain steps in lesson design i.e. Madeline Hunter to . . . “the question now being asked is not whether the teacher checked for understanding but rather, “What will I do if students did or didn't understand?” (Erkens et al., 2008, p. 60). Teachers' ability to incorporate and interpret formative and summative assessments in meaningful ways is important. “Assessments must help us accurately diagnose student needs, track and enhance student growth toward standards, motivate students to strive for academic excellence, and verify student mastery of required standards” (Stiggins, 2005, p. 15). The assessment literacy of teachers will support a successful transition for children from Pre-K to the kindergarten classroom. The elementary principal will need to be well-versed in these standards to best provide meaningful opportunities for professional development.

Home and School Collaborative Partnerships

Many roadblocks to student learning can be best avoided if collaborative teachers are working in positive collaborative cultures. “Collaborative cultures . . . clarify what their students must learn, systematically gather evidence of that learning through common formative assessments, and study the evidence together to inform and improve their individual and collective practice” (Erkens et al., 2008, p. 2). In order to guide this

process, school leadership needs to be highly involved and provide the resources to achieve this.

Elmore (2005) emphasized sharing accountability for learning and the learning process is important in the learning experience. “In order to be accountable in a learning relationship, as teacher to student or as student to teacher, an individual must accept responsibility for his or her own learning.” (as cited in Fuhrman & Lazerson, 2005, p. 283). An essential component in this process, whether it be between student and teacher, teacher and student, principal and teacher, superintendent and board, board and community, superintendent and community is trust.

The importance of developing relationships with the numerous stakeholders that make up an educational community (students, parents, families, school board members, legislators, business owners, etc.) can often be overshadowed by day-to-day operations within the school. “Parent involvement is itself a form of resources, but, as is often the case, it takes resources to generate resources (tangible and intangible). And it requires looking beyond the classroom.” and “In the overall mix, the effort and insight that parents can contribute, though not easy to enlist, have a potential to deepen the impact of school reform” (Stone, as cited in Fuhrman & Lazerson, 2005, p. 280). Developing these relationships has shown to be essential to school districts and there are numerous benefits for growing suburban districts. Schneider, Teske and Marschall (2000) state, “American parents have used their residential location decisions as a way to choose their children’s schools” (p. 8). Such choices are magnified in larger urban and metro area school districts where families with the financial means are capable of selecting their school

based on gravitating toward others who tend to be most like you. Contrary, in many rural schools, the *choice* is limited to the one local school and would not seem to have as great of an impact on the local school community. “Education is a complex and community-based journey that has no finish line or boundaries” (Thomas, 2012, p. 164). One’s successes are largely dependent upon the collaboration of a *community* and other factors beyond the direct control of that person.

The Nebraska Department of Education has reflected the importance of developing a community of learners in the Performance Framework for Principals (2011a) under Standard 7: “Developing Relationships - The Principal promotes and supports productive relationships with students, staff, families, and the community” (NDE, 2011a, p. 4). The importance of developing trusting and lasting relationships with all members of the school community remains at the forefront for building leaders.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The Nebraska Department of Education (2015b) unveiled an accountability system titled, Accountability of Quality Education System for Today and Tomorrow: A QuESTT for Nebraska! (AQuESTT). This accountability system is founded on six tenets: Positive Partnerships, Relationships & Student Success; Transitions, Educational Opportunities and Access, College and Career Ready, Assessment and finally Educator Effectiveness. Three of the tenets specifically outlined in AQuESTT relate directly to this researcher’s study. This study will focus on elementary principal actions related to creating: Positive Partnerships, Relationships & Student Success, Transitions, and Educational Opportunities and Access. With the future focus on and implementation of

such an accountability system in Nebraska, the importance of Positive Partnerships, Relationships and Student Success, Transitions and Educational Opportunities and Access becomes more prevalent throughout Nebraska's school districts.

“Simply implementing programs or policies is not the measure of their success; whether they result in improved student learning is the true test” (Conley, 2003, p. 95). Policy and practice are not mutually exclusive. There must be an alignment between what is written policy and the actions that support that policy. Early Childhood researchers Dr. Robert Pianta and Dr. Martha Cox (2002, p. 3) suggest four policy changes or focuses to best support the child and family involved in a transition process for children moving from Pre-K to kindergarten:

Facilitation of communication. Fostering communication between the Pre-K setting and elementary school is essential. Discussion should center on curriculum, consistent expectations between Pre-K and kindergarten programs as well as the experiences and expectations for children actively participating in the transition process.

Formation of transition planning team. The formation of a transition team, made up of elementary school and Pre-K personnel, community members, Pre-K families and various agency workers, would support children, families and school programs with a successful transition process. This team would emphasize the importance of communicating the numerous Pre-K opportunities within the community, enriching the learning opportunities, and putting appropriate transitional practices in place to support the transition of children from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms.

Teacher training on building relationships with families and stakeholder.

Developing relationships between teachers and families is necessary in providing a successful transition program. Teacher training should be devoted to engaging in positive and meaningful relationships with Pre-K families who will be active participants in the transition process. These trainings should be supported by and focus on implementing the most current research regarding teaching, learning and child development.

Ensure kindergarten programs are “high-quality” and meet the needs of all students. The experiences of children within the Pre-K setting should support a successful transition to the kindergarten classroom and likewise, the kindergarten school program should be built on principles and policies that further support these successes. These programs should demonstrate specific criteria, which have been proven to produce short- and long-term positive effects on children’s cognitive and social development (NAEYC, n.d.). To insure this occurs, it requires the implementation of sound early childhood learning policies and practices. Such policies and practices would include the hiring of highly-qualified staff, developing sound relationships between teacher, child and family, and maximizing the time spent in the learning environment.

In *Getting it Right from the Start: The Principal’s Guide to Early Childhood Education*, Drs. Kostelnik and Grady (2009) further state, “One of the goals of collaboration should be to strengthen the linkage between private providers of early childhood education and the public schools” (p. 69). This supports the changes suggested by Pianta and Cox (2002) and places an emphasis on implementing policy and practice

that focus on building collaborative relationships. This is indeed a goal, which needs to be strongly considered and the role of the elementary principal in this process is essential. As the leader of the school building, the elementary principal must engage and educate various community stakeholders on the mutual benefits these relationships provide. Kostelnik and Grady (2009) go on to state, “Since children from private settings often transition to the public schools and because the ultimate goal is the best education for all young children, it is essential to nurture the relationships between community settings and school settings” (p. 69). Educational practice and policy that focuses on nurturing these relationships and continues to promote the “ultimate goal” of providing the best educational opportunities for all children is essential in developing and maintaining a high-quality learning environment for all students.

Indicators of an Effective Transition Plan

Transition plans promote the preparation of children for the change from a Pre-K setting to that of kindergarten. These plans are intended to familiarize incoming children with the expectations of kindergarten and to increase each child’s level of comfort with the transition to school. There is no one-size-fits-all model when it comes to Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans, as plans are most effective when they meet the needs of the individual child and family being served. Transition plans will vary to meet the needs of each child and family and therefore will not be consistent across all schools and school districts. While there are numerous suggestions for effective transition plans, three of the better-known sets of transition guidelines have been created by Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003), Dockett and Perry (2001) and most recently Dockett and Perry (2014). These

guidelines share similar suggestions for best practice related to transition from Pre-K to kindergarten and also share similar features as recommended by the Nebraska Department of Education (2013b).

Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003) share five specific principles related to effective transition plans. These five recommendations are maximized when coupled with what is defined as a “developmental model” of transition. The developmental model focuses on skills children bring with them to school, the influences of the teacher, family, peers and community and their influence on each other and the child, while emphasizing the change and development over time (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2001). The following five principles are introduced by Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003, p. 9) and serve as guidelines for effective transitions for children from Pre-K to kindergarten: (a) foster relationships as resources; (b) promote continuity from preschool to kindergarten; (c) focus on family strengths; (d) tailor practices to individual needs; and (e) form collaborative relationships.

Foster relationships as resources. “When a child is involved in and surrounded by supportive relationships, the transition to kindergarten occurs more smoothly.” “Parents also benefit from the positive relationships during the transition process, and teachers are a valued and useful sources of support and information to parents, particularly first-time parents” (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003, p. 10).

Promote continuity from preschool to kindergarten. “Relationships that are stable and lasting can serve as a bridge between the family and school and provide continuity from preschool to kindergarten” (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003, p. 10).

Focus on family strengths. “Approaching families as resources with special strengths, no matter how these are defined or enacted, allows schools to build relationships that can be helpful to vulnerable children and families” (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003, p. 10-11).

Tailor practices to individual needs. “The actual set of transition practices enacted with a given family or classroom must be based on the needs and actual strengths of that child, family, teacher, school and community” (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003, p. 13).

Form collaborative relationships. “Collaboration among the key players in the transition process – teachers, principals, family workers, families – is fundamental in developing and implementing successful transition practices” (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003, p. 13).

In summary, “a developmental model of kindergarten transition considers child factors; the child’s social network or family, school, peer, and community; and the interactions of these contexts over time” (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003, p. 14). This model of transition planning utilizes and incorporates all possible human resources in the process of a child’s transition from Pre-K to kindergarten.

The following ten indicators serve as a reminder and guidelines for effective transitions plans for children transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms. The following guidelines emerged out of the *Starting Schools Research Project*, a University of Western Sydney study, conducted from 1998-2000 (Dockett & Perry, 2001):

(a) establish positive relationships between the children, parents and educators;

(b) facilitate each child's development as a capable learner; (c) differentiate between "orientation to school" and "transition to school" process; (d) draw upon dedicated funding and resources; (e) involve a range of stakeholders; (f) well planned and effectively evaluated; (g) flexible and responsive; (h) based on mutual trust and respect; (i) rely on reciprocal communication among participants; and (j) take into account contextual aspects of community and of individual families and children within that community.

Establish positive relationships between the children, parents and educators.

Effective transition programs rely upon a collaborative approach between these stakeholders and place an emphasis on nurturing and developing positive relationships. "While transition programs may focus on developing children's knowledge, understanding, and skills, they have as their function, a commitment to facilitating positive social interactions and relationships" (Dockett & Perry, 2001, para. 21).

Facilitate each child's development as a capable learner. Effective transition programs understand that learning occurs prior to a child entering the formal school setting and recognize that external factors often contribute to each child's development, knowledge and skills. Effective transition programs utilize information regarding a child's specific knowledge and skills (social and academic) to develop a learning plan that will best meet the needs of that child and will support all prior learning experiences the child brings with them to school.

Differentiate between "orientation to school" and "transition to school" process. Effective transition programs include the child and family in more than an

orientation to school (information being shared with) process through opportunities for the child and family to visit the school, spend time with other children who will be making the transition with them, getting to know teachers and beginning to learn the expectations of the school. The goal is the continue nurturing the process of transition through providing meaningful activities that meet the individual needs of each child and family.

Draw upon dedicated funding and resources. Effective transition programs identify resources (human, capital, material and space) early in the process and use collaborative approaches to access these resources and disseminate them appropriately. Depending upon the availability of resources within a school community, resources may vary from school to school.

Involve a range of stakeholders. Effective transition programs utilize a wide range of stakeholders to support the transition process and value input from educators, families and children. Including the family in the transition process emphasizes the knowledge of the child that is held by the family members who know their child well. It also promotes the relationship development that is necessary to sustain a successful transition program. Another way to involve a variety of stakeholders is through opening lines of communication between Pre-K educators and the receiving kindergarten teachers. There may be other individuals who know the child well and can effectively contribute to the process. These stakeholders should not be overlooked in the process. Involving a number of stakeholders in the process ensures “a belief and commitment that starting school is not just an experience for the individual child. Rather, it is a community

experience, involving a wide range of people (family and community)” (Dockett & Perry, 2001, para. 14).

Well planned and effectively evaluated. “Effective transition programs are based on detailed planning and have clearly defined objectives that have been developed in collaboration with all of the stakeholders” (Dockett & Perry, 2001, para. 43). The importance of maintaining an organized approach to transition planning cannot be overlooked. The previously identified objectives provide measureable outcomes to compare the transition process against. Establishing objectives with input from all stakeholders will ensure that each group has a voice and that the agreed upon objectives reflect each participant in the process.

Flexible and responsive. Effective transition programs are ever evolving and adapting to meet the needs of the children and families being served. A flexible and responsive approach allows stakeholders to assume various roles as these roles become more explicitly defined. Effective transition programs meet family members and children where they are, taking into account prior experiences and seek to learn how to best support both the child and family throughout the transition process.

Based on mutual trust and respect. Effective transition programs work best in a state of mutual trust and respect. In such an environment, all participants are encouraged to communicate openly and freely and connect more deeply with the school community. A community in which trust and respect are present promotes the sharing of ideas and information pertinent to the successful transition of the child and family. There must also be trust and respect between Pre-K educators and kindergarten educators during this

process. Elementary principals can assist with providing opportunities for such relationships to develop.

Rely on reciprocal communication among participants. Effective transition programs rely on “open and reciprocal communication among children, parents, and early childhood educators” (Dockett & Perry, 2001, para. 54). Focusing collaborative communication on creating a positive educational experience for the child is the goal of the group. Effective transition programs support educators, children and families in this communication process. Such a program establishes methods of communication that reach beyond the standard email and newsletter. It focuses on establishing a line of communication that is two-way.

Take into account contextual aspects of community and of individual families and children within that community. Effective transition programs value the background and experiences that children bring with them during the transition process. Responding to the needs of the community and the needs of specific families and children within the context of the community is essential of an effective transition program. Such needs can often be generalized across the community, though the transition process should not overlook the individual experiences and needs that may also be present within the school community. A focus on collaborative efforts between families, children, educators and administrators is absolutely necessary.

The most recent work conducted by Dockett and Perry (2014) draws upon the most recent and relevant research in the area of providing and supporting successful transitions from Pre-K to kindergarten for children and families.

Starting school is one of the major transitions individuals make throughout their lives. While the transition to school can be a time of excitement and eagerness, it can also be tinged with anxiety and concern. . . . Children, families and schools all exist within communities and they, too, reap benefit and provide support when the connection to school is positive and ongoing. (Dockett & Perry, 2014, p. 7)

Their work identifies five principles that are aimed to contribute to the successful transition experiences of children, families and other adults in the transition process:

(a) secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships; (b) partnerships; (c) high expectations and equity; (d) respect for diversity; and (e) ongoing learning and reflective practice.

Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships. Successful transition practices maintain, at their core, a focus on developing secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships. Within such environments, each member is seen as a valued and contributing member of the team. The success of the relationships and transition plan depends on the commitments of all stakeholders (children, families, educators, community members, etc.) to one another. “The quality of adult relationships also impacts on experiences of transition. Family relationships with educators, and educators’ relationships with each other – be they prior-to-school, school, school age care educators or school principals – provide models for children’s relationships with educators” (Dockett & Perry, 2014, p. 10). The primary focus is on developing the collaborative, child-centered relationships.

Partnerships. Effective transition practices involve a variety of level of partnerships. These partnerships involve the action of working toward a common goal and maximizing the secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships to accomplish such goals. Partnership is generalized across the following areas; partnerships with families;

partnerships with communities; partnerships with other professionals; and partnerships with children.

Partnerships between educators and families recognise and respect the critical role of each in the lives of young children; partnerships with community confirm the importance of early childhood education within that community; partnerships with other professionals set the context for consistency and continuity as children move from one educational setting to another; and partnerships between educators and children convey a sense of value and respect that promotes learning and development. (Dockett & Perry, 2014, p. 29)

Including the right type of partners, those with an invested interest in the transition plan process, focuses the team on developing collaborative relationships while maintaining the common goal of implementing a successful transition plan and developing a child-centered learning environment.

High expectations and equity. Effective transition processes establish high expectations for all stakeholders who engage in the transition process. The expectations held by each member of the transition team can vary depending upon background experiences and overall expectations. “While all involved aim towards effective transitions, there is consistent research that different groups of stakeholders have different expectations. Within the contexts of positive, trusting relationships and meaningful partnerships, differences can be triggers for reflective practice and ongoing learning” (Dockett & Perry, 2014, p. 48). The different experiences and initial expectations each team member brings to the table should not be seen as a detriment to the team, and should instead be viewed as an opportunity to engage in productive discussion that centers on the transition process and a successful transition for both child and family.

Respect for diversity. Valuing and respecting diversity is essential to an effective process for children and families transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms. The importance of respect for diversity should include differences of “gender, race, ethnicity, culture, language background and disability” (Dockett & Perry, 2014, p. 59). Establishing and further nurturing an environment that values such diversity is indicative of a community of trust and respect. In such environments, the strengths of children, families and other adults are accentuated. “Children, families, educators, other professionals and community members experience a sense of belonging when they feel welcome in various early childhood settings, schools and school age care settings” (Dockett & Perry, 2014, p. 61). The sense of belonging can often be attributed to the past experiences each member of the team brings with them to the partnership. “When educators, families and other professionals work collaboratively and have access to organisational support, potential exists for individualised, responsive practice that addresses the diverse capabilities of all children” (Dockett & Perry, 2014, p. 60).

Ongoing learning and reflective practice. “Ongoing learning opportunities promote the professionalism of early childhood educators. Effective ongoing learning, or professional development, is shaped by the contexts in which educators operate and by the values, beliefs and expectations educators bring to those contexts” (Dockett & Perry, 2014, p. 70). Educators who are committed to and engage in a process of continuous learning are more likely to “take greater responsibility for the educational outcomes of all children” (Dockett & Perry, 2014, p. 70). Educators who engage in the process of ongoing learning are more connected to the learning process by nature of their actions.

Reflective practice is as important as committing to habits of ongoing learning. Schon (1983) identified two types of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action refers to being aware of the decision-making process and paying special attention to why these decisions are being made, in the moment. Reflection-on-action refers to reflecting on decisions that have already been made and evaluating the outcomes of those decisions. “Professional interactions with children, families, other professionals and community members can be complex; commitments to ongoing learning and reflective practice promote educators’ awareness of actions, and the consequences of these, and serve as the basis for improving practice” (Dockett & Perry, 2014, p. 70).

Elementary Principal’s Role in Pre-K to Kindergarten Transitions

The principal must play an active role in the process of developing an early childhood education program that meets high-quality and highly effective standards.

A school staff must understand and commit to the belief that schools can and must continually improve. This cannot be done without facing the elements of change, for with improvement, also comes the need to change daily routines and instructional techniques so that the district can ensure that all students will be accommodated and provided the opportunity to learn and be successful. Improvement cannot occur until all members of the school community understand that major elements of change are internal first. (Isernhagen, 2010, p. 4)

An elementary principal or human resources department’s ability to recruit, identify and hire highly qualified staff members who can commit to the process of continuous improvement must be a consideration for the development of a high-quality early childhood education program. “Principals are increasingly expected to lead their

schools within a framework of collaboration and shared decision making with teachers and other staff members” (NAESP, 2013, p. 2).

Research (High/Scope Perry and Abecedarian Studies) show that higher classroom quality in early childhood learning environments is predictive of child cognitive and social outcomes, with children who experience higher quality doing much better than children in lower-quality early learning environments. Studies support the findings that children who experience high-quality early childhood programming are indeed more successful in school. This finding places a focus on the importance of hiring a highly-qualified early childhood staff and support staff to facilitate and develop the learning environment described above.

“Principals know the importance of high-quality, effective early learning in creating the foundation for learning that happens in later grades. They also know the ramifications that occur if children are not fully prepared for kindergarten or are not on reading grade level by grade three” (NAESP, 2014, p. 6). The process of preparing students for a successful entrance into kindergarten is a collaborative one.

The leader’s responsibility is to set the conditions in place that allow him or her access to the work that teachers do. The leader’s effectiveness depends in large part on his or her capacity to learn how to function at higher levels as an enabler of teacher learning, and the leader does this in part by examining his or her own knowledge and skills as a leader based on an understanding of individual teachers’ practice. (Elmore, as cited in Fuhrman & Lazerson, 2005, p. 286)

The Nebraska Department of Education (2013a) views the transition process as a collaborative event. When considering what can be done to assist children and families through a successful transition (one which will help the child have a positive attitude about school and learning) into the kindergarten classroom NDE suggested:

1. Talk enthusiastically about school, and read books about starting kindergarten, discussing feelings the children may have.
2. Learn about school and classroom expectations, routines, and rules that the children should know. Gradually incorporate those kindergarten routines and rules into children's daily lives.
3. Arrange to visit the new classroom with the children and help them feel more comfortable and confident by knowing what to expect.
4. Assist families in meeting with the kindergarten teacher to discuss any special needs or concerns they may have.
5. Provide copies, or encourage families to download the free resource from Nebraska Department of Education, Office of Early Childhood: Ready for Success- What Families Want to Know about Starting School in Nebraska. (p. 3)

Summary

The development of a successful and highly-effective transition program involves numerous working parts. "Transitioning is a shared responsibility between parents, school and early care providers, and is key for children to be ready to be engaged in their new learning environment, which sets the stage for a lifelong love of learning" (NDE, 2013b, p. 12). When stakeholders engage in collaborative relationships, students benefit from the process. We cannot overlook the role of both policy and practice in setting the stage for such collaborative relationships to develop. Early Childhood researchers Dr. Robert Pianta and Dr. Martha Cox (2002) state,

Good policy and good practice have to build on a solid conceptual foundation that recognizes that young children's success in school is intertwined with their experiences in multiple settings: family, peer group, preschool, and school and that this transition period is a critical time for building partnerships between schools and families that can support children's progress. (p. 3)

The development of sound transition policies and practices are fundamental to the success of a transition program, the success of the children and families engaged in the process and place the focus where it should be, on the learner and the learner's family.

Transition to school is taken to be a dynamic process of continuity and change as children move into the first year of school. The process of transition occurs over time, beginning well before children start school and extending to the point where children and families feel a sense of belonging at school and when educators recognize this sense of belonging. (Dockett & Perry, 2014, p. 2)

Chapter 3

Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions and expectations of public school elementary principals in Nebraska regarding their role in the Pre-K education program and the transition of students from Pre-K to kindergarten programs. The study will provide information on elementary principals' knowledge of best practices related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs, factors that influence their level of support for such programs within their school and their role in the transition of Pre-K students to the elementary classroom setting. Demographic data was collected for each elementary principal participant so common group data (gender, years of service, grade levels taught, certification, and professional development training in early childhood) for public school elementary principals can be used to more thoroughly analyze results. Common group perceptions will also be gathered, using the data to identify barriers and challenges to implementation of Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs in some schools.

Research Design

Characteristics of a mixed methods research design. A mixed method research design uses both quantitative and qualitative data to add depth and breadth to the study. Quantitative data was collected via a cross-sectional survey originally developed by Dr. Brenda Hanthorn (2007), adapted by the researcher and delivered to all Nebraska elementary principals via email. A "cross-sectional" survey allows the researcher to

collect data “at one point in time” (Creswell, 2014, p. 157). After survey data was collected, organized and analyzed, interviews were conducted with selected elementary principals. The researcher used what Creswell (2013) referred to as a “stratified purposeful” sampling method for the qualitative interviews to select the individuals for this study. “A narrowly focused purposeful sampling strategy for qualitative analysis that ‘complements’ a broader focused probability sample for quantitative analysis helped to achieve a balance between increasing inference quality/trustworthiness (internal validity) and generalizability/transferability (external validity)” (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2013, p. 8).

An explanatory, sequential, mixed methods research design was selected in order to address the primary and secondary research questions in this study. A mixed methods approach offered the greatest opportunity to further explore the secondary research questions and to better understand the experiences and perceptions of elementary principals related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs. Quantitative data was first collected through an online cross-sectional survey of public elementary school principals in Nebraska school districts. A qualitative process was implemented in phase two of the study and interviews were conducted with a selected sample of public elementary school principals to expand upon the data collected and analyzed from the quantitative study.

Survey variables and measures. Transition planning for Pre-K children and their families has moved to the forefront within the state of Nebraska and the implementation of the AQuESTT (NDE, 2015b) and an emphasis on “student success

and access.” Evidence supports the positive impact of successful transition plans on a child’s future academic success. Such evidence further supports the first transition, Pre-K to kindergarten, as a critical transition in the school and learning process. Educational leaders who embrace this research and belief can utilize the results of this study to evaluate their own transition plan practices and to strengthen the transition plans currently in place.

Research questions. The overarching question for the research was: Do elementary principals perceptions and expectations have an effect on transition plans for Pre-K to kindergarten children and families? For the purpose of this study, seven sub-questions were used to guide the research:

1. What is the background and experience of the principal related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs, training and professional development?
2. Are there differences in elementary principals’ perceptions for Pre-K transition plans, knowledge of research, and availability of resources between:
 - a. districts with higher percentages of Free and Reduced Lunch percentages and at-risk children and districts with lower percentages of Free and Reduced Lunch percentages and at-risk children?
 - b. rural and non-rural school districts?
 - c. Title I and non-Title I schools?
3. What Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs are in place in Nebraska public elementary schools?

4. To what extent do the current Pre-K to kindergarten transition practices in place in Nebraska public elementary schools align with the work done by Dockett and Perry (2014)?
 - a. Indicators of an effective transition program for kindergarten students:
 - 1) Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships
 - 2) Partnerships
 - 3) High expectations and equity
 - 4) Respect for diversity
 - 5) Ongoing learning and reflective practice
5. To what extent do transition programs impact the school readiness of students entering kindergarten?
6. To what extent do Nebraska public school elementary principals believe financial, facility or human resources impact Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs in Nebraska schools?
7. How do the perceptions and expectations of elementary principals impact their role in the successful transition of Pre-K children to kindergarten?

Pilot study procedures. A sample survey was field tested by professionals who are experienced in the field of early childhood education and the Pre-K to kindergarten transition process. A Personnel Director at the district level, an Early Childhood Administrator at the Nebraska Department of Education, an early childhood professor at the university level, a public school district early childhood coordinator and an elementary principal who was not included in the sample population were asked to

review the survey. Each professional who reviewed the survey was asked to provide feedback related to the content of the survey and his/her ability to interpret each item for intended purpose. All feedback collected was considered for potential changes to the survey.

Survey respondents indicated that the survey was visually pleasing. The Qualtrics platform allows for several features, which were outlined by the respondents as being “helpful.” It was also noted that the systems inclusion of a completion bar, which moved across the screen as respondents neared the end of the survey, was appreciated. The large radial buttons used in the survey were also mentioned as “a positive.” Survey respondents also noted that “not being forced to respond to all items” and “still being allowed to move throughout the survey” was welcome. They also appreciated that the survey “informed” them when they had not answered specific questions and gave them an option of going back to answer these items. The overall feedback was positive and provided the researcher with the opportunity to fine tune the instrument for increased clarity.

Mixed Methods Study

Phase I: Quantitative research target population The population for Phase I of this mixed methods study, the quantitative, cross-sectional survey, were public elementary school principals (465) in Nebraska’s (555) elementary programs throughout the 245 public school districts in Nebraska (NDE, 2015c). All public elementary principals in Nebraska were asked to participate in an online survey. Two non-rural school districts did not participate in the study. Surveys were distributed through

administrators' school email addresses via the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) website (NDE, 2015a).

The Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) provides a listing of all Nebraska school elementary principals and their email addresses via the NDE web site. This web site listing is updated in December of each year. Surveys were distributed using the email addresses listed on the web page, after it had been updated in December 2014. Surveys returned for incorrect email addresses were crosschecked through school district web site searches and the use of the Nebraska School Directory. These surveys were redistributed to the current email address listed by the school district.

Phase I: Quantitative research and survey instrument. For Phase I of the study, confidential demographic data was gathered on each participant so common grouping could be used to analyze results. Demographic data included professional data and demographic school/district data:

1. Professional role:
 - a. Male or female
 - b. Total years in administrative role
 - c. Total years in elementary teaching role
 - d. Elementary Teaching endorsement
 - e. Early Childhood endorsement
 - f. Grade Levels taught
 - g. Total number of professional development courses in early childhood

Professional data. Survey participants' demographic data was gathered on their role as an elementary principal, gender, the number of years they have been in their administrative role, the number of years they spent in an elementary teaching role, whether they have an Early Childhood endorsement, and their total number of professional development courses in early childhood education.

2. Demographic school/district:
 - a. School district population
 - b. Rural or non-rural school
 - c. Title 1 or non-Title 1 school
 - d. Transition plan implementation
 - e. Number of kindergarten students retained
 - f. Socio-economic status (based on free and reduced lunch percentage)
 - g. Types of early childhood programs serving the student population

School district data. School districts from each of the different levels of free/reduced lunch (FRL) rates were represented. The three levels were based on Nebraska's 2013-2014 FRL average (44.9%): below average (below 35%), approximate average (35% to 55%), and above average (above 55%) (Nebraska Department of Education, 2014a).

Additionally, respondents were asked to define other demographic data, including whether the school is classified as a Title I school and school district size, specifically rural or non-rural.

For the purpose of this survey, Nebraska schools were divided into two classifications, non-rural and rural, using school district population. Nebraska currently has two urban areas, Lincoln Public schools classified as Class IV and Omaha Public Schools classified as class V (Nebraska Department of Education, 2011b, para. 1). Even though there are only 34 districts (14%) classified as non-rural and 211 districts (86%) classified as rural in Nebraska, more than 77% of the children in Nebraska attend non-rural school districts. More specifically, the Nebraska Department of Education identifies “small schools” as school districts with enrollment of 900 or fewer students (Former Department of Education Commissioner, Dr. Roger Breed, personal communication, September 6, 2015). Legislative Bill 806A (LB806A), which was passed in 1997 established the threshold of 900 or fewer students for the purpose of TEEOSA funding. TEEOSA stands for Tax Equity & Educational Opportunities Support Act and is the current school finance formula for all Nebraska public schools. For the purpose of this study, elementary principals were asked to report the student enrollment of their school district through the administered cross-sectional survey. More precise student population data were used to better analyze data related to specific transition plan practices and the level of their implementation.

Transition activity data. The survey instrument included a section devoted specifically to transition activities that have been proven “highly-effective” for children and families making the transition from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms. This portion of the survey included 55 survey items that are aligned with the current research by

Dockett and Perry (2014) related to effective principles and practices of early childhood transitions. Full results are reported in Appendix Q.

Survey instrument procedures. The purpose of the survey was to gather data to determine elementary principal perception of early childhood education and their role in the successful transition of Pre-K students to kindergarten. The sample population asked to participate in the online survey included only public elementary school principals from the state of Nebraska.

Before the survey was administered, an email was sent to the superintendents of all Nebraska public school districts informing them of the study. The advanced email notification provided the superintendents with an overview of the study, the time constraints involved and a description of the study's importance. These emails were grouped by ESU affiliation and sent to superintendents two weeks prior to the distribution of the survey. The intention of sending the encouragement and notification to each superintendent was that such communication would assist in developing relationships with school districts and offering the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the survey ahead of time, if desired. It was desired that an advanced notification of the study, in a personalized manner would have a positive impact and improve the survey response rate.

Many school districts in Nebraska also require researchers desiring to conduct research within their school district to complete a formal request for Research Consent; the researcher also completed these Research Consent forms for individual school districts, as required by district policy. This process allowed for numerous personal

contacts and discussions between the researcher and district personnel responsible for overseeing research policy. Developing these personal relationships “is important (because) it establishes a connection between the surveyor and the respondent that is necessary to invoke social exchange, and it draws the respondent out of the group” (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014, p. 329). The goal of the advanced personal contact and email notification was to produce a better than average survey response rate. The email addresses for public elementary school principals and superintendents were collected via the Nebraska Public Schools Directory found on NDE’s website (NDE, 2015a).

The survey was distributed via an email, the last week of October 2015. The use of an online survey was found to be most beneficial to the large quantity of elementary principals and geographic barriers from the researcher. Qualtrics, web-based, survey software was recommended by the Nebraska Evaluation and Research (NEAR) center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and was used to construct the online survey instrument. The Qualtrics platform allowed for a coherent and sound survey design while offering a wide variety of survey design elements and platforms to improve the overall accessibility of the survey.

The original survey was developed and utilized by Dr. Brenda Hanthorn in her doctoral study titled *An Examination of Effective Kindergarten Transition Practices and the Perceptions of Public Elementary School Principals* (2007). Dr. Hanthorn conducted her study in the state of Pennsylvania and focused on transition practices of elementary principals. The researcher contacted Dr. Hanthorn via phone and secured permission

(Appendix G) to use her original survey tool with appropriate revisions to reflect transition practices in Nebraska and the most current educational research in the area.

The intention of the 70-item survey was to gather important demographic information and to determine the perceptions and expectations of public school elementary principals in Nebraska regarding their role in the transition of students from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms. Open-ended questions were included in the Quantitative (Phase I) study to gather information from all respondents regarding “challenges and barriers related to successful Pre-K to kindergarten transitions” and “goals related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition activities, they would like to achieve.” The researcher also included these open-ended questions as a component of the Qualitative study (Phase II) to better draw conclusions regarding the challenges to implementing successful transition plans goals to accomplish these plans. Fifty-five survey items were utilized to better explore the following elements of successful transition practices as outlined by Dockett and Perry (2014): Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships (20 questions); Partnerships (18 questions); High Expectations and Equity (7 questions); Respect for Diversity (5 questions); and Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice (5 questions). A six-point Likert scale was implemented to collect data related to these items. Respondents were asked to select from: “1” representing “Strongly Disagree”; “2” representing “Disagree”; “3” representing “Slightly Disagree”; “4” representing “Slightly Agree”; “5” representing “Agree”; and “6” representing “Strongly Agree.”

Demographic questions were developed to elicit predominantly “Yes” or “No” responses and respondents were asked to provide some information in “Open-Ended” format. To provide respondents with an opportunity to share specific experiences, options for an “open-ended” response were included at the end of each section of the 55 Likert scale items. These responses were further analyzed and coded using qualitative research methods.

Validity. The content validity of the survey was addressed through a sample survey, which was field-tested by professionals who have experiences in the field of early childhood education and the kindergarten transition process. These “judges assess whether the items or questions are representative of possible items” (Creswell & Clark, 2011, p. 210).

The first group was comprised of school administrators: a Personnel Director (former elementary principal) at the district level, a public school district early childhood coordinator and an elementary principal who was not included in the sample population were asked to review the survey.

The second group was made up of external experts. Among the second group who received the survey for analysis, were college professors with expertise in school administration and instruction within an education department. These people all have a reputation for excellence in their noted area of expertise. An Early Childhood Administrator at the Nebraska Department of Education, an Educational Administration professor at the university level, and an Early Childhood Education professor were asked to review the survey.

Each professional who reviewed the survey was asked to provide feedback related to the content of the survey and his/her ability to interpret each item for intended purpose. All feedback collected was considered for potential changes to the survey and allowed the researcher to make changes to the survey. The suggestions provided additional information regarding Pre-K to kindergarten transition issues while also improving the overall clarity of the survey.

Prior to administration, the survey was reviewed by an expert in quantitative research methods at the Nebraska Evaluation and Research (NEAR) center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. With guidance from the NEAR center staff, the researcher was able to improve the survey design and layout to best maximize the accessibility and clarity of the instrument. These modifications improved the efficiency of the survey while allowing data to be collected and analyzed most efficiently.

Reliability. The reliability of the survey was evaluated with the assistance from the University of Nebraska's NEAR center. The survey's internal consistency was checked using Cronbach's coefficient alpha (reference Table 2). Cronbach's coefficient alpha is "an estimate of the correlation between two random samples of items from a universe of items like those in the test" (Cronbach, 1951, p. 297). Survey items were grouped according to the early education transition guidelines suggested in the work done by Dockett and Perry (2014) and like items were grouped into the following categories (Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships; Partnerships; High Expectations and Equity; Respect for Diversity; and Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice) and further analyzed for internal consistency.

Table 2

Summary of Reliability Indices (Cronbach's Alpha) by Category

Survey Category	Number of Survey Items	Reliability (α)
Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships	20	.88
Partnerships	18	.89
High Expectations and Equity	7	.78
Respect for Diversity	5	.79
Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practices	5	.80

Quantitative data analysis. SPSS software was used to analyze the quantitative data. The data was analyzed with the assistance from the University of Nebraska's NEAR Center. Results of the study and disaggregated data from a variety of common groups were analyzed. Numeric values and codes were given for specific question and variables. A numeric code was given for demographic information for survey participant including: male/female; years at present position : (a) 0-6 years, (b) 7-15 years, (c) more than 15 years; years as an elementary teacher: (a) 0-6 years, (b) 7-15 years, (c) 16-24 years, (d) more than 25 years; specific grade level(s) taught; number of pertinent, early childhood courses, conferences and trainings attended: (a) 0-5, (b) 6-12, (c) more than 12; and information for School Districts: Rural/non-rural school; Title I / Non-Title I school; Free and Reduced Lunch Rate: (a) Below 35%, (b) Approximate Average 35-55%, (c) more than 55%. All collected demographic data was compared to the items on the Likert scale, which fell in each categorical grouping, as determined by the literature review, feedback from Dr. Brenda Hanthorn and early childhood author Dr. Sue Dockett.

Additionally:

- Laveane’s test for equality of variances was used to test the null hypothesis that population variances were equal
- a two tailed t test was used to analyze significant differences between two subgroups.
- ANOVA and Tukey analysis was used to analyze data to determine significant differences between three or more subgroups.
- SPSS software was used to analyze the information;
- a descriptive analysis of data included:
 - mean, median, and mode;
 - range of differences between highest and lowest scores;
 - standard deviation; and
 - Cronbach’s Alpha statistic

SPSS software was used to analyze the quantitative data. The data was analyzed with assistance from the University of Nebraska’s NEAR Center.

Survey implementation plan. The researcher established a timeline to assist with the survey delivery and monitoring of the incoming survey data (reference Table 3).

Phase II: Qualitative Research: Qualitative case selection. Phase II explored and expanded upon the data collected in Phase I. A qualitative research design was used for this portion of the mixed methods study and was conducted through a case study approach. A case study is the study of a “bounded system” or a case (or multiple cases)

Table 3

Timeline of Study

Timeframe	Task
September 2015	IRB approval for online survey; after securing approval, began contacting school districts to acquire research approval, develop online survey using Qualtrics survey software
Two weeks prior to the delivery of the online survey	Pre-notice was sent to district superintendents informing them of the online survey to be delivered. The notice included the benefits of the research and explained the study process.
October & November 2015	The online survey was active for 30 working days.
After 5 days of an active survey	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Reviewed the current rate of participation for the survey. 2) Sent out a reminder email (Appendix J) to complete the online survey, repeating the benefits of the research and further encouraging them to participate.
After 10 days of an active survey.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Reviewed the current rate of participation for the survey 2) Sent out another reminder (Appendix J) email to participants who had not yet completed the survey.
After 15 days of an active survey.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Reviewed the current rate of participation for the survey
After 20 days of an active survey.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Reviewed the current rate of participation for the survey 2) Sent out a third and final reminder email to participants who had not yet completed the survey (Appendix K).
After 30 days of an active survey	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Closed the survey 2) Collected Data 3) Analyzed Data

over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, in order to present a substantive picture of the case through a case description and case themes (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). The case study approach allowed the researcher freedom to “make sense of the underlying philosophical influences” in his/her own way (Merriam, 2009, p. 8).

Defining the boundaries of the study was a key element in the case study method of qualitative research. The study proposed, in Phase II, was a qualitative case analysis that attempted to describe and interpret the expectations and perceptions of elementary principals related to early childhood education programming and their role in the transition of children from Pre-K to kindergarten.

The qualitative, case study method was appropriate for this study because the study attempts to describe the experiences with Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs of elementary principals through individual accounts that focus on a bounded experience. This in-depth investigation of individual experiences and perceptions is consistent with the purpose and design of qualitative case study methodology.

The researcher used what Creswell (2013) referred to as a “stratified purposeful” sampling method to select the individuals for this study. Current elementary principals were purposefully selected based on the following criteria: Those whose survey responses indicated either a high level or a low level of implementation of Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans as well as the demographic information of the district. It was desired to have ample representation of the various rural and non-rural districts in the state of Nebraska. After initial consent was granted on the phone (Appendix L), an informed consent was mailed/emailed out seeking administrator’s permission to interview (Appendix N).

Interview protocol. The interview data was collected using an interview protocol (see Appendix F). The interview protocol was adjusted after analysis of the quantitative data to reflect the results from the survey and to better address the quantitative data

collected. This practice was in accordance with procedures outlined for explanatory, sequential design mixed methods research that utilizes qualitative data to elaborate or better identify and explain the quantitative results (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The following questions were used as the basis for the semi-structured open-ended interview protocol:

Soft interview questions. How do you feel the survey went?

Primary elementary principal interview questions.

1. What is your definition of an effective Pre-K to kindergarten transition plan or program?
2. What steps have you taken to ensure a successful transition for kindergarten students into your school? Please explain the process utilized to develop this plan.
3. What connections have you developed within your community and the early childhood education programs to foster the successful transition for Pre-K children into kindergarten?
4. What resources does your district devote to Pre-K programming, particularly Pre-K to kindergarten transition?
5. What challenges and barriers have you encountered in helping Pre-K children to make successful transitions to kindergarten in your school district?
6. What goals, related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition activities, would you like to achieve as elementary principal?

7. Is there anything that I have missed? Do you have any other comments other than the questions I have asked?

The researcher used respondent responses to develop further questions on the elementary principal's perceptions and experiences related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans in Nebraska.

Data Collection

The data was collected, through site-based (elementary school of the principal) interviews during December 2015 and January of 2016 with time built in for coding and theme development. The interviews included both soft and primary interview questions. The purpose of the selected soft interview question (see Appendix F) was to establish rapport with the elementary principal and to gain insight into their experience completing the survey. It also helped facilitate the interview process through encouraging the respondent to connect back with their survey experience. The primary interview questions (see Appendix F) were used with an option for exploratory/clarifying questions, as described in the interview protocol (see Appendix F), to build upon and/or clarify the respondent's thoughts and feelings throughout the interview process. Interviews were audio-recorded and the researcher took notes during the interview. A qualified transcriptionist (Appendix M) transcribed each interview in verbatim prior to data analysis. The transcripts were then analyzed using MAXQDA software and coded for description and themes.

Research Permission and Ethical Considerations

The researcher considered respondent involvement when conducting the study. The anonymity of the participants was protected. While selected for the study by the researcher, each respondent was able to freely decide whether to participate in the study. All expectations of the respondents were communicated clearly and followed by the researcher. After the respondents were interviewed, they were asked to read the themes gleaned from the interviews to determine whether the researcher's interpretation was consistent with their beliefs. The researcher believed this method, member checking, ensured the reported findings were illustrative of the respondents' answers.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The current study sought to determine the perceptions and expectations of public school elementary principals in Nebraska regarding their role in the transition of students from Pre-K to kindergarten. Interview data was the primary source of data collection and the Interpretive Analysis model of data analysis as proposed by Hatch (2002) was utilized. This method was used to better describe and develop interpretations of elementary principals experiences and perceptions with Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs.

Following the data collection, and verbatim transcription of the interviews, all data was printed for analysis. Preliminary analysis of the data included reading the transcripts and cross-referencing them with notes taken during the interview. This process allowed the researcher to better immerse himself with what participants reported.

Upon completing the initial readings, the researcher conducted repeated reviews of the collected data while focusing specifically on the research questions. During this process, the researcher took notes and recorded memos to bring themes contained in the data to light. MAXQDA, qualitative data analysis software, was then utilized to better identify appropriate themes from the study. Themes specifically related to the current study were analyzed further and coded. Further analyses of the data were conducted to identify excerpts from the data to support the themes and identified codes.

A draft summary of the themes was written and the summaries were then shared with the research participants through what is referred to as a “member-check” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). This process involved sharing the initial summaries with respondents in order to gain feedback and to check the accuracy of the interpretations. This process served as a verification check of the interpretations made by the researcher. The end result of the data analysis procedures was a thorough description of the experiences and perceptions of elementary principals related to Pre-K programming and transitions from Pre-K to kindergarten.

Summary

Research supports the importance of purposeful transition plans for children moving from Pre-K settings to kindergarten classrooms. Better understanding the role of the elementary principal in the successful transition of children from a Pre-K setting to kindergarten will assist with the purposeful implementation of transition plans that align with the guidelines suggested by Dockett and Perry (2001), Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003), Dockett and Perry (2014), and NDE (2010). These suggested guidelines all

support the most important part of this equation, the children and families who experience this process.

Chapter 4

Quantitative Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions and expectations of public school elementary principals in Nebraska regarding their role in the Pre-K education program and the transition of students from preschool to kindergarten programs. The overarching question for the research was: Do elementary principals perceptions and expectations have an effect on transition plans for Pre-K to kindergarten children and families? The study provided information on elementary principal preparation for supervision and support of Pre-K students' transition to kindergarten classrooms, knowledge of best practices related to early childhood education programs, factors that influence their level of support for such programs within their school and their role in the transition of Pre-K students to the elementary classroom setting. Demographic data were collected for each elementary principal participant so common group data for public school elementary principals could be used to more thoroughly analyze the results. Common group perceptions were also gathered, using the data to identify barriers and challenges to implementation of Pre-K transition programs in schools.

Research Questions

For the purpose of this study, seven sub-questions were used to guide the research:

1. What is the background and experience of the principal related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs, training and professional development?
2. Are there differences in elementary principals' perceptions for Pre-K transition plans, knowledge of research, and availability of resources between:
 - a. districts with higher percentages of Free and Reduced Lunch percentages and at-risk children and districts with lower percentages of Free and Reduced Lunch percentages and at-risk children?
 - b. rural and non-rural school districts?
 - c. Title I and non-Title I schools?
3. What Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs are in place in Nebraska public elementary schools?
4. To what extent do the current Pre-K to kindergarten transition practices in place in Nebraska public elementary schools align with the work done by Dockett and Perry (2014)?
 - a. Indicators of an effective transition program for kindergarten students:
 - 1) Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships
 - 2) Partnerships
 - 3) High expectations and equity
 - 4) Respect for diversity
 - 5) Ongoing learning and reflective practice
5. To what extent do transition programs impact the school readiness of students entering kindergarten?

6. To what extent do Nebraska public school elementary principals believe financial, facility or human resources impact Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs in Nebraska schools?
7. How do the perceptions and expectations of elementary principals impact their role in the successful transition of Pre-K children to kindergarten?

Research Method

An explanatory, sequential, mixed methods research design was selected in order to address the primary and secondary research questions in this study. A mixed methods approach offered the greatest opportunity to further explore the secondary research questions and to better understand the experiences and perceptions of elementary principals related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs. Quantitative data was first collected through an online cross-sectional survey of public elementary school principals in Nebraska school districts. Surveys were distributed through administrators' school email addresses via the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) website (NDE, 2015a). After survey data was collected, organized and analyzed, interviews were conducted with specifically selected elementary principals. The researcher used what Creswell (2013) referred to as a "stratified purposeful" sampling method to select the elementary principals for the qualitative interviews in the study.

To better improve the return rate of the survey, an email was sent to the superintendents of all Nebraska public school districts informing them of the study. The advanced email notification provided the superintendents with an overview of the study, the time constraints involved and a description of the study's importance. These emails

were grouped by ESU affiliation and sent to superintendents two weeks prior to the distribution of the survey. The intention of sending the encouragement and notification to each superintendent was that such communication would assist in developing relationships with school districts and offering the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the survey ahead of time, if desired. It was desired that an advanced notification of the study, in a personalized manner would have a positive impact and improve the survey response rate. “Personalizing all contacts in web surveys is important . . . it establishes a connection between the surveyor and the respondent that is necessary to evoke social exchange” (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014, p. 329).

Several school districts in Nebraska also required external researchers desiring to conduct research within their school district to complete a formal request for Research Consent; the researcher also completed these Research Consent forms for individual school districts, as required by district policy. This process allowed for numerous personal contacts and discussions between the researcher and district personnel responsible for overseeing research policy. Developing these personal relationships is important. The email addresses for public elementary school principals and superintendents were collected via the Nebraska Public Schools Directory found on NDE’s website (NDE, 2015a).

Quantitative Instrument

Qualtrics survey software was used as the platform to distribute the survey in an online format. The original survey was developed by Dr. Brenda Hanthorn (2007), modified by the researcher to meet the needs of this study and reviewed by six experts in

the field of early childhood education (reference Chapter 3). The intentions of the 70-item survey were to gather important demographic information and to determine the perceptions and expectations of public school elementary principals in Nebraska regarding their role in the transition of students from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms. Open-ended questions were included in the Quantitative (Phase I) study to gather information from all respondents regarding “challenges and barriers related to successful Pre-K to kindergarten transitions” and “goals related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition activities, they would like to achieve.” The researcher included these open-ended questions as a component of the Qualitative study (Phase II) to better draw comparisons and conclusions regarding the challenges to implementing successful transition plans goals to accomplish these plans between the survey sample and the interview respondents. Fifty-five survey items were utilized to better explore the following elements of successful transition practices (Dockett & Perry, 2014): Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships (20 questions); Partnerships (18 questions); High Expectations and Equity (7 questions); Respect for Diversity (5 questions); and Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice (5 questions). A six-point Likert scale was implemented to collect data related to these items. Respondents were asked to select from: (1) representing “Strongly Disagree”; (2) representing “Disagree”; (3) representing “Slightly Disagree”; (4) representing “Slightly Agree”; (5) representing “Agree”; and (6) representing “Strongly Agree.” A one-way ANOVA test was utilized to analyze the mean differences regarding reported level of implementation for the previously identified transition practices when looking at Free and Reduced Lunch Status condition at the

“Below Average, Approximate Average and Above Average” range. A t-test was utilized to analyze the mean differences regarding reported level of implementation for the above identified transition practices when looking at conditions of “Rural vs. Non-Rural Status” and “Title I vs. Non-Title I Status.” For all categories, if a statistical significance was found, the researcher then used the Tukey Post Hoc test to determine the level of significance between each of the tested conditions.

Demographic questions were developed to elicit background information and respondents were asked to provide additional supporting information and specific experiences in “open-ended” format. This response option was included at the end of each of the five sections encompassing the 55 Likert scale items. These responses were further analyzed and coded for themes using qualitative research methods.

Survey Participants

Elementary principals. Public elementary school principals in 465 of Nebraska’s 555 elementary schools were invited to contribute to the survey, as two non-rural school districts did not participate in the study. Of the 465 non-duplicated public elementary principals who were eligible to respond to the study, 125 responded for a return rate of 27%.

School district. The study’s sample population included public elementary school principals in 243 of the state’s 245 public school districts. Two non-rural school districts did not participate in the study. One hundred twenty-five (125) elementary principals participated in the survey. Of the 125 elementary principals who participated, 114 school districts were represented for a school district response rate of 47%.

Demographic School District Data

The survey instrument was designed to gather school and district data from each respondent in order to better analyze the survey results and to make educated decisions regarding potential follow-up interview candidates. Data was disaggregated within the following conditions: (a) districts with higher percentages of Free and Reduced Lunch percentages and districts with lower percentages of Free and Reduced Lunch percentages, (b) Rural and Non-Rural school districts, and (c) Title I and non-Title I schools. This disaggregated data was used to determine elementary principal perceptions of Pre-K education and their role in the successful transition of Pre-K students to kindergarten.

Condition (a): Free and reduced lunch (FRL) percentage. School districts from each of the different levels of free/reduced lunch (FRL) rates were represented. The three levels were based on Nebraska's 2013-2014 FRL average (44.9%): below average (below 35%), approximate average (35% to 55%), and above average (above 55%) (Nebraska Department of Education, 2014a). *Condition (b): Rural and non-rural school districts.* Nebraska school districts were divided into two classifications, rural and non-rural. For the purpose of this study, the researcher chose to use the Nebraska Department of Education's model for identifying "small schools" as school districts with enrollment of 900 or fewer students (Former Department of Education Commissioner, Dr. Roger Breed, personal communication, September 6, 2015). Legislative Bill 806A (LB806A), which was passed in 1997 established the threshold of 900 or fewer students for the purpose of TEEOSA funding. TEEOSA stands for Tax Equity & Educational Opportunities Support Act and is the current school finance formula for all Nebraska public schools. *Condition*

(c): *Title I and non-title I schools.* Elementary principals' responses were disaggregated to include Title I and Non-Title I representation. This table identifies the number of schools being represented in each condition. Table 4 shows the demographic data of the school district for the respondents of the study survey. This data will be disaggregated and described in Research Question 2.

Table 4

Demographic Data of the School/District

Demographic Data	Count / (Percentage)
Free and Reduced Lunch	
Below Avg. 35%	42 (34%)
Approximate Avg. 35+-55%	50 (40%)
Above Avg. 55% +	33 (26%)
Rural vs. Non-Rural Schools	
Rural (≤ 900)	74 (59%)
Non-Rural (> 900)	51 (41%)
Title I vs. Non-Title I Schools	
Title I	95 (76%)
Non-Title I	30 (24%)

Note: n = 125

Demographic data was also collected regarding the types of early childhood programs serving the student population of the school district. Elementary principals selected all types of early childhood programs from a list of programs created by the researcher and respondents were given the option of adding “other” programs that may not have been referenced in the survey. The “other” programs, which were most

prevalent, are included in Table 5. This table provides the frequencies and percentages of each type of early childhood program, as identified by the survey respondents.

Table 5

Demographic Data of Participants Responding to the Study Survey (Early Childhood Programs)

Demographic Data	Count / (Percentage)
Type of Early Childhood Program	
Head Start	47 (38%)
Educare	1 (0.8%)
School Based Pre-K Center	90 (72%)
Other Non-Profit Center	14 (11%)
For Profit Preschool/Nursery School	38 (30%)
For Profit Child Care Center	42 (34%)
Other For Profit	10 (8%)
Home Child Care Center	45 (36%)
Other Examples	
Sixpence	4 (3%)
None	2 (2%)

Note: (n = 125)

Ninety (72%) of the elementary principals responding to this survey indicated the presence of a “School Based Pre-K Center” with respondents also reporting the presence of “Head Start” (38%) and “Home Child Care Centers” (36%). “For Profit Child Care Centers” (34%) and “For Profit Preschool/Nursery School” (30%) were also consistent across elementary principals responding to the survey.

Two elementary principals indicated a lack of any form of early childhood program serving the student population of their school.

Demographic Survey Participant Data

Demographic data was collected to gain information about the sample of participants in the study. The participants were asked to identify their gender, years of service in their current role, years of service in an elementary teaching role, specific grade-level teaching experience, early childhood teaching endorsement, and number of early childhood education pertinent training courses and/or conferences. Table 6 displays the demographic data of the participants who responded to the study survey.

Findings of the Study

Introduction. An explanatory, sequential, mixed methods research design was selected in order to address the primary and secondary research questions in this study. Quantitative data was first collected through an online cross-sectional survey of public elementary school principals in Nebraska school districts (results are found in this chapter). A qualitative process was implemented in phase two of the study and interviews were conducted with a selected sample of public elementary school principals to expand upon the data collected and analyzed from the quantitative study (reference Chapter 5). Research questions for the study were related to the five guidelines identified in the literature review about Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans: (Guideline One) Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships, (Guideline Two) Partnerships, (Guideline Three) High Expectations and Equity, (Guideline Four) Respect for Diversity, (Guideline Five) Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice (Dockett & Perry, 2014). The overarching question for the research was: Do elementary principals perceptions and

Table 6

Demographic Data of the Participants Responding to the Study Survey

Demographic Data	Count / (Percentage)
Gender	
Female	58 (46%)
Male	67 (54%)
Years in Current Role (Elem Principal)	
1-6 years	68 (54%)
7-15	46 (37%)
16 +	11 (9%)
Years in Elementary Teaching Role	
0	27 (22%)
1-6	16 (13%)
7-15	45 (36%)
16-24	23 (19%)
25 +	13 (10%)
*One respondent did not answer	Mean Years (11)
Grade Level Teaching Experience	
Pre-K	14 (11%)
K	38 (30%)
1st	45 (36%)
2nd	46 (37%)
3rd	54 (43%)
4th	57 (46%)
5th	58 (46%)
Middle School & above	89 (71%)
Early Childhood Education Endorsement	
Yes	7 (6%)
No	118 (94%)
Number of Early Childhood Courses, Conferences, Pertinent Training...	
0	39 (34%)
1-5	54 (47%)
6-12	13 (11%)
13-50	9 (8%)
*10 respondents did not answer	

Note: (n = 125)

expectations have an effect on transition plans for Pre-K to kindergarten children and families? The findings are presented based on the seven sub-questions guiding the study.

Survey results. Survey participants responded to questions in 5 categories using a 6-point Likert scale for each survey item: (1) Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships (20 questions); (2) Partnerships (18 questions); (3) High Expectations and Equity (7 questions); (4) Respect for Diversity (5 questions); (5) Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice (5 questions) (Dockett & Perry, 2014). These responses are grouped and disaggregated by the following conditions: “Rural vs. Non-Rural”; “Title I vs. Non-Title I”; and “Free and Reduced Lunch Status.”

A one-way ANOVA test was utilized to analyze the mean differences regarding reported level of implementation for transition practices when looking at Free and Reduced Lunch Status condition at the “Below Average, Approximate Average and Above Average.” A two-tailed t-test was utilized to analyze the mean differences regarding reported level of implementation for the above identified transition practices when looking at conditions of “Rural vs. Non-Rural Status” and “Title I vs. Non-Title I Status.” For all categories, if a statistical significance was found, the researcher then used the Tukey Post Hoc test to determine the level of significance between each of the tested conditions. Significant differences, if present, were reported using Cohen’s d. These analyses were supported through the use of SPSS software and are labeled under *“Statistically significant research findings.”*

Quantitative Survey Results by Research Question

Research Question 1: What is the background and experience of the principal related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs, training and professional development? This section included six survey questions (**Survey Items 2 – Item 7**), and one open-ended response option, which provided the researcher with information regarding the “Background Experience, Pertinent Training and Professional Development,” received related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs. Survey respondents were also asked to provide specific information regarding the types of pertinent training they have received regarding transition practices.

Background experience, pertinent training and professional development. The total years of experience in their present role (elementary principal) for each of the 125 elementary principals who responded to the survey, were reported as follows: respondents who had served in their current role for 6 or fewer years (54%); respondents who had served in their current role between 7 and 15 years (37%); and respondents who had served in their current role more than 15 years (9%). Respondents’ total years in an elementary teaching role ranged from 0 to 41 years with (22%) of survey respondents indicating no experience as an elementary teacher. The respondents’ grade-level teaching experience ranged from Pre-K to Middle Level with numerous respondents indicating experience at multiple grade-levels. Demographic data also indicated that (6%) of respondents held an early childhood education endorsement. When asked about the number of pertinent early childhood training, course and conferences they had received, responses ranged from 0 (34%) to greater than 13 (8%). The majority of respondents,

93 (81%), indicated experience between 0 and 5 trainings, courses and conferences attended. Table 7 outlines the background and experiences of the elementary principals related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs, training and professional development.

Table 7

Demographic Data of the Participants Responding to the Study Survey (Transition & Training)

Demographic Data	Count / (Percentage)
Number of Early Childhood Courses, Conferences, Pertinent Training...	
0	39 (34%)
1-5	54 (47%)
6-12	13 (11%)
13-50	9 (8%)
*10 respondents did not answer	

Note: (n = 125)

Respondents indicated they had received training, conferences and professional development in a variety of areas. Their responses ranged from broad to very specific trainings, conferences and courses attended. Conferences and workshops ranged from self-initiated to district-level to national early childhood education conferences and professional development experiences. Elementary principal qualitative responses on the quantitative survey (**Survey Item 7**) were coded in a way that allowed the researcher to better understand “who provided the training” and “what type of training” was received

in both **Rural and Non-Rural Status** school districts and at below average, average and above average levels of **Free and Reduced Lunch Status** (both defined in Chapter 3).

Of the 66 elementary principals in school districts with **Rural Status** responding to this item, 32% indicated they had received no formal training, conferences or professional development related to early childhood education. As an open-ended response item, respondents were able to indicate more than one type of training, conference, or professional development received. The majority of elementary principal respondents in school districts with **Rural Status**, who indicated they had received formal training, conferences or professional development, identified this training came primarily through the Nebraska Department of Education (35%), Conferences/Workshops (14%), College Level Classes (graduate and undergraduate) (12%), and their local educational service unit (ESU) (8%). Rural elementary principals indicated specific training in The Creative Curriculum & GOLD teaching and assessment system (14%), Early Childhood Special Education (8%), Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (ECERS) (5%), Nebraska Rule 11 (5%), Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scales (ITERS) (2%), and Preschool Early Literacy Indicator (PELI) (2%).

Of the 49 elementary principals in school districts with **Non-Rural Status** responding to this item, 37% indicated they had received no formal training, conferences, or professional development related to early childhood education. As an open-ended response item, respondents were able to indicate more than one type of training, conference, or professional development received. The majority of elementary principal respondents in school districts with **Non-Rural Status**, who indicated they had received

formal training, conferences or professional development, identified this training came primarily through the form of Conferences/Workshops (41%), Nebraska Department of Education (27%), College Level Classes (graduate and undergraduate) (14%), District Level (12%), and their local educational service unit (ESU) (6%). Non-rural elementary principals indicated specific training in The Creative Curriculum & GOLD teaching and assessment system (18%), Early Childhood Special Education (12%), and Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (ECERS) (8%).

When the three levels of Free and Reduced Lunch Status described in Chapter 3 categorized survey results were analyzed, the following results were noted. Of the 39 elementary principals in schools with **Below Average Free and Reduced Lunch Status** responding to this item, 28% indicated they had received no formal training, conferences, or professional development related to early childhood education. As an open-ended response item, respondents were able to indicate more than one type of training, conference, or professional development received. The majority of elementary principal respondents in schools with **Below Average Free and Reduced Lunch Status**, who indicated they had received formal training, conferences or professional development, identified this training came primarily through the Nebraska Department of Education (38%), Conferences/Workshops (33%), College Level Classes (graduate and undergraduate) (15%), and their local educational service unit (ESU) (8%). These principals further indicated specific training in The Creative Curriculum & GOLD teaching and assessment system (28%), Early Childhood Special Education (8%), and Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (ECERS) (5%).

Of the 48 elementary principals in schools with **Average Free and Reduced Lunch Status** responding to this item, 44% indicated they had received no formal training, conferences, or professional development related to early childhood education. As an open-ended response item, respondents were able to indicate more than one type of training, conference, or professional development received. The majority of elementary principal respondents in schools with **Average Free and Reduced Lunch Status**, who indicated they had received formal training, conferences or professional development, identified this training came primarily through the Nebraska Department of Education (27%), Conferences/Workshops (21%), their local educational service unit (ESU) (10%), College Level Classes (graduate and undergraduate) (6%), and district-level professional development opportunities (6%). These principals further indicated specific training in The Creative Curriculum & GOLD teaching and assessment system (19%), Early Childhood Special Education (13%), and Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (ECERS) (4%).

Of the 28 elementary principals in schools with **Above Free and Reduced Lunch Status** responding to this item, 25% indicated they had received no formal training, conferences, or professional development related to early childhood education. As an open-ended response item, respondents were able to indicate more than one type of training, conference, or professional development received. The majority of elementary principal respondents in schools with **Above Average Free and Reduced Lunch Status**, who indicated they had received formal training, conferences or professional development, identified this training came primarily through the Nebraska Department of

Education (29%), Conferences/Workshops (21%), College Level Classes (graduate and undergraduate) (21%), and through district-level professional development (4%). These principals further indicated specific training in The Creative Curriculum & GOLD teaching and assessment system (11%), Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (ECERS) (11%), and Early Childhood Special Education (7%).

Research Question 2: Are there differences in elementary principals' perceptions for Pre-K transition plans, knowledge of research, and availability of resources between: "*Rural vs. Non-Rural*"; "*Title I vs. Non-Title I*"; and "*Free and Reduced Lunch Status*."

Perceptual differences. Elementary principals were asked 55 questions (**Survey Items 16-70**) related specifically to transition practices and children making transitions from Pre-K settings to kindergarten. These questions were analyzed for perceptual differences in each category (a) Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships (20 questions); (b) Partnerships (18 questions); (c) High Expectations and Equity (7 questions); (d) Respect for Diversity (5 questions); (e) Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice (5 questions); (Dockett & Perry, 2014). These responses, were then grouped and disaggregated by the following conditions: "*Rural vs. Non-Rural*"; "*Title I vs. Non-Title I*"; and "*Free and Reduced Lunch Status*" as outlined in **Survey Items 8-10**. Conditions were analyzed for significant differences and these differences are reported in this section.

Perceptual differences (Rural vs. Non-Rural Status). This section of the survey (reflected in **Survey Items 16-70**) included 55 questions, where respondents identified

their level of agreement using a six-point Likert scale while selecting from:

(1) representing “Strongly Disagree”; (2) representing “Disagree”; (3) representing “Slightly Disagree”; (4) representing “Slightly Agree”; (5) representing “Agree”; and (6) representing “Strongly Agree.” These survey items were aligned with the guidelines outlined by Dockett and Perry (2014). The mean score and standard deviation for each guideline: (Guideline One) Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships, (Guideline Two) Partnerships, (Guideline Three) High Expectations and Equity, (Guideline Four) Respect for Diversity, (Guideline Five) Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice in relation to Rural vs. Non-Rural status is reported in Table 8. A significant difference was found when comparing elementary principal perceptions of Rural vs. Non-Rural status in the category of establishing “*Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships.*”

Statistically significant research findings: Rural vs. Non-Rural Status. An analysis of variance showed a significant difference $p < .05$ where $F(1,123) = 7.05$, $p = .009$ (Table 9) in elementary principals’ perception amongst Rural and Non-Rural Status when implementing transition practices that establish **Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships**. A two-tailed t test revealed elementary principals in Rural districts ($M = 4.74$, $SD = .70$) have a higher mean than did their counterpart in Non-Rural districts ($M = 4.40$, $SD = .69$), $t(123) = 2.66$, $p = .009$, $d = .48$.

Perceptual Differences (Title I vs. Non-Title I Status). This section of the survey (reflected in **Survey Items 16-70**) included 55 questions, where respondents identified their level of agreement using a six-point Likert scale while selecting from:

Table 8

Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Rural vs. Non-Rural Status

Transition Guidelines (Dockett & Perry, 2014) Rural vs. Non-Rural Status (School District)		# of Items	M	SD
Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships		20		
Rural			4.74	.70
Non-Rural			4.40	.69
Partnerships		18		
Rural			4.59	.92
Non-Rural			4.48	.78
High Expectations and Equity		7		
Rural			4.80	.92
Non-Rural			4.63	.83
Respect for Diversity		5		
Rural			4.27	1.05
Non-Rural			4.07	.95
Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice		5		
Rural			3.83	1.23
Non-Rural			3.60	1.09

Note: (n = 125)

Table 9

Significant Differences in Rural vs. Non-Rural Status

Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships		Transition Guidelines (Dockett & Perry, 2014)		
	N	M	SD	Cohen's d
Rural	74	4.74	.70	.48
Non-Rural	51	4.40	.69	

Note: (n = 125)

(1) representing “Strongly Disagree”; (2) representing “Disagree”; (3) representing “Slightly Disagree”; (4) representing “Slightly Agree”; (5) representing “Agree”; and (6) representing “Strongly Agree.” These survey items were aligned with the guidelines outlined by Dockett and Perry (2014).

The mean score and standard deviation for each guideline: (Guideline One) Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships, (Guideline Two) Partnerships, (Guideline Three) High Expectations and Equity, (Guideline Four) Respect for Diversity, (Guideline Five) Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice in relation to Title I vs. Non-Title I status is reported in Table 10.

Table 10

Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Title I vs. Non-Title I Status

Transition Guidelines (Dockett & Perry, 2014) Title I vs. Non-Title I Status (School Building)			
	# of Items	M	SD
Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships	20		
Title I		4.68	.74
Non-Title I		4.38	.58
Partnerships	18		
Title I		4.64	.85
Non-Title I		4.24	.84
High Expectations and Equity	7		
Title I		4.83	.84
Non-Title I		4.40	.96
Respect for Diversity	5		
Title I		4.20	1.01
Non-Title I		4.13	1.04
Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice	5		
Title I		3.88	1.16
Non-Title I		3.27	1.14

Note: (n = 125)

Significant differences were found when comparing Title I vs. Non-Title I status perceptions in the following survey categories: “*Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships*,” “*Partnerships*,” “*High Expectations and Equity*,” and “*Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice*.”

Statistically significant research findings. Title I vs. Non-Title I Status: An analysis of variance showed a significant difference $p < .05$ where $F(1,123) = 4.12$, $p = .045$ (Table 11) in elementary principals’ perception amongst Title I and Non-Title I Status when implementing transition practices which create **Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships**. A two-tailed t test revealed elementary principals in Title I districts ($M = 4.68$, $SD = .74$) have a higher mean than did their counterpart in Non-Title I districts ($M = 4.38$, $SD = .58$), $t(123) = 2.03$, $p = .045$, $d = .45$.

Table 11

Significant Differences in Title I vs. Non-Title I Status (n = 125)

	Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships		Transition Guidelines (Dockett & Perry, 2014)	
	N	M	SD	Cohen’s d
Title I	95	4.68	.74	.45
Non-Title I	30	4.38	.58	

Note: (n = 125)

An analysis of variance also showed a significant difference $p < .05$ where $F(1,123) = 4.95$, $p = .028$ (Table 12) in elementary principals’ perception amongst Title I

Table 12

Significant Differences in Title I vs. Non-Title I Status (n = 125)

Partnerships	Transition Guidelines (Dockett & Perry, 2014)			
	N	M	SD	Cohen's d
Title I	95	4.64	.85	.47
Non-Title I	30	4.24	.84	

and Non-Title I Status when implementing transition practices which create **Partnerships** with various stakeholders. A two-tailed t test revealed elementary principals in Title I districts ($M = 4.64$, $SD = .85$) have a higher mean than did their counterpart in Non-Title I districts ($M = 4.24$, $SD = .84$), $t(123) = 2.22$, $p = .028$, $d = .47$.

An analysis of variance also showed a significant difference $p < .05$ where $F(1,123) = 5.41$, $p = .022$ (Table 13) in elementary principals' perception amongst Title I and Non-Title I Status when implementing transition practices which establish **High Expectations and Equity** for children who are transitioning. A two-tailed t test revealed elementary principals in Title I districts ($M = 4.83$, $SD = .84$) have a higher mean than did their counterpart in Non-Title I districts ($M = 4.40$, $SD = .96$), $t(123) = 2.33$, $p = .022$, $d = .47$.

A further analysis of variance also showed a significant difference $p < .05$ where $F(1,123) = 6.38$, $p = .013$ (Table 14) in elementary principals' perception amongst Title I and Non-Title I Status when implementing transition practices which establish **Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practices** for children who are transitioning. A two-tailed t test revealed elementary principals in Title I districts ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.16$) have a higher

Table 13

Significant Differences in Title I vs. Non-Title I Status (n = 125)

High Expectations and Equity Transition		Guidelines (Dockett & Perry, 2014)		
	N	M	SD	Cohen's d
Title I	95	4.83	.84	.47
Non-Title I	30	4.40	.96	

Note: (n = 125)

Table 14

Significant Differences in Title I vs. Non-Title I Status (n = 125)

Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practices		Guidelines (Dockett & Perry, 2014)		
	N	M	SD	Cohen's d
Title I	95	3.88	1.16	.53
Non-Title I	30	3.27	1.14	

Note: (n = 125)

mean than did their counterpart in Non-Title I districts ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.14$),

$t(123) = 2.53$, $p = .013$, $d = .53$.

Perceptual Differences (Free and Reduced Lunch Status). This section of the survey (reflected in **Survey Items 16-70**) included 55 questions, where respondents identified their level of agreement using a six-point Likert scale while selecting from: (1) representing “Strongly Disagree”; (2) representing “Disagree”; (3) representing “Slightly Disagree”; (4) representing “Slightly Agree”; (5) representing “Agree”; and (6) representing “Strongly Agree.” These survey items were aligned with the guidelines

outlined by Dockett and Perry (2014). The mean score and standard deviation for each guideline: (Guideline One) Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships, (Guideline Two) Partnerships, (Guideline Three) High Expectations and Equity, (Guideline Four) Respect for Diversity, (Guideline Five) Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice in relation to Free and Reduced Lunch status is reported in Table 15. Significant differences were found when comparing Free and Reduced Lunch status perceptions between the following conditions: “Above Average” and “Below Average” Free and Reduced Status in the following survey categories: *“Partnerships,” “High Expectations and Equity,” and “Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice.”*

Statistically significant research findings. Free and Reduced Lunch Status: An analysis of variance showed a significant difference $p < .05$ where $F(2,122) = 4.61$, $p = .012$ (Table 16) in elementary principals’ perception amongst Free and Reduced Lunch Status when implementing transition practices which establish **Partnerships**. A one-way ANOVA and Tukey Post Hoc revealed elementary principals in districts with Above Average Free and Reduced Lunch Status ($M = 4.89$, $SD = .72$) have a higher mean than did their counterpart in districts with Below Average Free and Reduced Lunch Status ($M = 4.30$, $SD = .84$), $t(12) = 4.61$, $p = .012$, $d = .75$. There was no significant difference between the Approximate Average condition ($M = 4.51$, $SD = .91$) and Below Average and Above Average Free and Reduced Lunch Status.

Table 15

Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Free and Reduced Lunch Status

Transition Guidelines (Dockett & Perry, 2014)			
Free and Reduced Lunch Status (School Building)	# of Items	M	SD
Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships	20		
Below 35%		4.40	.70
Approximate Average 35+% to 55%		4.67	.76
Above 55%		4.77	.66
Partnerships	18		
Below 35%		4.30	.84
Approximate Average 35+% to 55%		4.51	.91
Above 55%		4.89	.72
High Expectations and Equity	7		
Below 35%		4.44	.95
Approximate Average 35+% to 55%		4.80	.86
Above 55%		4.98	.75
Respect for Diversity	5		
Below 35%		4.06	1.03
Approximate Average 35+% to 55%		4.10	1.03
Above 55%		4.47	.94
Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice	5		
Below 35%		3.44	1.17
Approximate Average 35+% to 55%		3.72	1.13
Above 55%		4.15	1.17

Note: (n = 125)

Table 16

Significant Differences in Free and Reduced Lunch Status

Partnerships		Transition Guidelines (Dockett & Perry, 2014)		
	N	M	SD	Cohen's d
Below 35%	42	4.30	.84	
Approximate Average 35+% to 55%	50	4.51	.91	
Above 55%	33	4.89	.72	.75

Note: (n = 125)

An analysis of variance showed a significant difference $p < .05$ where $F(2,122) = 3.88$, $p = .023$ (Table 17) in elementary principals' perception amongst Free and Reduced Lunch Status when implementing transition practices which establish **High Expectations and Equity**. A one-way ANOVA and Tukey Post Hoc revealed elementary principals in districts with Above Average Free and Reduced Lunch Status ($M = 4.98$, $SD = .75$) have a higher mean than did their counterpart in districts with Below Average Free and Reduced Lunch Status ($M = 4.44$, $SD = .95$), $t(12) = 3.88$, $p = .023$, $d = .63$. There was no significant difference between the Approximate Average condition ($M = 4.80$, $SD = .86$) and Below Average and Above Average Free and Reduced Lunch Status.

Table 17

Significant Differences in Free and Reduced Lunch Status

	Transition Guidelines (Dockett & Perry, 2014)			
	High Expectations and Equity			
	N	M	SD	Cohen's d
Below 35%	42	4.44	.95	
Approximate Average 35+% to 55%	50	4.80	.86	
Above 55%	33	4.98	.75	.63

Note: (n = 125)

An analysis of variance showed a significant difference $p < .05$ where $F(2,122) = 3.49$, $p = .034$ (Table 18) in elementary principals' perception amongst Free and Reduced Lunch Status when implementing transition practices which establish

Table 18

Significant Differences in Free and Reduced Lunch Status

	Transition Guidelines (Dockett & Perry, 2014)			
	Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practices			
	N	M	SD	Cohen's d
Below 35%	42	3.44	1.17	
Approximate Average 35+% to 55%	50	3.72	1.13	
Above 55%	33	4.15	1.17	.61

Note: (n = 125)

Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practices. A one-way ANOVA and Tukey Post Hoc revealed elementary principals in districts with Above Average Free and Reduced Lunch Status ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.17$) have a higher mean than did their counterpart in districts with Below Average Free and Reduced Lunch Status ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.17$), $t(12) = 3.49$, $p = .034$, $d = .61$. There was no significant difference between the Approximate Average condition ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.13$) and Below Average and Above Average Free and Reduced Lunch Status.

Research Question 3: What Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs are in place in Nebraska public elementary schools? This section of the survey included five questions, where respondents identified their level of agreement using a six-point Likert scale while selecting from: (1) representing “Strongly Disagree”; (2) representing “Disagree”; (3) representing “Slightly Disagree”; (4) representing “Slightly Agree”; (5) representing “Agree”; and (6) representing “Strongly Agree.” There was also an open-

ended option for respondents to share additional information related to their personal experiences with transition practices that may not have been covered in the survey.

When exploring the Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs in place in public elementary schools in Nebraska, elementary principals were first asked **Survey Item 13**, “Does your school implement a transition plan for children transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten?” Of the 125 elementary principals responding to the survey, 81% of survey respondents indicated their school does indeed implement a transition plan for children transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten and 19% of survey respondents indicated their school does not implement such a transition plan. Survey data further revealed a high mean level of agreement ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.08$) for **Survey Item 24**, “Programs are in place to assist children transitioning to kindergarten in developing pro-social and respectful behaviors towards others.” There was also a high mean level of agreement ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.46$) for **Survey Item 66**, “A transition plan has been developed and the Elementary School Principal supports implementation within the school.” Low levels of agreement were noted for **Survey Item 67** ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.54$), “The Elementary School Principal leads the annual evaluation of the transition plan and revision if necessary” and **Survey Item 69** ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.60$), “The transition plan is available to the public.” (Specific examples of transition plans and implementation strategies will be further explored in the Qualitative (Phase II) portion of the study. Table 19 outlines the mean and standard deviation of elementary principals’ related to **Research Question 3** and “*What Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs are in place in Nebraska public elementary schools?*”

Table 19

Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Transition Programs

Transition Programs in Place: Sub-Questions	M	SD
Q24 Programs are in place to assist children transitioning to kindergarten in developing pro-social and respectful behaviors towards others.	5.15	1.08
Q66 A transition plan has been developed and the Elementary School Principal supports implementation within the school.	4.64	1.46
Q67 The Elementary School Principal leads the annual evaluation of the transition plan and revision if necessary.	4.06	1.54
Q68 The transition plan is available to the public.	3.77	1.60
Q69 The transition plan is available on your website.	2.28	1.36

Note: (n = 125)

Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs. Elementary principals completing the survey shared their understanding of specific examples of transition programs that were in place within their school district. Of the specific transition plans identified for children moving from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms, elementary principals identified specific federal programs such as Head Start (3 times), specific programs like Jump Start (3 times) and the presence of Kindergarten Round Up (17 times).

Research Question 4: To what extent do the current Pre-K to kindergarten transition practices in place in Nebraska public elementary schools align with the work done by Dockett and Perry (2014)?

Transition Guidelines Alignment. This section of the survey included 55 questions, where respondents identified their level of agreement using a six-point

Likert scale while selecting from: (1) representing “Strongly Disagree”; (2) representing “Disagree”; (3) representing “Slightly Disagree”; (4) representing “Slightly Agree”; (5) representing “Agree”; and (6) representing “Strongly Agree.” Survey items were grouped according to the early education transition guidelines suggested in the work of Dockett and Perry (2014). “Like items” were grouped into the following categories (Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships; Partnerships; High Expectations and Equity; Respect for Diversity; and Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice).

The mean score, standard deviation and internal consistency for each guideline: (Guideline One) Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships, (Guideline Two) Partnerships, (Guideline Three) High Expectations and Equity, (Guideline Four) Respect for Diversity, (Guideline Five) Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice is reported in Table 20.

Table 20

Mean, Standard Deviation Scores and Reliability Indices (Cronbach’s Alpha) of Transition Guidelines

Transition Guidelines (Dockett & Perry, 2014)	# of Items	M	SD	Reliability (α)
Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships	20	4.66	.73	.88
Partnerships	18	4.63	.83	.89
High Expectations and Equity	7	4.81	.82	.78
Respect for Diversity	5	4.27	.99	.79
Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice	5	3.83	1.14	.80

Note: (n = 125)

Tables 21 – 25 identify the highest and lowest mean scores and standard deviation for each guideline as outlined in the work of Dockett and Perry (2014). For the larger sample sets, “Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships” (20 items) and “Partnerships” (18 items), the researcher reported the highest three and lowest three survey items by mean score and standard deviation. For the smaller sample sets, “High Expectations and Equity” (7 items), “Respect for Diversity” (5 items), and “Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice” (5 items), the researcher reported the highest two and lowest two survey items by mean score and standard deviation. A six-point Likert scale was used to identify their level of agreement while selecting from: (1) representing “Strongly Disagree”; (2) representing “Disagree”; (3) representing “Slightly Disagree”; (4) representing “Slightly Agree”; (5) representing “Agree”; and (6) representing “Strongly Agree.”

Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships. When looking at the highest and lowest rated survey items in this category as rated by responding elementary principals, the item with the highest mean score of 5.64 (SD = .66) was **Survey Item 43**, “Families have the opportunity to tour the school.” Further strengths included **Survey Item 16**, “Preschool children have the opportunity to visit a kindergarten classroom,” with a mean score of 5.56 (SD = .95) and **Survey Item 44**, “Families receive correspondence from their child’s teacher prior to the beginning of the school year,” with a mean score of 5.54 (SD = .82). Survey items with the lowest mean score were **Survey Item 69**, “The transition plan is available on your website,” with a mean score of 2.28 (SD = 1.36), **Survey Item 18**, “Children receive a home visit from their kindergarten teacher prior to

the beginning of the school year,” with a mean score of 2.77 (SD = 1.57) and **Survey Item 19**, “Children have an opportunity for a bus ride experience prior to the first day of school” with a mean score of 3.63 (SD = 1.90) (reference Table 21).

Table 21

Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Top Category Items Guidelines

<i>Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Highest Mean Scores</i>			
Q43	Families have the opportunity to tour the school.	5.64	0.66
Q16	Preschool children have the opportunity to visit a kindergarten classroom.	5.56	0.95
Q44	Families receive correspondence from their child’s teacher prior to the beginning of the school year.	5.54	0.82
<i>Lowest Mean Scores</i>			
Q69	The transition plan is available on your website.	2.28	1.36
Q18	Children receive a home visit from their kindergarten teacher prior to the beginning of the school year.	2.77	1.57
Q19	Children have an opportunity for a bus ride experience prior to the first day of school.	3.63	1.90

Note: (n = 125)

Partnerships. When looking at the highest and lowest rated survey items in this category as rated by responding elementary principals, the item with the highest mean score of 5.26 (SD = 1.09) was **Survey Item 42**, “Families meet with the school principal prior to the beginning of the school year.” Further strengths included **Survey Item 41**, “Families meet with their child’s kindergarten teacher prior to the beginning of the school

year,” with a mean score of 5.11 (SD = 1.35) and **Survey Item 25**, “Preschool teachers are invited to visit a kindergarten classroom,” with a mean score of 5.10 (SD = 1.27). Survey items with the lowest mean score were **Survey Item 54**, “A variety of community stakeholders (agencies and support services) are included in the transition plan development,” with a mean score of 3.57 (SD = 1.48), **Survey Item 29**, “Release time is provided for preschool teachers to visit with kindergarten students prior to the beginning of school,” with a mean score of 3.60 (SD = 1.71) and **Survey Item 70**, “The Elementary School Principal secures funding and allocates resources to support the transition plan within the school” with a mean score of 3.77 (SD = 1.60) (reference Table 22).

Table 22

Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Top Category Items Guidelines

<i>Partnerships</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Highest Mean Scores</i>			
Q42	Families meet with the school principal prior to the beginning of the school year.	5.26	1.09
Q41	Families meet with their child’s kindergarten teacher prior to the beginning of the school year.	5.11	1.35
Q25	Preschool teachers are invited to visit a kindergarten classroom.	5.10	1.27
<i>Lowest Mean Scores</i>			
Q54	A variety of community stakeholders (agencies and support services) are included in the transition plan development.	3.57	1.48
Q29	Release time is provided for preschool teachers to visit with kindergarten students prior to the beginning of school.	3.60	1.71
Q70	The Elementary School Principal secures funding and allocates resources to support the transition plan within the school.	3.77	1.60

Note: (n = 125)

High expectations and equity. When looking at the highest and lowest rated survey items in this category as rated by responding elementary principals, the item with the highest mean score of 5.63 (SD = .56) was **Survey Item 30**, “Kindergarten teachers design experiences to stimulate learning in all areas – physical, social, emotional, and intellectual.” Another strength included **Survey Item 22**, “A culture of high expectations has been developed for ALL children transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms” with a mean score of 5.26 (SD = 1.05). Survey items with the lowest mean score were **Survey Item 60**, “The Elementary Principal allocates funds designed for transition practices,” with a mean score of 4.08 (SD = 1.52) and **Survey Item 31**, “Curriculum among sending programs and school programs are compared for similarities,” with a mean score of 4.30 (SD = 1.46) (reference Table 23).

Table 23

Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Top Category Items Guidelines

<i>High Expectations and Equity</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Highest Mean Scores</i>			
Q30	Kindergarten teachers design experiences to stimulate learning in all areas – physical, social, emotional, and intellectual.	5.63	0.56
Q22	A culture of high expectations has been developed for ALL children transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms.	5.26	1.05
<i>Lowest Mean Scores</i>			
Q60	The Elementary School Principal allocates funds designated for transition practices.	4.08	1.52
Q31	Curriculum among sending programs and school programs are compared for similarities.	4.30	1.46

Note: (n = 125)

Respect for diversity. When looking at the highest and lowest rated survey items in this category as rated by responding elementary principals, the item with the highest mean score of 5.15 (SD = 1.08) was **Survey Item 24**, “Kindergarten teachers design experiences to stimulate learning in all areas – physical, social, emotional, and intellectual.” Another strength included **Survey Item 65**, “A culture of high expectations has been developed for ALL children transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms” with a mean score of 4.49 (SD = 1.42). Survey items with the lowest mean score were **Survey Item 51**, “Family members are active participants in developing a transition plan that values diversity,” with a mean score of 3.82 (SD = 1.44) and **Survey Item 50**, “Families are included in the development of the official transition plan,” with a mean score of 3.80 (SD 1.40) (reference Table 24).

Ongoing learning and reflective practice. When looking at the highest and lowest rated survey items in this category as rated by responding elementary principals, the item with the highest mean score of 4.06 (SD = 1.53) was **Survey Item 67**, “The Elementary School Principal leads the annual evaluation of the transition plan and revision if necessary.” Another strength included **Survey Item 32**, “Professional development about transition is planned for kindergarten teachers” with a mean score of 4.03 (SD = 1.43). Survey items with the lowest mean score were **Survey Item 53**, “Public school personnel participate in community-wide professional development with Pre-K staff,” with a mean score of 3.69 (SD = 1.52) and **Survey Item 52**, “Public school personnel participate in community forums on kindergarten transitioning,” with a mean score of 3.34 (SD = 1.50) (reference Table 25).

Table 24

Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Top Category Items Guidelines

<i>Respect for Diversity</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Highest Mean Scores</i>			
Q24	Programs are in place to assist children transitioning to kindergarten in developing pro-social and respectful behaviors towards others.	5.15	1.08
Q65	The Elementary School Principal leads kindergarten programs to provide for a wider range of developmental interests and abilities than the chronological age suggests.	4.49	1.42
<i>Lowest Mean Scores</i>			
Q51	Family members are active participants in developing a transition plan that values diversity.	3.82	1.44
Q50	Families are included in the development of the official transition plan.	3.80	1.40

Note: (n = 125)

Table 25

Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Top Category Items Guidelines

<i>Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Highest Mean Scores</i>			
Q67	The Elementary School Principal leads the annual evaluation of the transition plan and revision if necessary.	4.06	1.53
Q32	Professional development about transition is planned for kindergarten teachers.	4.03	1.43
<i>Lowest Mean Scores</i>			
Q53	Public school personnel participate in community-wide professional development with Pre-K staff.	3.69	1.52
Q52	Public school personnel participate in community forums on kindergarten transitioning.	3.34	1.50

Note: (n = 125)

Research Question 5: To what extent do transition programs impact the school readiness of students entering kindergarten?

School readiness. This section of the survey included 11 questions, where respondents identified their level of agreement using a six-point Likert scale while selecting from: (1) representing “Strongly Disagree”; (2) representing “Disagree”; (3) representing “Slightly Disagree”; (4) representing “Slightly Agree”; (5) representing “Agree”; and (6) representing “Strongly Agree” and open-ended responses, which were analyzed for themes.

Respondents were asked to identify the number of kindergarten students, if any, are typically retained at the end of a school year in their school in **Survey Item 12**. The results are found in Table 26 and outline frequency by number of children typically being retained and children typically being retained in various demographic categories. Elementary principals indicated there are typically anywhere from 0 to 25 kindergarten students retained at the end of a school year in their school. Eighty-seven respondents indicated between 0 and 1 kindergarten student are retained in a typical school year.

In further analyzing the level of school readiness for children entering kindergarten, the researcher looked at seven specific survey items (reference Table 27) where respondents identified their level of agreement using a six-point Likert scale. Elementary principals selected from the following levels of agreement for each item: (1) representing “Strongly Disagree”; (2) representing “Disagree”; (3) representing “Slightly Disagree”; (4) representing “Slightly Agree”; (5) representing “Agree”; and

Table 26

Demographic Data of Participants Regarding Retention of Kindergarten Students

Demographic Data	Count / (Percentage)	
Number of kindergarten students typically retained		
0	76	(61%)
1	32	(26%)
2	8	(6%)
3	5	(4%)
4	1	(1%)
8	1	(1%)
20	1	(1%)
25	1	(1%)
*Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding error		
Average number of kindergarten students typically retained per school year (Rural vs. Non-Rural Status)	N	M
Rural	24	3.00
Non-Rural	25	1.92
Average number of kindergarten students typically retained per school year (Title I vs. Non-Title I Status)	N	M
Title I	39	2.77
Non-Title I	10	1.20
Average number of kindergarten students typically retained per school year (Free and Reduced Lunch Status)	N	M
Below 35%	15	1.47
Avg. 35+-55%	19	4.00
Above 55%+	15	1.47

Note: (n = 125)

Table 27

Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of School Readiness (n = 125)

Transition Programs in Place: Sub-Questions		M	SD
Q16	Preschool children have the opportunity to visit a kindergarten classroom.	5.56	.95
Q22	A culture of high expectations has been developed for ALL children transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms.	5.26	1.05
Q17	Preschool children have the opportunity to visit their assignment kindergarten classroom (the classroom they will attend).	5.10	1.39
Q23	Communication between all stakeholders in the Pre-K to kindergarten transition process occurs and high-expectations for ALL children are discussed.	4.94	1.29
Q37	Families are invited to attend sessions related to school readiness.	4.83	1.18
Q31	Curriculum among sending programs and school programs are compared for similarities.	4.30	1.46
Q18	Children receive a home visit from their kindergarten teacher prior to the beginning of the school year.	2.77	1.57

(6) representing “Strongly Agree.” Results are organized from highest to lowest mean score.

When exploring the extent at which transition programs impact the school readiness for students entering kindergarten in Nebraska, public elementary schools, elementary principals indicated a high mean level of agreement ($M = 5.56$, $SD = .95$) for **Survey Item 16**, “Preschool children have the opportunity to visit a kindergarten classroom.” There was also a high mean level of agreement ($M = 5.26$, $SD = 1.05$) for **Survey Item 22**, “A culture of high expectations has been developed for ALL children

transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms” and **Survey Item 17** ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.39$), “Preschool children have the opportunity to visit their assignment kindergarten classroom (the classroom they will attend).” Lower levels of mean agreement were found in **Survey Item 18** ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 1.57$), “Children receive a home visit from their kindergarten teacher prior to the beginning of the school year” and **Survey Item 31** ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.46$), “Curriculum among sending programs and school programs are compared for similarities” (reference Table 27).

Open-ended response **Survey Items 14 and 15** allowed respondents to share additional information related to their perceptions regarding current challenges and barriers to creating successful Pre-K to kindergarten transition practices and goals for future Pre-K to kindergarten transition activities. These qualitative responses, answered on the survey instrument, were analyzed for common themes related to school readiness.

Of the 113 elementary principals providing qualitative responses to **Survey Item 14**, nearly half (46%) of these respondents indicated an impact on school readiness attributed to transition programs. Thirty-two principals specifically identified challenges and barriers related to school readiness impacting the transition program and 21 elementary principals, 17 rural and 4 non-rural elementary principals, indicated there were “no challenges/barriers” or shared positive impacts from transition plans on **School Readiness**. Twelve of these 21 elementary principals specifically referenced the presence of a Pre-K program that is supported by their school district as a reason for the successful transitions.

Emerging themes from elementary principal responses regarding successful transitions for **School Readiness** are outlined below and will be further discussed and interpreted in the Mixed Methods portion of this study in Chapter 6. Responses ranged from broad to very specific aspects of school readiness and impact. These challenges were primarily related to students not having “foundational skills” (coming at different levels of preparedness, potty trained, understanding routines and procedures, behavior, maturity) and adjusting to a full-day schedule, which is more centered on academics.

Research Question 6: To what extent do Nebraska public school elementary principals believe financial, facility or human resources impact Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs in Nebraska schools?

Financial, facility, human resources impact. This section of the survey included seven questions, where respondents were asked to identify to what extent Nebraska public school elementary principals believe financial, facility or human resources impact Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs in Nebraska schools. Elementary principals indicated their level of agreement using a six-point Likert scale while selecting from: (1) representing “Strongly Disagree”; (2) representing “Disagree”; (3) representing “Slightly Disagree”; (4) representing “Slightly Agree”; (5) representing “Agree”; and (6) representing “Strongly Agree.” There was also an open-ended option for respondents to share additional information related to their personal experiences with transition practices that may not have been covered in the survey. The results are found in Table 28 and provide the mean and standard deviation for each survey item. Results are organized from highest to lowest mean score.

Table 28

*Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Financial, Facility and Human Resources**Impact on Transition Programs (n = 125)*

<i>Financial, Facility and Human Resources Impact: Sub-Questions</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Q34	Formal opportunities are planned for preschool and kindergarten teachers to communicate about individual children.	4.76	1.30
Q33	Formal opportunities are planned for preschool and kindergarten teachers to communicate about expectations, curriculum, and assessment.	4.50	1.47
Q36	Families meet with the school nurse prior to the child entering school.	4.46	1.52
Q59	The Elementary School Principal provides release time for school personnel to visit local early childhood centers to meet with students and staff.	4.19	1.61
Q60	The Elementary School Principal allocates funds designated for transition practices.	4.08	1.52
Q32	Professional development about transition is planned for kindergarten teachers.	4.03	1.43
Q70	The Elementary School Principal secures funding and allocates resources to support the transition plan within the school.	3.77	1.60
Q53	Public school personnel participate in community wide professional development with Pre-K staff.	3.69	1.52

Survey data further revealed a high mean level of agreement ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.30$) for **Survey Item 34**, “Formal opportunities are planned for preschool and kindergarten teachers to communicate about individual children”, for **Survey Item 33**, ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.47$), “Formal opportunities are planned for preschool and kindergarten teachers to communicate about expectations, curriculum, and assessment” and for **Survey**

Item 36, ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.52$), “Families meet with the school nurse prior to the child entering school.” Survey items with lower mean scores related to elementary principal perceptions related to Financial, Facility and Human Resources Impact regarding transition programs. Specifically, **Survey Item 60** ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.52$), “The Elementary School Principal allocates funds designated for transition practices”, **Survey Item 32**, ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.43$), “Professional development about transition is planned for kindergarten teachers”, **Survey Item 70** ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.60$), “The Elementary School Principal secures funding and allocates resources to support the transition plan within the school”, and **Survey Item 53** ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.52$), “Public school personnel participate in community-wide professional development with Pre-K staff” fell into this category. The impact of financial, facility and human resources will be further discussed and interpreted in the Mixed Methods portion of this study in Chapter 6

Research Question 7: How do the perceptions and expectations of elementary principals impact their role in the successful transition of Pre-K children to kindergarten? Elementary principals were asked to identify both challenges and/or barriers to successful transitions (**Survey Item 14**) and future goals related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition activities (**Survey Item 15**) they would like to implement. Elementary principals responding to survey items 14 and 15 were categorized by the following status: Rural vs. Non-Rural, Title I vs. Non-Title I and Free and Reduced Lunch Status. One hundred-thirteen (113) elementary principal respondents represented 90% of the study sample. The categories represented include the following; Elementary principals from Rural school district status (61%), Non-Rural school district status (39%),

Title I status (74%), Non-Title I status (26%) and Free and Reduced Lunch Status: Below Average 35% (34%), Approximate Average 35+-55% (39%) and Above Average 55% (27%).

Challenges and barriers to successful transitions. This question, reflected in **Survey Item 14**, which asked elementary principals to identify “challenges and barriers encountered in helping Pre-K children make successful transitions to kindergarten” was recorded on the survey instrument as qualitative responses, coded (see Appendix O) and analyzed for common themes. These responses are further described in narrative form in the Mixed Methods portion of this study in Chapter 6. Table 29 displays the frequency of each perceived challenge and/or barrier identified by the 113 elementary principals responding to the survey.

Table 29

Themes, Codes and Frequency – Elementary Principals (Challenges/Barriers to Successful Transitions)

Themes	Codes	Frequency
School Readiness (Academic & Social)	Social Readiness	28
	Academic Readiness	18
Partnerships & Collaboration	School to Home	18
	School to Private	13
	Staff to Staff	4
Financial, Facility & Human Resources	Limited Access to Programs	7
	Transportation	3
	Staff Availability	3
	No Program	2
Pre-K Programming	Program Focus	4
	Program Quality	6
Communication	English Language Learners	7

Goals related to transition activities. This question, reflected in **Survey Item 15**, which asked elementary principals to identify “goals related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition activities they would like to achieve” was recorded on the survey instrument as qualitative responses, coded and analyzed for common themes (see Appendix P). These responses are further described in narrative form in the Mixed Methods portion of this study in Chapter 6. Table 30 displays the frequency of goals to be achieved identified by the 113 elementary principals responding to the survey.

Table 30

Themes, Codes and Frequency – Elementary Principals (Goals to be Achieved)

Themes	Codes	Frequency
Partnerships & Collaboration	Increase School to Home	18
	Increase Parent Involvement	16
	Identify Student Needs	16
	Staff to Staff	7
	School to Private Providers	6
School Readiness (Academic & Social)	Academic Readiness	14
	Social Readiness	12
Pre-K Programming	Increase Focus (Routines & Procedures)	6
	Increase Focus (Family Needs)	6
	Pre-K more like Kindergarten	5
Communication	Increase School to Home	17
	Increase between Staff	5
Financial, Facility & Human Resources	Add School Based Pre-K	4
	Additional Pre-K Sports Available	5

Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions and expectations of public elementary school administrators in Nebraska regarding the role of the elementary principal in successful transitions from Pre-K to kindergarten education programs throughout the state. The overarching question for the research was: Do elementary principals perceptions and expectations have an effect on transition plans for Pre-K to kindergarten children and families?

The study provided information on elementary principals' knowledge of best practices related to early childhood education programs, factors that influence their level of support for such programs within their school and their role in the transition of Pre-K students to the elementary classroom setting. Demographic data was gathered from all public school elementary administrators who completed the cross-sectional survey so common group data, such as school district population, rural and non-rural disaggregated data (as identified by Nebraska's TEEOSA formula), and Title 1 and non-Title 1 schools (as identified by the Nebraska Department of Education) to better analyze results and identify restraints to implementation of Pre-K programs in local schools. The survey instrument included a section devoted specifically to transition activities that have been proven "highly-effective" for children and families making the transition from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms. The survey included 55 survey items which were utilized to better explore the following elements of successful transition practices as outlined by Dockett and Perry (2014): Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships (20 questions); Partnerships (18 questions); High Expectations and Equity (7 questions);

Respect for Diversity (5 questions); and Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice (5 questions). These items were scored on a six-point Likert scale and respondents were asked to select from: “1” representing “Strongly Disagree”; “2” representing “Disagree”; “3” representing “Slightly Disagree”; “4” representing “Slightly Agree”; “5” representing “Agree”; and “6” representing “Strongly Agree.”

There were significant differences noted between school district demographic subgroups, “Rural vs. Non-Rural,” “Title I vs. Non-Title I” and “Free and Reduced Lunch Status.” A significant difference was found when comparing elementary principal perceptions of Rural vs. Non-Rural status in the category of establishing “*Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships*.” Significant differences were also found when comparing Title I vs. Non-Title I status perceptions in the following survey categories: “*Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships*,” “*Partnerships*,” “*High Expectations and Equity*,” and “*Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice*.” Finally, significant differences were found when comparing Free and Reduced Lunch status perceptions between the following conditions: “Above Average” and “Below Average” Free and Reduced Status in the following survey categories: “*Partnerships*,” “*High Expectations and Equity*,” and “*Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice*.” Qualitative results to further enhance and describe the quantitative results are discussed in both Chapter 5 (Qualitative Results) and the Mixed Methods portion of this study in Chapter 6.

Chapter 5

Qualitative Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions and expectations of public school administrators in Nebraska regarding the role of the elementary principal in successful transitions from Pre-K to kindergarten education programs throughout the state. For the Qualitative (Phase II) portion of the study, the researcher used qualitative data to better explain the quantitative results. The overarching question for the research was: Do elementary principals perceptions and expectations have an effect on transition plans for Pre-K to kindergarten children and families? For the purpose of this study, seven sub-questions were used to guide the research:

1. What is the background and experience of the principal related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs, training and professional development?
2. Are there differences in elementary principals' perceptions for Pre-K transition plans, knowledge of research, and availability of resources between:
 - a. districts with higher percentages of Free and Reduced Lunch percentages and at-risk children and districts with lower percentages of Free and Reduced Lunch percentages and at-risk children?
 - b. rural and non-rural school districts?
 - c. Title I and non-Title I schools?
3. What Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs are in place in Nebraska public elementary schools?

4. To what extent do the current Pre-K to kindergarten transition practices in place in Nebraska public elementary schools align with the work done by Dockett and Perry (2014)?
 - a. Indicators of an effective transition program for kindergarten students:
 - 1) Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships
 - 2) Partnerships
 - 3) High expectations and equity
 - 4) Respect for diversity
 - 5) Ongoing learning and reflective practice
5. To what extent do transition programs impact the school readiness of students entering kindergarten?
6. To what extent do Nebraska public school elementary principals believe financial, facility or human resources impact Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs in Nebraska schools?
7. How do the perceptions and expectations of elementary principals impact their role in the successful transition of Pre-K children to kindergarten?

Interview Protocol Validation

“Qualitative researchers strive for ‘understanding,’ that deep structure of knowledge that comes from visiting personally with participants, spending extensive time in the field, and probing to obtain detailed meanings” (Creswell, 2013, p. 243). In this study, the researcher found it essential to strive for a high level of “understanding.” In this study, the researcher implemented the following validation strategies, as

recommended by Creswell: (a) triangulation, (b) member checking, and (c) external audit (2013, p. 250).

The researcher used triangulation to corroborate evidence from different sources in order to shed light on a theme or perspective (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). Quantitative data and qualitative survey responses were collected and further analyzed by the researcher in connection with the interview responses.

Through the use of member checking, the researcher involved the respondent in the preliminary analyses and emerging themes (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). Identified themes and analyses were shared with interview respondents and their input was sought to validate the researcher's interpretation.

An administrator with the department of education and a researcher who had conducted a similar study in Pennsylvania in 2007 conducted an external audit of the interview questions. Both reviewers, after reviewing the survey and the interview, indicated the interview questions fit the purpose of the study and felt they would provide pertinent information to support the quantitative portion of the study.

Sample and Selection Process

The 125 Nebraska elementary principals who completed the survey were asked to indicate their interest in a follow up interview with the researcher to further explore their perceptions and experiences with Pre-K to kindergarten transition. Of the 43 elementary principals who indicated an interest in the follow up interview, phone interviews were scheduled with 8 and conducted during January of 2016. The 8 elementary principals were selected based on high or low level of agreement regarding the implementation of

Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans, as identified on the survey, and specific school demographic criteria (rural and non-rural status and free and reduced lunch status). The Nebraska Department of Education identifies “small schools” as school districts with 900 or fewer students under Nebraska Legislative Bill 806A, which established the threshold of 900 or fewer students for the purpose of TEEOSA funding, the current school finance formula for all Nebraska public schools. In addition to size of school district, elementary principals were selected based on the level of free and reduced lunch status for their school, representing the socioeconomic status of their student population. The three levels were based on Nebraska’s 2013-2014 Free and Reduced Lunch Status (FRL) average (44.9%): below average (below 35%), approximate average (35% to 55%), and above average (above 55%) (Nebraska Department of Education, 2014a) (reference Table 31). Due to a limited number of rural principals with a low level of survey agreement and below average free and reduced lunch status indicating a desire to be interviewed, the researcher selected a respondent with an approximate average free and reduced lunch that was near the lower end of the range. The years of experience in their current position for each of the eight elementary principals ranged from 1 to 13.

Elementary principals meeting criteria for follow up interviews were initially contacted via phone call (see Appendix L). Follow up phone calls and emails were needed to finalize a schedule for interview completion with each elementary principal. Prior to completing the taped, phone interviews, verbal consent was gained and a letter of consent (see Appendix N) was collected from each respondent. The letter of consent

Table 31

Elementary Principal Interview Participants

Level of Survey Agreement	<i>Rural (n = 4)</i>			<i>Non-Rural (n = 4)</i>		
	Below Avg. FRL	Approx Avg. FRL	Above Avg. FRL	Below Avg. FRL	Approx Avg. FRL	Above Avg. FRL
High Agreement	1		1	1		1
Low Agreement		1	1	1		1

Note: (n = 8)

outlined the purpose of the study and how the results of the study would be used and reported. The letter of consent ensured the researcher would take necessary measures to ensure the confidentiality of the participant, school and school district. A copy of the interview protocol and the interview questions was provided to each respondent prior to completing the interviews. All interviews were completed within a two-week window in January.

Interview Protocol

The interview data was collected using an interview protocol (see Appendix F). The interview protocol was adjusted after analysis of the quantitative data to reflect the results from the survey and to better address the quantitative data collected. This practice was in accordance with procedures outlined for explanatory, sequential design mixed methods research that utilizes qualitative data to elaborate or better identify and explain the quantitative results (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The following seven questions were used as the basis for the semi-structured open-ended interview protocol:

Soft Interview Questions:

1. How do you feel the survey went?

Primary Elementary Principal Interview Questions:

1. What is your definition of an effective Pre-K to kindergarten transition plan or program?
2. What steps have you taken to ensure a successful transition for kindergarten students into your school? Please explain the process utilized to develop this plan.
3. What connections have you developed within your community and the early childhood education programs to foster the successful transition for Pre-K children into kindergarten?
4. What resources does your district devote to Pre-K programming, particularly Pre-K to kindergarten transition?
5. What challenges and barriers have you encountered in helping Pre-K children to make successful transitions to kindergarten in your school district?
6. What goals, related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition activities, would you like to achieve as elementary principal?
7. Is there anything that I have missed? Do you have any other comments other than the questions I have asked?

The researcher used respondent responses to develop further questions on the elementary principal's perceptions and experiences related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans in Nebraska.

Emerging Themes

The researcher used a qualitative data analysis strategy suggested by Creswell (2013) to organize and analyze the interview data,

Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts, or image data as in photographs) for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables or a discussion. (p. 180)

Upon transcription, MAXQDA software was used to code the interview responses for themes related to each interview question in the interview protocol. The codes from the qualitative responses to specific survey items were then compared with the qualitative interview responses and further condensed into common themes. Five common themes emerged that were consistent with the qualitative responses to survey items: (a) School Readiness (Academic and Social); (b) Partnerships and Collaboration; (c) Pre-K Programming; (d) Financial, Facility and Human Resources; and (e) Communication.

Theme Summaries

Introduction. In this section, each of the five themes will be discussed:

(a) School Readiness (Academic and Social); (b) Partnerships and Collaboration; (c) Pre-K Programming; (d) Financial, Facility and Human Resources; and (e) Communication. The 5 themes with corresponding codes are located in Table 32.

Each theme will be presented through the interpretations of elementary principals from both rural and non-rural demographics as well as free and reduced lunch status if it shows relevance and is aligned with survey results.

Table 32

Codes and Frequency – Elementary Principal Interviews

Interview Question	Codes	Frequency
Definition of Effective Transition Plan	Foundational Skills	8
	Collaboration	10
Steps to Ensure Successful Transition	Team Approach	14
	Kindergarten Round Up	7
	Kindergarten Ready	7
	Identifying Improvement	4
Connections with Community	Community Partnership	9
	Public to Private	6
Resources Devoted	Financial	9
	Human Resources	4
	Alternate Funding Sources	6
Challenges and Barriers	Communication with Families	9
	Financial	7
	Transportation	3
	Human Resources	2
Transition Goals to Achieve	Kindergarten Ready	6
	School to Home Collaboration	15
Additional Comments	Importance of Early Childhood	6

Theme 1: School Readiness (Academic and Social). The importance of school readiness emerged in several questions across the interview. Specifically when elementary principals were asked to “define an effective Pre-K to kindergarten transition plan or program,” when they were asked to identify the steps they have taken to ensure a successful transition for children entering kindergarten in their school and when it came to setting goals related to transition activities that elementary principals would like to implement. School readiness emerged throughout these questions in the form of both academic and social readiness. The importance of foundational skills and being ready for

kindergarten was seen as key throughout the transition process. A rural elementary principal indicated challenges related to children arriving to school with the appropriate readiness skills:

Some of it [challenges] has been the maturity process. Are they [children] ready to sit and listen? Can they take direction? Once they hit kindergarten it's probably one of the more challenging things we have is, you know, can they sit for longer periods of time? Can they [students] take direction in several phases?

A rural elementary principal stated:

I'm looking for a program that's going to help our students come into the kindergarten year with some pretty basic skills, that they're going to let them carry on and gain more as they go through their first year of school.

A non-rural elementary principal further stated, "I would say one that exposes kids to kindergarten curriculum. One that exposes kids to transitions through general expectations. And just one, in general, that has high expectations for kids." Another non-rural elementary principal stated:

I don't know if I have a definition but I would say I think it's a plan to allow preschool students to seamlessly move into kindergarten, as well as their parents make that transition. It's a way to ease that [transition] so they [children and families] kind of have an idea of what's happening, so those first 2 weeks, 3 weeks of school aren't such a shock to them.

When elementary principals were asked to identify the steps they have taken to ensure a successful transition for children entering kindergarten in their school. Rural elementary principals mentioned specific elements they have implemented in the pre-school classrooms in their schools. One rural elementary principal mentioned a need to focus on the "basic skills" that will ensure future success:

We're looking at [children entering kindergarten] knowing the alphabet, some number skills, and being able to communicate. We're looking at some

disciplinary things concerning being able to sit for a little while and take direction, those types of things.

Elementary principals indicated a strong desire to establish goals that prepared the children entering their schools to succeed. This was evident when asked about specific goals they would like to achieve related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition activities. A rural elementary principal stated:

I would like to see a high percentage of our kids coming in with the skills that are going to make them be successful in the kindergarten stage. I personally believe that that's where we have a tendency to lose some of our students, is in those primary grades, where we're learning some of the basic skills and when you don't learn those things it's hard to come back.

This feeling was further supported by a non-rural elementary principal who explained:

My goal would be that my kids achieve, that all kids that enter the building start out in kindergarten, whether they speak English or they're learning English, whether they're free, reduced, or full-pay, that they all can be successful, that they all can achieve.

Another rural elementary principal stated:

My goal is to make sure that all the pre-k in our district would be kindergarten ready, you know, make sure they know, make sure they're all screened and if there is any deficiencies you are able to address those before they get into kindergarten.

How school readiness was best achieved was viewed as a collaborative affair involving both internal and external stakeholders. This led to the emergence of Theme 2: Partnerships and Collaboration.

Theme 2: Partnerships and Collaboration. The survey results and interviews conducted with selected elementary principals identified the importance of establishing collaborative partnerships with a variety of stakeholders. The partnership theme emerged consistently throughout responses during the interview process (Interview questions 1, 2,

3, and 6). When elementary principals were asked to “define an effective transition plan”; “identify steps taken to ensure successful transitions”; “identify connections within the community to foster successful transitions” and when “identifying goals they would like to achieve,” elementary principal responses focused largely on the importance of developing and maintaining collaborative relationships with students, families and community stakeholders. A non-rural elementary principal stated:

I think first of all, your kindergarten teachers and your preschool teachers must be communicating. I also think administration in both of those buildings must be communicating, and parents must be communicating with both schools so that transition is allowed to happen. And when I say teachers, that means special education teachers, ELL teachers, and classroom teachers and any other teachers that are affected.

Collaborative partnerships were noted as an integral part of a successful transition process. These partnerships occurred between school and home as well as between school and other agencies. When asked about their definition of an effective transition plan, a non-rural elementary principal stated:

I feel the key component is that we need to make connections with families. We need to build relationships, we need to allow them to have an awareness of what our expectations are as a member of our school community, and then in particular what will be the expectations of the kindergarten curriculum. And that would be both the academic and the behavioral and, you know, socio and emotional piece. But my big thing is I want kids to be able to transition and families to feel comfortable that their kids are coming to a good place, that this is going to be a positive experience for them.

A rural elementary principal explained:

It would be the school district working with either head start or the preschools and giving information on what the expectations of the kindergarten student would be the next year they would arrive in their district. So working together would be my definition.

Another non-rural elementary principal explained:

I think that an effective transition program centers around communication, and when I say that I am talking about not only students and teachers but also involving parents, administration, daycare centers, if they are involved. Any stakeholders that are going to play a major role in the child's life, inside or outside of school, that would be effective pieces of a transition program. I think that communication has to take place between the pre-k teachers and the kindergarten teachers. Knowing what needs students have, and that's going to be able to better prepare those students to make that transition into the next grade into kindergarten.

Elementary principals further supported the importance of developing and maintaining partnerships to ensure an effective transition between a Pre-K environment and the kindergarten classroom. These partnerships included collaborating with specific non-profit organizations to aid in the transition process, partnering with local community organizations and the importance of developing internal relationships (preschool to kindergarten teachers). One non-rural elementary principal mentioned partnering with the preschool in their building to ensure a successful transition:

At the building level we make sure that our pre-k students are part of our student body. They are invited and included in any extra-curricular activities that we do. So their families always receive all the information for all of our PTO events, you know, we include them in our specials schedule, they go to media, and they go to the art teacher, the music teacher, the PE teacher. It's not a set schedule, they don't meet with them weekly but through the course of the year we include those students in our school day. We also have a lot of our older students, spend time, kind of some buddy time in the classroom [with the preschool students]. So we really work to try to make the children and the families feel a part of the school and not a separate entity.

A rural elementary principal explained:

I would say our biggest step was bringing the preschool right into the school here. We typically did not have that experience prior, and so we moved, we do not manage and operate our preschool; it's contracted through a non-profit. I brought it to our board, and I think they knew that it was best for kids.

Another rural elementary principal explained:

They [preschool children] go up and play bingo with the people in [assisted living]. . . . You know, just different things like that that the community has helped us with, and in transitioning, another thing that I think has helped us, we have an open house night and, you know, people in the community come and help serve cookies and things like that to promote it.

A non-rural elementary principal stated:

One of the biggest community connections that I have is with [a local non-profit organization] who run an after school program [in the school community]. And I use that individual kind of as a liaison to make sure that to help me connect with families. . . . I make sure and connect with her so she knows things that are going on.

Another non-rural elementary principal shared some challenges with establishing partnerships between the school and private Pre-K providers:

Any time you have a private entity and you're working as a public and private [partnership] it's a little bit different. It's harder to allow time commitments, creating time for teachers to get together, and administrators to get together, so I think that's the biggest thing, just the time. . . . To be honest with you I can't name all of the different preschools in my town right now, so, I think there's just some lack of understanding and just, it hasn't been tackled yet.

When identifying specific steps in place to ensure a successful transition for Pre-K children to the kindergarten classroom, a non-rural elementary principal indicated the role relationships play and also shared that the lack of a formal process can create challenges. This principal stated:

I think my involvement with transition to kindergarten for some of our kids during preschools would be, just being available and open to visit, and teachers collaborating on the kids that are coming to us, what their needs may be, and some of the things that we can be prepared for when it comes to serving them when they come. Without the formal process I think it's just kind of hit-or-miss with, whether or not the parents advocate or preschool teachers advocate for kids and parents to visit the school, to become familiar with their surroundings. I would say without a formal process I would try to be as open to what our families and preschool teachers need from us.

Elementary principals identified goals related to improving the school to home partnerships within their school community. One rural elementary principal mentioned the importance of “Getting the parents to where they feel comfortable and engaged.” A non-rural elementary principal explained:

I just want parents and families to trust us. To feel proud of the building that they’re entering, to feel that it’s a good place, that their child’s going to be successful there. My goal would be that everyone one of those parents feels comfortable walking in the building, comfortable talking to all the adults that are going to work with their child, including me. That we’re a resource for them and the place that they can come when they have a need.

Another non-rural elementary principal stated:

I think the survey and this conversation has opened my mind more to being more available and how as a district can we be more available to the various preschool learning centers around us. Reaching out to them, I think it’s more about finding out what they do, if there’s a consistency, if there’re things we can do to make sure they’re aware of what our expectations are. I think that is something that’s maybe missing; we kind of take it for granted that the majority of our kids go to a preschool program. As long as they go to one they seem to be “ok” but if I think there could be a little bit more of a focus on establishing relationships and reaching out and inviting maybe some of those teachers in to see what it looks like, so that they know what we do as vertical teams in an elementary, so that they can see what happens at different stages during the year and what teachers truly expect of kids in the beginning. I think that would be helpful, if I had a goal that would come out of this it would be to establish that relationship. I could probably find out where the majority of our kids are going to preschool because there’s a couple in the area that make the most sense to reach out and see about that transition.

Theme 3: Pre-K Programming. Elementary principals indicated the importance of specific Pre-K programming centering on successful transitions. The importance of a program that provides opportunities for children and families to visit their home school and become familiar with the school was noted. One non-rural elementary principal explained:

My number one goal would be to, if every student and parent would not be able, would not have that animosity, or that uncomfortableness or that uneasiness as a, in a preschool. I'm sorry, kindergarten. They know what to expect, they know what it's going to be like.

When elementary principals were asked to identify the steps they have taken to ensure a successful transition for children entering kindergarten in their school. Rural elementary principals mentioned specific elements they have implemented in the pre-school classrooms in their schools. One rural elementary principal mentioned a need to focus on the "basic skills" that will ensure future success:

We've worked with the primary grade teachers, mainly the kindergarten teacher and preschool folks to line up a curriculum that is going to dovetail into the kindergarten curriculum and be seamless so that the kids can just get right in there and take right off from where they left off in preschool.

Another rural elementary principal, with a preschool in the school building stated:

We try to mirror a kindergarten school day. They go to specials, like PE, music, Art, things like that, similar to what the kindergarten, not for as long a time but similar to what the kindergartners do so that they are used to seeing another teacher. We, the first semester, for instance, we do their lunch tray, they go through the lunch line and we fill their tray for them and carry it for them. Second semester, is where they get their own tray, it's still filled by the cooks but they have to hold their own tray and things like that. So we just try to emulate that kindergarten as much as we possibly can. We do the best we can in just preparing them by having a day that's similar to what they're going to experience in kindergarten.

Non-rural elementary principals tended to focus on the role of specific programs, like Kindergarten Roundup, that were used to promote successful transitions.

Kindergarten Roundup was mentioned by three of the four non-rural elementary principals and one of the rural principals. One non-rural elementary principal explained:

My kindergarten teachers, also our district sets up a work day, our after school meeting where they meet with the preschool teachers to ease that transition. We do your typical kindergarten roundup, but other than that we also, one of the

things that we do, I think that helps us, is we do a back-to-school night for kindergarten parents right away. Like the week, we go half day of school the first day and then we do a parent night that night, kind of helps with that.

A rural elementary principal stated:

We have a kindergarten day roundup. We go with them [Pre-K children] and we show them the expectations [for kindergarten].

A non-rural elementary principal explained:

At the building level, well of course we have what's called kindergarten roundup. We're getting ready to possibly rename it or look at it as maybe that's an outdated terminology, but we have an opportunity where we bring in second semester kids that will enter our kindergarten.

Theme 4: Financial, Facility and Human Resources. When elementary principals were asked to identify the resources (financial, facility and human) their school district devoted to the Pre-K to kindergarten transition process, both locally provided resources and grant-funded programs were mentioned. Rural elementary principals noted the use of district funds and available grants and partnerships as provided resources. A rural elementary principal stated:

We have a, what we call a scholarship program. We have a tuition for our preschool, which is minimal but we do to help defray some of the costs. We have a tuition and our community has set up a scholarship program for students that don't quite qualify for [state assistance], and yet need help. So our community, we had members in our community step up and help us set up a scholarship program for those students. Our community is, you know, very willing to help us with anything that we really need for our preschool. We've had patrons that have purchased books for us, and somewhat some of the equipment and things like that. Financially the community has really supported our preschool, and made it, I feel like, made it successful, and made it an important part of our school.

Another rural elementary principal explained:

The school pays the transportation and all of the transportation expenses, and then the bus driver and the paraeducator, as well as the custodial and food preparation and secretarial.

Another rural elementary principal stated:

Really the only resources that we devote would be, we contract services through our ESU. We try to seek out the students that need services provided to them. We have them come in and we will either, give services at their house or if they would like, they use one of our facilities to receive services.

Non-rural elementary principals mentioned the presence of early childhood centers and programs at the district level as well as alternate funding sources (grants) to support Pre-K to kindergarten transitions. These resources tended to be distributed district wide and were based on specific programs within the school district. A non-rural elementary principal explained:

[A grant funded program] does occur at buildings throughout the district and we all use some of our Title I money for that. We do hold some additional parent events [that are communicated] through the district website and the parent [contact service].

Another non-rural elementary principal stated:

We've got a Head Start program, our early childhood program, and we also offer a childcare program as part of our foundation, that starts, at [a minimum age] and feeds all the way into Pre-K. Then they transition into a program that helps children transition into kindergarten, wherever they would go to within the district.

Another non-rural elementary principal mentioned:

We have a [district] preschool as well as some other early childhood stuff that goes with it, where the district provides preschool. Those are for students who qualify generally, and that's all through grants, and there's the mixing of free and reduced lunch versus other students. But as far as the transition, the district will provide, district being out of my school budget, pay for a sub for my teachers to go observe at the preschool.

Theme 5: Communication. Creating and maintaining open lines of communication between school, home and various stakeholders within the school community were seen as challenges to a successful transition of children from Pre-K

settings to kindergarten classrooms. All four non-rural elementary principals interviewed identified specific perceived challenges or goals aligned with improving the lines of communication related to transition activities they would like to achieve. When asked to identify a goal they would like to work towards, a rural elementary principal shared, “I just would like to increase that communication [between school and home] in a positive way. I really think the more involved and engaged you can get families, the better off [the relationship].” This feeling is reflected in one non-rural elementary principal’s words,

In each building we’ve seen that it’s become more and more important to have that line of communication open, that partnership with our parents as well as all the agencies that could be serving our families to better help support those students.

Another non-rural elementary principal mentioned challenges related to communicating appropriate resources to families in need of assistance:

Putting our parents and our families in touch with those resources [health care, medical care, financial assistance] and making that an option for them and helping them to see how they can get in touch with those resources [many are outside the school community], how they can access those, and eliminating some of those barriers that they face.

The desire to get important information to families who are transitioning into the school was noted in a non-rural elementary principals comment:

I think communication barriers, finding folks, making sure that, you know, they understand that they [students] have to have a physical, they need to have shots, there are some requirements, and there is some paperwork. We do have a computer in the building that’s set aside just for parents, so you know, if we can make a phone contact with them and invite them to come in, we do have a special night just set aside for our ELL parents so that they can come in and we’ll have translators available to help them with some of those kind of things, but I think, you know, it’s just figuring out how to get outside of my school mindset and get it in a mindset that is better fit for parents and the needs that they have.

Another non-rural elementary principal explained:

I think the biggest piece is just making contact with those parents [with children who are transitioning]. And, you know, any time you make contact with parents, all parents have a different level of interest in being involved in the transition and trying to get maybe some of those folks that are just going to wait to worry about kindergarten in August to start to think about things that they can do to help their kid to transition in the spring versus the fall.

Additional elementary principal comments. When the elementary principals being interviewed were asked if there was other information they would like to share with the researcher, two rural and two non-rural administrator responses centered on the importance of the study, the importance of early childhood learning opportunities and the benefits of a school district sponsored preschool. A non-rural elementary principal shared, “I think it’s a good topic to study because I think preschool is getting to be more and more important piece of what we do in education every year.” A rural elementary principal further explained:

I feel like early childhood education and having a preschool, if not right in your district, in your building, particularly, that primary building if you will, it’s non-negotiable. I just can’t express to you how important I feel [it is].

A non-rural elementary principal further explained the value in gaining early access to children in the learning process:

I think that focusing on early childhood education is a great focus, because I think we’ve learned over time if we can catch them there [early], and get them started academically, behaviorally, going, engaged and excited about learning there are [long term impacts]. You set the tone for what’s going to come for the next many years. And we want that, again, to be a very positive welcoming tone, so I do think that, I value having a preschool at my building, I do think that it’s an important component.

This principal further explained their perceptions regarding the impact of a school-based preschool opportunity:

There's so many cool things going on in there [preschool room]; these 3- and 4-year-olds are self-assessing, they are sitting knee-to-knee, eye-to-eye and having conversations about things. They're [preschool students] also spending lots of time playing and talking and doing all of those things, but you know there's just a tremendous amount of things that go on in Pre-K and I wish all children really had that opportunity because I do think that it just lays at a very crucial time in their education development, a great, great foundation for what's to come.

A rural elementary principal shared the importance of their school based preschool and the perceived impact it has had on children in the district:

I think that's something that preschool has done for us, it's freed them [kindergarten teachers] up to do more academics and I think that's been a big plus. It's just advanced our kids along and, like I said before, it's really pushed our kindergarten teachers and if they're advancing our 1st grade advances, it's just helped us all the way through. And, you know, the thing that we've noticed is our NeSA scores, things like that, are on the rise, and we think part of it is due to preschool.

Summary

The qualitative data, which was collected, appeared to reflect the data collected in the study's survey. Elementary principals share a common belief that transition plans for children from Pre-K to kindergarten settings are important. When asking elementary principals to identify their definition of an effective transition program, the majority outlined a program that promotes school readiness by exposing children to routines, expectations and basic skills, prepares children for what kindergarten will look like -- academically and behaviorally, and promotes communication/collaboration between all parties in the transition process (student, teacher, administration, families). While indicating that collaboration and communication with all the parties involved in the transition process was important to the success of a transition program, several elementary principals indicated they had not reached out to local early childhood

education centers to discuss transition processes. Main drawbacks to this contact were a “lack of time” and the size of the community, resulting in a large number of potential contacts to make.

Elementary principals shared a range of challenges/barriers in helping children make a successful transition from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms. Identified challenges and barriers aligned with the survey results were categorized in the following five themes: School Readiness (academic and social/behavioral); Partnerships and Collaboration; Pre-K Programming; Financial, Facility and Human Resources; and Communication. The majority of the interviewed elementary principals indicated a desire to continue to develop “collaborative” relationships with the families of children transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms and to open lines of communication with local Pre-K providers. They further indicated a desire to provide a safe and welcoming environment for the children and their families during this process.

Chapter 6, “Summary of Findings, Discussion, and Recommendations” will further expand upon the themes identified in both the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study: “School Readiness (academic and social/behavioral),” “Partnership and Collaboration,” “Pre-K Programming,” “Financial, Facility and Human Resources” and “Communication.” This chapter will share comments outlining the perceptions and expectations of elementary principals regarding their role in the successful transition of children from Pre-K to kindergarten, the challenges/barriers they face in this process, and the Pre-K to kindergarten transition goals they would like to achieve as elementary principal. It will also highlight specific recommendations to limit the impact of identified

challenges and create a transition plan that meets the needs of the children and families within the school community.

Chapter 6

Summary of Findings, Discussion, and Recommendations

Introduction

A wide range of research regarding the impact of high-quality early childhood education programs on the future success of children transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten has been conducted. The impact of such programs has indicated long-term academic, social and financial impact for children receiving the high-quality early childhood education experience as well as a significant return on investment for the community supporting these programs.

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions and expectations of public school administrators in Nebraska regarding the role of the elementary principal in successful transitions from Pre-K to kindergarten education programs throughout the state. It was also a goal to better understand what elementary principals know about Pre-K to kindergarten transitions, what role they play in the transition process and what challenges and barriers they face in establishing transition plans. The study's population included elementary principals from 243 of Nebraska's 245 public school districts. A total of 465 participants received an invitation to complete the survey and 125 participants (27%), representing 114 Nebraska public school districts (47%), responded to the survey. Upon collection of survey data, the researcher selected 8 elementary principals, who had indicated an interest in participating in a follow up interview process, and met specific criteria outlined in Chapter 5. These 8 principals were asked 7 interview questions related to their perceptions and expectations with Pre-K to kindergarten

transition programs. The overarching question for the research was: Do elementary principals perceptions and expectations have an effect on transition plans for Pre-K to kindergarten children and families? For the purpose of this study, 7 sub-questions were used to guide the study:

1. What is the background and experience of the principal related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs, training and professional development?
2. Are there differences in elementary principals' perceptions for Pre-K transition plans, knowledge of research, and availability of resources between:
 - a. districts with higher percentages of Free and Reduced Lunch percentages and at-risk children and districts with lower percentages of Free and Reduced Lunch percentages and at-risk children?
 - b. rural and non-rural school districts?
 - c. Title I and non-Title I schools?
3. What Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs are in place in Nebraska public elementary schools?
4. To what extent do the current Pre-K to kindergarten transition practices in place in Nebraska public elementary schools align with the work done by Dockett and Perry (2014)?
 - a. Indicators of an effective transition program for kindergarten students:
 - 1) Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships
 - 2) Partnerships
 - 3) High expectations and equity
 - 4) Respect for diversity

5) Ongoing learning and reflective practice

5. To what extent do transition programs impact the school readiness of students entering kindergarten?
6. To what extent do Nebraska public school elementary principals believe financial, facility or human resources impact Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs in Nebraska schools?
7. How do the perceptions and expectations of elementary principals impact their role in the successful transition of Pre-K children to kindergarten?

Mixed Methods Design

The researcher used an explanatory, sequential, mixed methods research design to address the primary and secondary research questions in this study. A mixed methods approach offered the greatest opportunity to better understand the experiences and perceptions of elementary principals related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs.

In Phase I (quantitative) of the study, the researcher collected data using a cross-sectional survey, which was delivered to public school elementary principals in Nebraska. All data collected via the survey were organized and analyzed for common perceptions and expectations between various demographic categories. Upon completing the survey, elementary principals were asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow up interview. Those indicating a willingness to participate would be considered for the qualitative portion of the study.

In Phase II (qualitative) of the study, a qualitative case study approach was implemented by the researcher in an attempt to better describe elementary principals'

perceptions and experiences with Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs. Interview respondents were identified using what Creswell (2013) referred to as a “stratified purposeful” sampling method. This method allowed the researcher to purposefully select elementary principals who indicated either a high level or low level of agreement regarding the implementation of Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans and met specific school demographic criteria (rural and non-rural status and free and reduced lunch status). The study design allowed the researcher to explain the similar results from the quantitative and qualitative studies.

Discussion and Implications of Mixed Methods Study Findings

The researcher was able to learn about Nebraska elementary principal perceptions and expectations regarding the role of the elementary principal in successful transitions from Pre-K to kindergarten education programs throughout the state. The researcher was further able to connect the literature related to successful transition practices outlined in the study: Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships; Partnerships; High Expectations and Equity; Respect for Diversity; and Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice with the study results. Survey and interview results also revealed differences in participant perceptions regarding factors impacting school readiness, challenges and barriers to successful transition plans, and the impact of financial, facility and human resources on successful transition plans. These differences were related to the demographic categories that were used to classify the elementary principal respondents.

To address the purpose of this study, seven sub-questions were used as a guide. The research questions are grouped according to findings and offered recommendations. Both quantitative and qualitative results were used to address the research questions.

Data was collected from 55, six-point Likert-scale questions as well as from an analysis of the 5 themes that emerged from the qualitative data collected from 7 open-ended interview questions and 7 open-ended survey items. Full survey results are reported in Appendix Q.

Research Question 1: What is the background and experience of the principal related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs, training and professional development?

Findings. For the 125 elementary principals who were surveyed, 54% of the respondents had served in their current position for 6 or fewer years, with 37% serving in their current position for between 7 and 15 years and 9% serving in their current role for more than 15 years. While there appeared to be no significant differences between the number of years in the current position and the number of attended trainings and professional development related to transition programs, it is applicable to note a significant number of survey respondents (34%) had attended no courses, conferences or trainings related to Pre-K to kindergarten transitions. The majority of respondents (81%) indicated between 0 and 5 trainings, courses and conferences attended.

When comparing the pertinent trainings received between the 66 rural and 49 non-rural elementary principals, it is of interest to note that 35% of rural respondents and 27% of non-rural respondents indicated their primary source of early childhood training

comes via the Nebraska Department of Education. The next highest source of pertinent training came through the attendance of conferences and workshops, with 14% of rural respondents and 41% of non-rural elementary principals indicating this type of training. 12% of rural respondents and 14% of non-rural respondents indicated attending either undergraduate or graduate level college courses, which provided preparation for Pre-K to kindergarten transitions.

Rural elementary principals primarily identified the Nebraska Department of Education as the source of pertinent trainings related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition planning. Non-rural elementary principals indicated a higher number of trainings that come via attendance of conferences and workshops. Both groups of administrators indicated a low number of courses received via undergraduate or graduate college preparatory experiences. It should also be noted that a large proportion (34%) of elementary principals participating in this study indicated they had received no pertinent trainings related to engaging in Pre-K to kindergarten transition processes. “Ongoing learning and reflective practice is most likely to result when educators have multiple opportunities to engage with and consider issues, build upon what they already know and value, and explore implications for practice” (Dockett & Perry, 2014, p. 74). With limited background knowledge regarding the implementation of effective early childhood transition practices, challenges to these successful transitions are created.

Recommendation #1: Require minimum training or education requirements in the area of Pre-K to kindergarten transition practices for all elementary principals. This training will provide elementary principals with the requisite knowledge to

implement research based transition practices in their school community. Expanding offerings of Pre-K and early childhood educational opportunities for elementary principals in the area of transitions can be used to strengthen the knowledge base related to implementing effective transition programs, which align with research-based methods. When considering what elementary principals should know regarding the development of young children, the National Association of Elementary School Principals stated principals should,

(1) demonstrate thorough knowledge of early child development and learning; (2) take action to ensure that young children's development and ways of learning are supported by program practices and policies; (3) communicate to others the importance of young children's development and learning needs and (4) resist pressure to create or maintain programs that ignore or run counter to what we know about how young children develop and learn. (as cited in Kostelnik & Grady, 2009, pg. 99)

To address these important recommendations, would require educational administration training programs to design and implement courses with the intention of providing aspiring elementary principals with the background knowledge to successfully engage in these actions. This recommendation aligns with suggestions made by Dr. Jacqueline Florendo in her 2012 doctoral study titled, "Nebraska Public School Administrators' Perceptions of Preschool Education. In her study, one of Dr. Florendo's recommendations was to,

Provide future administrators the opportunity to become more knowledgeable about specific benefits of Pre-K and early childhood education that align to current research within their education administration training programs, most likely integrate it into Education Administration coursework.

Research Question 2: Are there differences in elementary principals' perceptions for Pre-K transition plans, knowledge of research, and availability of resources between: a. rural and non-rural school districts?; b. Title I and non-Title I schools?; c. districts with higher percentages of Free and Reduced Lunch percentages and at-risk children and districts with lower percentages of Free and Reduced Lunch percentages and at-risk children?

Research Question 4: To what extent do the current Pre-K to kindergarten transition practices in place in Nebraska public elementary schools align with the work done by Dockett and Perry (2014)?

- a. Indicators of an effective transition program for kindergarten students:**
 - 1. Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships**
 - 2. Partnerships**
 - 3. High expectations and equity**
 - 4. Respect for diversity**
 - 5. Ongoing learning and reflective practice**

Findings. When exploring the differences in elementary principals' perceptions for Pre-K transition plans, knowledge of research and the availability of resources, there were statistically significant differences reported between the subgroups Rural and Non-Rural schools, Title I and Non-Title I schools, and Above and Below Average Free and Reduced Lunch status levels. These statistically significant differences fell within four of the five categories (reference Table 33) as previously identified components of effective transition programs. The only category not yielding a significant difference between the demographic categories outlined above was "*Respect for Diversity.*" These differences were further supported with open-ended qualitative responses from survey items 14 and 15 and interview questions 5 and 6, both open-ended response items asked

elementary principals to identify specific challenges and/or barriers to implementing effective transition plans as well as goals related to implementing effective transition plans they would like to achieve as principal.

Table 33

Significant Differences (Rural vs. Non-Rural, Title I vs. Non-Title I and Above Average vs. Below Average Free and Reduced Lunch Status (FRL))

	N	M	SD	Cohen's d
Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships		Transition Guidelines (Dockett & Perry, 2014)		
Rural	74	4.74	.70	.48
Non-Rural	51	4.40	.69	
Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships				
Title I	95	4.68	.74	.45
Non-Title I	30	4.38	.58	
Partnerships				
Title I	95	4.64	.85	.47
Non-Title I	30	4.24	.84	
High Expectations and Equity Transition				
Title I	95	4.83	.84	.47
Non-Title I	30	4.40	.96	
Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practices				
Title I	95	3.88	1.16	.53
Non-Title I	30	3.27	1.14	
Partnerships				
Below Avg. FRL <35%	42	4.30	.84	
Above Avg. FRL >55%	33	4.89	.72	.75
High Expectations and Equity				
Below Avg. FRL <35%	42	4.44	.95	
Above Avg. FRL >55%	33	4.98	.75	.63
Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practices				
Below Avg. FRL <35%	42	3.44	1.17	
Above Avg. FRL >55%	33	4.15	1.17	.61

The study results indicated there are differences in elementary principal perceptions related to the level of implementation of effective transition activities as identified in the literature. The literature further supports the importance of elementary principals engaging in reflective practice while considering their actions related to implementation of transition practices. Determining the challenges and barriers related to implementation while reflecting on what is working and what is not working should be important components of the process.

Ongoing learning opportunities promote the professionalism of early childhood educators. Effective ongoing learning, or professional development, is shaped by the contexts in which educators operate and by the values, beliefs and expectations educators bring to those contexts. (Dockett & Perry, 2014, p. 74)

As Dockett and Perry (2001) further point out,

Effective transition practices have, as their base, a commitment to building secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships. One outcome of such relationships is that all participants regard themselves – and other participants – as valued members of the school community. (as cited in Dockett & Perry, 2014, p. 14)

In addressing these research questions, the qualitative data and quantitative data were convergent. The importance of developing collaborative partnerships was expressed by elementary principals responding to the survey and further expanded upon in the interview portion of the study. High levels of agreement were noted when elementary principals rated survey item 42, “Families meet with the school principal prior to the beginning of the school year,” as a 5.26 and survey item 41, “Families meet with their child’s kindergarten teacher prior to the beginning of the school year” as a 5.11. This high level of agreement seems to relate to elementary principals’ shared

perceptions regarding transition activities like “kindergarten roundup.” When further exploring the level of agreement with current practices related to “Partnerships,” elementary principals rated survey item 54, “A variety of community stakeholders (agencies and support services) are included in the transition plan development” at 3.57 and survey item 57, “The Elementary School Principal hosts an open house for local early childhood staff to provide opportunities to become acquainted and to share information about their programs” as a 3.84. When coding qualitative responses from the survey, the researcher noted 35 challenges and/or barriers in the category of Partnerships and Collaboration including 18 related to “School to Home,” 13 related to “School to Private” and 4 related to “Staff to Staff.”

Rural and non-rural elementary principals shared the following perceptions regarding the importance of partnering with stakeholders to improve the effectiveness of transition activities and some of the challenges and barriers to establishing such partnerships:

With a partnership program with the Head Start, we have a smooth transition between Pre-K and Kindergarten. Continue what we are doing – parent meetings; opportunities for students to visit before Kindergarten; orientation activities, etc. (Rural Respondent)

I visit our Head Start Preschoolers’ parents to talk about the transition every spring. We also invite the Preschool classes to our campus where I provide a 30-minute tour. (Non-Rural Respondent)

A non-rural elementary principal shared the following challenge related to collaborating with private early childhood providers:

[Developing] an understanding, from the Pre-K teacher's perspective, on what kindergarten demands are and can look like (what it means to be successful) and collaboration between Pre-K and kindergarten teachers.

A rural elementary principal shared the following challenge:

Connecting the various preschools in the area with the curriculum and with our district expectations of where the children should be when they enter kindergarten.

The emphasis on importance of establishing relationships with parents and various early childhood providers was identified as being an important factor for all elementary principals. Where rural elementary principals generally identified positive relationships with the early childhood programs within their school community, those in non-rural settings indicated specific challenges related to establishing these relationships due to the size of their school community. Elementary principals shared that they understand the importance of partnerships and collaboration, though from their perception, there are often challenges that get in the way of accomplishing these.

A non-rural elementary principal shared,

Any time you have a private entity and you're working as a public and private it's a little bit different. It's harder to allow time commitments, creating time for teachers to get together, and administrators to get together, so I think that's the biggest thing, just the time. I think there are communication barriers. To be honest with you I can't name all of the different preschools in my town right now. I think there's just a lack of understanding and it hasn't been tackled yet.

Understanding the importance of developing "Partnerships" with various members of the school community is a powerful component to establishing effective Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs. As Dockett and Perry (2014) stated,

Many partnerships support effective transitions. Partnerships between educators and families recognize and respect the critical role of each in the lives of young children; partnerships with community confirm the importance of early childhood education within that community; partnerships with other professionals set the context for consistency and

continuity as children move from one educational setting to another; and partnerships between educators and children convey a sense of value and respect that promotes learning and development. (p. 33)

A non-rural elementary principal stated,

With information and education, I am beginning to have a deeper understanding of the impact on children without a Pre-K academic experience. I want to develop a plan to create more Pre-K opportunities for families to place students as well as increase the collaboration between the public school and PK facilities concerning kindergarten readiness.

Both rural and non-rural elementary principals indicated a similar average level of agreement within the items corresponding to the “*Partnerships*” category on the survey. Rural elementary principals rated this category at 4.59 and Non-Rural principals rated it a 4.48. They also shared similar perceptions related to the challenges and barriers they face and the goals they would like to implement regarding transition plans. The challenges identified were centered on alignment of pre-school expectations with those of the school (academic and behavioral), establishing partnerships (home to school and Pre-K to kindergarten) that prepare students for kindergarten, ensuring students who are not in the [school district] preschool program have the necessary skills to be successful in kindergarten and a “well-rounded” education.

A rural, Non-Title I elementary principal shared the following was a challenge to successful transitions, “Making the correct decisions on early intervention strategies and parental support/follow through on these strategies.”

A non-rural, Non-Title I elementary principal shared the following challenge, “[There is a] lack of collaboration between Pre-K and kindergarten teachers and a lack of communication to parents.”

When coding the goals elementary principals would like to achieve, the researcher noted the following consistencies between elementary principal responses: collaboration between (school and home, Pre-K and kindergarten staff, public schools and private providers, all stakeholders, and administration and staff), identifying the specific needs (academic and social) of students, and increasing parent involvement in the transition process. Of the 113 elementary principals responding to this survey item, 63 codes were created from 56 elementary principal responses and related to Partnerships (reference Appendix P) with 75% of these codes centered directly on the area of increasing collaboration between various stakeholders throughout the school community (staff, families, providers).

Elementary principals identified goals that were supported by literature as important aspects of the Pre-K to kindergarten transition process.

A rural elementary principal in a Title I school with Above Average Free and Reduced Lunch status shared the following goal,

All children are ready to succeed in kindergarten and there are little if any issues with the process of transition. Everyone is clear, concise and in agreement on what is expected [in the transition] and what is going to happen.

A non-rural, Title I elementary principal explained, “I want to make sure they [students and parents] know we [school staff] are here to work together as a team and will do whatever it takes to be successful with their child.”

The importance of establishing collaborative partnerships was further supported when a non-rural, Non-Title I elementary principal shared the following goal, “We

currently are trying to partner with families specifically during the summer prior to kindergarten enrollment. I would like to see this continue to evolve.”

Elementary principals have indicated a desire that all members of the transition team are engaged in collaborative relationships and are working together to ensure a successful Pre-K to kindergarten transition. As the literature supports, “The collaboration that characterizes these partnerships requires educators to acknowledge, trust and respect the knowledge of others; utilize open and reciprocal approaches to communication; and engage in shared decision-making as they work towards common goals” (Dockett & Perry, 2014, p. 34).

These findings align with the similar work of Dr. Brenda Hanthorn of Pennsylvania who found that “There are limited partnerships that have been developed with the local early childhood community” (2007, p. 103).

Recommendation #2: Organize Pre-K to kindergarten transition teams in all elementary schools, made up of a variety of school community stakeholders, whose purpose is to develop a transition plan aligned specifically with the needs of the school community. Establishing a Transition Team, made up of advocates for high-quality early childhood educational experiences, is important to the overall success of the transition plan and the outcomes of the Pre-K to kindergarten transition process. Instituting a formal transition team is a first step toward multiple opportunities for collaboration, sharing perspectives in a safe environment, improving the effectiveness of relationships between stakeholders, and for the team to grow together in their understanding of effective transition practices. Brown and Amwake (2005) stated, “When transition is

viewed as a process, this encourages thoughtful planning and collaboration between early childhood programs, elementary school programs, and other community agencies/organizations involved in children's transition into school" (p. 18). The end result is a collaborative effort, focused on the needs of the student and families who are engaged in the transition process.

Recommendation #3: Establish formal transition plans, which are designed to help the Pre-K to kindergarten Transition Team navigate the Pre-K to kindergarten transition process and engage stakeholders in the process. Investing time in the process of establishing a formal transition plan solidifies the importance of transitions and helps guide the Transition Team in defining roles, prioritizing processes, identifying and securing potential resources and developing family centered transition practices. Furthermore, the development of a formal transition plan supports the desired outcomes of successful transitions for children from Pre-K to kindergarten settings. Ramey & Ramey (1994) shared the following indicators as some of the most important when it comes to identifying successful transitions:

1. Children will like school and look forward to going to school.
2. Children will show steady growth in academic skills.
3. Parents will become actively involved in their children's education—at home, in school, and in the community.
4. Classroom environments will promote positive feelings for both teachers and children.
5. Teachers, staff members, and families will value each other.

6. Schools and programs will celebrate cultural diversity in their communities.
7. Developmentally appropriate practices will be visible within the classroom.
8. The community will show consistent investment in the education of children and will strive to increase available learning opportunities.

These suggested indicators are supported by the most current recommendations for transition processes (Docket & Perry, 2001, 2014; Pianta & Krafy-Sayre, 2003).

There is no one-size-fits-all model when it comes to Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans, as plans are most effective when they meet the needs of the individual child and family being served. Transition plans will vary to meet the needs of each child and family and therefore will not be consistent across all schools and school districts. A sample transition plan can be accessed through the Department of Health and Human Services website within the Transition to Kindergarten section. This resource is produced by the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) (2015) and is located at the following: <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/docs/transition-plan-example.docx>

Research Question 3: What Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs are in place in Nebraska public elementary schools?

Research Question 5: To what extent do transition programs impact the school readiness of students entering kindergarten?

Findings. When exploring the types of transition programs and the types of early childhood education programs currently in place in elementary schools and school communities in Nebraska, 81% of the 125 survey respondents indicated the presence of a

transition plan for children transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten. Survey data further identified a high level of perceptual agreement with the **Survey Item 24**, “Programs are in place to assist children transitioning to kindergarten in developing pro-social and respectful behaviors toward others.” Elementary principals rated this category an average of 5.15 on a 6-point Likert scale with 6 meaning “Strongly Agree.” Additionally, elementary principals average rating for **Survey Item 66**, “A transition plan has been developed and the Elementary School Principal supports implementation within the school,” was a 4.64.

Participants were asked to identify the types of early childhood programs in their school community and the 125 elementary principals responding to the survey, identified 293 early childhood programs in their school communities. Seventy-two percent (72%) of survey respondents indicated the presence of a “School-Based Pre-K Center”; 38% of the respondents indicated a “Head Start” program; 36% indicated the presence of “Home Child Care Centers”; 34% indicated the presence of a “For Profit Child Care Center” and 30% of respondents indicated the presence of a “For Profit Preschool/Nursery Center” in their school community.

The 113 survey respondents when providing information regarding transitions from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms 10 times mentioned Pre-K programming as a challenge or barrier to successful transitions (reference Appendix O). The majority of elementary principals who indicated challenges related to programming fell into Rural and Title I demographic subgroups. Specific examples of these challenges were: children coming from a wide variety of Pre-K background experiences (private daycare, 3 day a

week for half days, 4 day a week for half days, staying at home with mom and some with no experience). Elementary principals indicated students who were coming to school without a structured Pre-K experience are more likely to “struggle to catch up” to other students. These principals further stated that children attending programs, which were not “district supported Pre-K programs,” often entered school behind in both academic and social skill development. They further stated that it is challenging for these children to “catch up.”

A non-rural, Title I elementary principal shared the following when discussing challenges related to Pre-K Programming,

Often students who come from other programs (not from our district Pre-K program) enter elementary with a lack of academic and social skills. I feel as though our district Pre-K program does a nice job preparing young students for Kindergarten.

A rural, Title I elementary principal explained, “Those [children] who have not attended the preschool setting at our school or have not attended any preschool struggle to catch up where our phonics program is concerned. This carries over into K-2 classroom instruction.” Another rural elementary principal indicated challenges related to Pre-K programming when they said, “The ones [children] who enroll in kindergarten who were NOT at our preschool have a wide variety of ability depending on what they were exposed to during early years.”

When coding the goals elementary principals would like to achieve, the researcher noted the majority of survey respondents who indicated a desire to implement goals related to Pre-K programming were from rural and Title I demographic subgroups. The researcher also noted consistencies between elementary principal desired goals: more

opportunities to focus on routines, a greater focus on family needs during the transition and creating an environment that is more focused on academics. These specific elements were mentioned 17 times (reference Appendix P). Rural and non-rural elementary principals identified goals related to improving the impact of Pre-K programming in their schools that went beyond Kindergarten Round-Up.

A rural, Title I elementary principal explained,

In addition to Kindergarten Round-Up, I would like to have at least a week of half day classes at the beginning of the year for kindergarten students to learn rules and routines and wait for academic instruction until the second week.

Another rural, Title I elementary principal stated, “Pre-K needs to be preparing the students specifically for success in kindergarten (academically and socially). I would like to see our Pre-K students entering kindergarten ready both academically and socially to handle the increased rigor of kindergarten.”

There are a wide variety of early childhood education programs in existence across the state of Nebraska, as surveyed elementary principals indicated an average of more than two types of early childhood program serving children in their school community. Elementary principals further indicated the importance of early childhood transition plans in creating consistent transition experiences for children moving from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms. The large number of early childhood providers all having different expectations was seen predominately as a challenge and/or barrier by elementary principals responding to the survey. Those elementary principals responding to the survey, shared their perceptions related to the benefits of “school-based” programs as well as challenges related to children transitioning from “other” programs:

Elementary principal perceptions (benefits):

Since our Pre-K is in the same building as the K-1 students, our transition from Pre-K to Kindergarten is fairly seamless with the students fully aware of expectations and the surroundings. (Rural Respondent)

Regarding our district Pre-K program, I feel that students entering Kindergarten come in adequately prepared. As far as other programs, our goals include early literacy skills and implementing positive behavioral support strategies. These goals are shared with local daycare/preschool centers and during our Kindergarten orientation. (Non-Rural Respondent)

Elementary principal perceptions (challenges):

Not having a district preschool makes the issue of equality quite telling. We are working hard to develop a system that partners with our preschools using Step up to Quality to help increase the quality of each program but our data shows quite a discrepancy between the academic performance of students from each private provider. (Non-Rural Respondent)

A challenge that comes to mind immediately is that often students who come from other programs (not from our district Pre-K program) enter elementary with a lack of academic and social skills. I feel as though our district Pre-K program does a nice job preparing young students for Kindergarten. (Non-Rural Respondent)

Those [children] who have not attended the preschool setting at our school or have not attended any preschool struggle to catch up where our phonics program is concerned, since this is started in preschool and carries over to K-2 classroom instruction. (Rural Respondent)

Recommendation #4: Improve the knowledge base of elementary principals to implement effective transition practices through educational administration degree coursework. Currently, many of the colleges in the state of Nebraska do not require graduate students seeking an elementary administrative endorsement to engage in coursework focused on early childhood education content. Requiring aspiring elementary principals to engage in scholarly work related to implementing effective Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans will increase their knowledge base, provide them with

resources to develop effective transition plans, and help develop the skills necessary to engage members of their school community as collaborative partners in the process. This expanded knowledge base will better equip elementary principals to establish relationships and partnerships with various early childhood providers within their school community and develop effective practices to improve the transition process for all children and families transitioning to their school.

Recommendation #5: Improve the knowledge base of early childhood education providers and expand opportunities for Pre-K transition teams to meet with early childhood community providers of early childhood educational opportunities.

Improving the knowledge base of early childhood education providers by increasing opportunities to meet with local school districts or state department of education early childhood professional development specialists will enhance the Pre-K to kindergarten transition process for children and families. These meetings and professional development sessions should focus on opening lines of communication between the entities, collaborating to develop effective transition plans and processes that have shown to be effective and improving the understanding of “high-quality” early childhood education experiences.

Research Question 6: To what extent do Nebraska public school elementary principals believe financial, facility or human resources impact Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs in Nebraska schools?

Findings: Financial, Facility and Human Resources (Challenges/Barriers and Goals). Of the 113 rural and non-rural elementary principals responding to the survey, a

challenge and/or barrier for children transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms 15 times mentioned Financial, Facility and/or Human Resource challenges. Examples of elementary principal responses regarding the positive and negative impact of financial, facility and human resources on the effective transition for children from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms are outlined below. Specific examples of these resource challenges and barriers centered primarily on students not attending Pre-K programs due to a lack of available spots in the district program, parent's not being able to afford a specific program, or transportation (reference Appendix O).

A rural, Title I elementary principal shared the following challenge, "Not serving all the students that will enter kindergarten because parents can't afford preschool or have transportation" another rural, Title I elementary principal explained, "There are not enough open slots for all children of preschool age to attend our current preschool. Grant and budget limitations impact the availability of a school-based preschool." A non-rural, Title I elementary principal further shared, "Availability for ALL students to attend a Pre-K learning center with an academic focus on K readiness." One specific challenge for rural elementary principals was captured in the following statement, "We are a small rural community. There are not a lot of agencies or support services in our area. We do not have community-wide professional development for Pre-K staff. There is simply not enough total staff." While the impact of limited support agency resources was not a focus of this study, it merits future consideration for study.

Both rural and non-rural elementary principals indicated the lack of a school district supported Pre-K program as having a negative impact on the transition of children

from a Pre-K setting to the kindergarten classroom. This is further supported through elementary principals identifying “budget limitations” to opening a school based preschool and the need to “increase opportunities” for children to gain experiences through access to Pre-K programs. When asked their level of agreement with **Survey Item 60**, “The Elementary School Principal allocates funds designated for transition practices,” elementary principals rated this category an average of 4.08 on a 6-point Likert scale with 6 meaning “Strongly Agree.” It cannot be determined from this study what these funds are used for or how these funds are used to support transition practices within the school setting. It also cannot be determined to what extent elementary principals have control in establishing their annual budget or whether they perceive this area is adequately funded.

Although not specifically asked to provide positive examples of Financial, Facility or Human Resources Impact in the survey, elementary principals indicated the positive impact of such resources. The following statements provide examples of positive impact:

Our district preschool is in the same facility as the kindergarten. The kids who attend our program are very familiar with where things are and how they work. We offer summer camps for children, including Pre-K kids. Some of the children who don't attend our district preschool do attend summer camp so they become familiar with the facility. (Rural Respondent)

Another rural elementary principal stated, “Our Pre-K staff and kindergarten staff work together in PLC's every week to help coordinate between Pre-K and kindergarten.”

A non-rural elementary principal noted, “Our kindergarten team will meet with the Head Start teachers as well as communicate with other public and private preschool

providers. Our in-house, public preschool teacher collaborates with our kindergarten team on a weekly basis through our PLC process.”

When coding goals elementary principals would like to achieve related to Financial, Facility and Human Resources, the researcher noted nine elementary principals indicated a desire to work toward the following goals: adding more opportunities for “school based” preschools and increasing opportunities for “all” community children to attend preschool. Three respondents indicated a desire of providing an opportunity for “all” children to have access to a Pre-K program.

A rural, Title I elementary principal shared the following goal, “ALL students in the community receive preschool daily” which was further supported by a non-rural, Non-Title I elementary principal, “Increase opportunities for more students to attend [preschool] so we can have more students with preschool experience to transition to kindergarten classrooms.”

The study did not ask survey or interview respondents if they desired to support a school-based preschool in their current school. The researcher feels this could be addressed in a future study, as the importance of school-based preschools was also specifically mentioned by 4 of the 8 interview respondents. This study also did not address the level of perceived impact for survey respondents regarding each type of resource and the researcher feels further information could be collected from elementary principals regarding their perceptions of the degree of impact Financial, Facility and Human Resources play in the transition process.

Recommendation #6: Expand Pre-K services. This recommendation aligns with suggestions made by Dr. Jacqueline Florendo in her 2012 doctoral study titled, “Nebraska Public School Administrators’ Perceptions of Preschool Education. In her study, one of Dr. Florendo’s recommendations was to,

Expand Pre-K funding so all eligible children are provided services, with the same allocations that are a part of K-12th grade, such as transportation, so all children can participate. . . . As a part of this, look at the option of expanding Birth – 3 year old programs

focusing on education for both parent and private early childhood providers. An increase in grant funding opportunities may provide an avenue for establishing early childhood education programs designed to promote school readiness and foster successful transitions for children from Pre-K to kindergarten. Additional resources could be used to facilitate the process of aligning curriculum between Pre-K and kindergarten programs.

Research Question 7: How do the perceptions and expectations of elementary principals impact their role in the successful transition of Pre-K children to kindergarten?

Ninety-two of the 113 elementary principals responding to the open-ended survey items (Survey Item 14 and 15) identified 113 challenges and/or barriers which hindered the implementation of a successful transition plan. Twenty-one (21) elementary principals indicated, at this time, they have experienced no challenges and/or barriers in helping children make successful transitions between Pre-K and kindergarten classrooms. The 113 identified challenges were coded and organized into the following 5 themes:

(a) School Readiness (Academic and Social); (b) Partnerships and Collaboration;

(c) Pre-K Programming; (d) Financial, Facility and Human Resources; and

(e) Communication. The frequency of the most notable challenges and/or barriers mentioned in the survey's qualitative responses have been included and were grouped into the following themes: School Readiness (46), Partnership and Collaboration (35), Facility, Financial and Human Resources (15), Pre-K Programming (10), and Communication (7). Reference Appendix O for a specific breakdown of codes.

These five themes aligned with the five themes that emerged from the coded responses of the eight elementary principals who were interviewed in Phase II of the study. As elementary principals' perceptions and expectations for Partnerships and Collaboration, Pre-K Programming and Financial, Facility and Human Resources have been discussed previously; the researcher will address perceptions and expectations related to School Readiness (Academic and Social) and Communication in this section.

Finding: School Readiness (Challenges/Barriers and Goals). The 113 survey respondents when providing information regarding transitions from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms 46 times mentioned School Readiness (Academic or Social) as a challenge or barrier to successful transitions (reference Appendix O). Challenges noted were primarily related to students not having "foundational skills" (coming at different levels of preparedness, potty trained, understanding routines and procedures, behavior, maturity) and adjusting to a full-day schedule, which is more centered on academics.

A rural, Title I elementary principal stated the biggest challenge was, "[Children] being prepared. Starting kindergarten with the tools needed to be successful in school." Another rural, Title I principal shared the following challenges, "Maturity and readiness for academics."

A non-rural, Title I elementary principal indicated the importance of stamina, “A common issue is teaching students the routines and procedures necessary to make progress as an academic student. Early in the year students have trouble with the stamina necessary to engage in learning for an entire school day.” A non-rural, Non-Title I elementary principal explained that “Maturity, skills of independence, and social skills with other students” was a challenge impacting successful transitions.

When coding the goals elementary principals would like to achieve, the researcher noted the following consistencies between elementary principal responses: academic and behavioral readiness, expectations of school (routines/procedures), and ensuring children are “ready” for kindergarten and the transition will have “success.” Elementary principals responding to this item mentioned incorporating readiness goals (academic, behavior, and expectations/routines), 26 times (reference Appendix P). Elementary principals expressed a desire to increase the “success” of their students, as a result of readiness.

A rural, Title I elementary principal explained, “Our goal is to have students acclimated in the schools cultural happenings, including academic and behavioral expectations.” A rural, Non-Title I elementary principal explained,

I would like to see our Pre-K students entering kindergarten ready both academically and socially to handle the increased rigors of Kindergarten. As new standards are introduced, and more is expected of our lower elementary, more is expected of our kindergarten.

A non-rural, Title I elementary principal stated,

Regarding our district Pre-K program, I feel that students entering Kindergarten come in adequately prepared. As far as other programs, our goals include early literacy skills and implementing positive behavioral support strategies. These

goals are shared with local daycare/preschool centers and during our Kindergarten orientation.

The findings from this study converge with findings presented by Dr. Brenda Hanthorn, who completed a similar study in Pennsylvania. Dr. Hanthorn explained,

This challenge or barrier [school readiness] is also the rationale for developing and implementing an effective kindergarten transition plan that partners with the local early childhood community and provides information about expectations to families. As families and early childhood settings more closely align experiences and expectations to that of the public elementary school, a more successful transition will be achieved for the students.

Findings: Communication (Challenges/Barriers and Goals). The 113 survey respondents when providing information regarding transitions from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms 7 times mentioned Communication (specifically Language Barriers) as a challenge or barrier as a to successful transitions (reference Appendix O). These 7 responses fell in the upper ranges (Approximate Average and Above Average) of the Free and Reduced Lunch Status demographic category. There were 4 rural schools and 3 non-rural schools represented by these principals. Six (6) of the schools were Title I schools with 1 being a Non-Title I school. When interviewing 8 purposefully selected elementary principals in Phase II of the study, the researcher noted the identification of more specific challenges regarding communication, specifically between school, home and various community stakeholders. One interviewed, non-rural principal did mention Language Barriers as a challenge related to successful transitions.

A rural elementary principal explained the following regarding school to home communication, “I would like to get all students that will attend my kindergarten to visit and meet the teacher. We have kindergarten registration, but not all students show up

and there are student we don't even know about [that show up]." Another rural elementary principal stated the need for increased communication between school, home and private providers, "I would like to make sure we have a true picture of a student's social, behavioral and academic needs and talents as they transition from Preschool to kindergarten."

The need to increase communication between staff members (within school and between school and private providers) was also identified by rural and non-rural elementary principals. A non-rural elementary principal explained, "I would like to see a way for the Pre-K teachers and kindergarten teachers to have conversations that will lead to impactful instruction in kindergarten. The preschool perspective is often not indicative of the perspective the kindergarten teachers have." This sentiment was further supported by a rural elementary principal who indicated a desire for, "Good communication between the Pre-K teacher and the kindergarten teacher so there's a smooth transition for the students. The kindergarten teacher needs to know the strengths and weaknesses of each student."

Understanding the needs of the child and the family is a critical component to establishing effective transition plans. One of the four policy suggestions to improve Pre-K to kindergarten transition processes for children and families made by Pianta and Cox (2002, p. 3) stated the need to, "Strengthen bonds between preschools and elementary schools." The researcher would add the importance of extending the importance of developing these bonds between the elementary school and families as well. Centering discussion on curriculum, consistent expectations between Pre-K and

kindergarten programs as well as the experiences and expectations for children and families actively participating in the transition process is essential to the success of the transition plan.

When coding goals elementary principals would like to achieve, the researcher noted the following consistencies between elementary principal responses: increasing communication between school and home and increasing communication between staff (Pre-K and kindergarten teachers). Of the 22 elementary principals who indicated this was a goal they would like to achieve, 17 indicated the desire to improve the communication between school and home, while 5 indicated the importance of increasing communication between staff (Pre-K and kindergarten). This convergent data indicates the importance of continuing to establish open lines of communication between all stakeholders as an essential component of the transition process.

Recommendation #7: Develop formal opportunities in both rural and non-rural school districts for early childhood service providers to meet with public school transition teams, discuss effective transition processes and begin developing partnerships to support children and families during the transition process. The importance of developing partnerships and opportunities for collaboration should not be overlooked in the process of establishing effective transition processes. As outlined in “*Steps to Kindergarten Transition. A Guide to a Successful Transition to Kindergarten*”, Riley & Feeney stated,

Developing systematic transition strategies must become a common goal of communities as a way of supporting children and families. Collaboration between the home or preschool, the elementary school, and the community is a way to

enhance the children's development while supporting and empowering the family in the process. (2004, p. 5)

Establishing these opportunities for communication will strengthen the relationships between school and home and reinforce the elements of an effective transition plan.

Future Studies

Research studies have clearly demonstrated the need for a cohesive and systematic approach to transitions for children from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms (Dockett & Perry, 2001, 2014; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Pianta & Cox, 2002; Pianta et al., 2001). The effectiveness of the transition process for young learners hinges on the systems, processes, perceptions and expectations established and upheld by the adults who are involved in the process.

Additional research focused on areas of significant differences between demographic subgroups within this study could be explored in greater detail and depth. For instance, the differences between rural or non-rural elementary perceptions in "*Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships*"; the differences between Title I or Non-Title I perceptions in the areas of "*Secure, Respectful and Reciprocal Relationships*," "*Partnerships*," "*High Expectations and Equity*," and "*Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice*;" and the differences between Above Average or Below Average Free and Reduced Lunch Status in the areas of "*Partnerships*," "*High Expectations and Equity*," and "*Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice*" could be explored in greater depth. A qualitative study utilizing extended interviews may allow the researcher to further define the impact of specific challenges and/or barriers between

each demographic category or other factors that may be related to the differences between these subgroups.

A further study could be conducted with a focus on the potential differences in the perceptions and expectations of public elementary principals from schools that have a school district-funded preschool and those who do not have a district-funded program. A large number of elementary principals (72%) participating in this study indicated their school included a district-funded preschool. Replicating this study with an equal representation of both demographic categories (public school with a preschool and public school without a preschool) could help determine if perceptions and expectations change between subgroup.

A consistent theme that emerged from this study was the presence of challenges and barriers inhibiting the implementation of effective and successful transition plans. A study focused on determining to what extent and at what level each challenge and/or barrier impacts the implementation of a successful transition plan could help identify those challenges and determine appropriate courses of action to address these challenges. These identified challenges and/or barriers could be further disaggregated by demographic categories (Rural vs. Non-Rural, Title I vs. Non-Title I, or Free and Reduced Lunch Status).

This study did not ask participants to identify the percentage of English Language Learners within their school district and therefore was not disaggregated to include this demographic category. Further research could be conducted in school districts or schools with high levels of (ELL) populations to examine the perceptions and expectations of

implementing successful transition programs. A comparative study between schools with high levels and low levels of (ELL) population could add to the research of understanding the impact communication plays as a challenge and/or barrier to implementing successful transition plans.

An additional study to better understand to what extent elementary principals feel prepared to implement research-based Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans could provide institutes of higher education and state departments of education with a baseline for what elementary principals feel is important to know and what supports are necessary to implement these transition plans. A better understanding for which transition strategies elementary principals feel prepared to implement and those they feel less prepared to implement could provide important information regarding where to place emphasis regarding the development of elementary principal preparatory coursework and professional development opportunities.

Conclusion

There is no one-size-fits-all model when it comes to Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans, as plans are most effective when they meet the needs of the individual child and family being served. Transition plans will vary to meet the needs of each child and family and therefore will not be consistent across all schools and school districts. While there are numerous suggestions for effective transition plans, three of the better-known sets of transition guidelines have been created by Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003), Dockett and Perry (2001) and most recently Dockett and Perry (2014).

The Nebraska Department of Education (2015b) unveiled an accountability system titled, Accountability of Quality Education System for Today and Tomorrow: A QuESTT for Nebraska! (AQuESTT). This accountability system is founded on 6 tenets: Positive Partnerships, Relationships & Student Success; Transitions, Educational Opportunities and Access, College and Career Ready, Assessment and finally Educator Effectiveness. Three of the tenets specifically outlined in AQuESTT linked directly to this study (Positive Partnerships, Relationships & Student Success, Transitions, and Educational Opportunities and Access). This study supported that to effectively instill these three tenets within the day-to-day operations of school, school leaders must have the knowledge base necessary to develop Positive Partnerships, manage Transition processes and increase Educational Opportunities and Access. This will happen only with a concerted effort to provide the required systems.

The results gleaned from this study show that elementary principals understand the importance of Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans and the role positive relationships play in preparing children and families for a successful school experience. Moving forward, it is essential that policies and practices are in place to support elementary principals throughout this process. Early Childhood researchers Dr. Robert Pianta and Dr. Martha Cox (2002) stated,

Good policy and good practice have to build on a solid conceptual foundation that recognizes that young children's success in school is intertwined with their experiences in multiple settings: family, peer group, preschool, and school and that this transition period is a critical time for building partnerships between schools and families that can support children's progress. (p. 3)

The development of sound transition policies and practices are fundamental to the success of a transition program, the success of the children and families engaged in the process and place the focus where it should be, on the learner and the learner's family.

Transition to school is taken to be a dynamic process of continuity and change as children move into the first year of school. The process of transition occurs over time, beginning well before children start school and extending to the point where children and families feel a sense of belonging at school and when educators recognize this sense of belonging. (Dockett & Perry, 2014, p. 2)

The role of the elementary principal in the process of developing positive partnerships and executing successful transition practices for children from Pre-K to kindergarten is an essential one.

Principals know the importance of high-quality, effective early learning in creating the foundation for learning that happens in later grades. They also know the ramifications that occur if children are not fully prepared for kindergarten or are not on reading grade level by grade three. (NAESP, 2014, p. 6)

“Principals are increasingly expected to lead their schools within a framework of collaboration and shared decision making with teachers and other staff members” (NAESP, 2013, p. 2). Elementary principals must be equipped with the skills to develop high-impact, collaborative partnerships with community stakeholders throughout the transition process. The principal is crucial in guiding the process of establishing the indicators of effective transition plans for children and families moving from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms.

One central factor to a student's successes when transitioning from a Pre-K to kindergarten setting is their “readiness to learn.” “Stakeholders at the local, state and federal levels agree that a child's future academic success is dependent on being ready to learn and participate in a successful kindergarten experience” (Ackerman & Barnett,

2005, p. 1). Much of school readiness can be attributed to a child's access to high-quality early childhood programming. Providing the necessary resources for all children to develop the requisite foundational skills to be successful in the transition from Pre-K to kindergarten, will equip them now and for years to come. The financial return on investment (ROI) for early childhood education has been well-documented in the High/Scope Perry, Abecedarian and Chicago Longitudinal studies and varies from \$10 to \$17 saved over time per \$1 invested. Economist James J. Heckman (n.d.) shared,

The highest rate of return in early childhood development comes from investing as early as possible, from birth through age five, in disadvantaged families. Starting at age three or four is too little too late, as it fails to recognize that skills beget skills in a complementary and dynamic way. Efforts should focus on the first years for the greatest efficiency and effectiveness. The best investment is in quality early childhood development from birth to five for disadvantaged children and their families. (p. 1)

This study has shown the need to establish both policy and practice focused on preparing elementary principal leaders to lead collaborative processes in instituting research based transition plans for children and families moving from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms. This study has further shown elementary principals view early childhood education opportunities as critical to the future success a student experiences in kindergarten. Now is the time to invest in the process, invest in the knowledge base of elementary principals, invest in high-quality early childhood experiences for all children and their families, and invest in the future of all Nebraska children.

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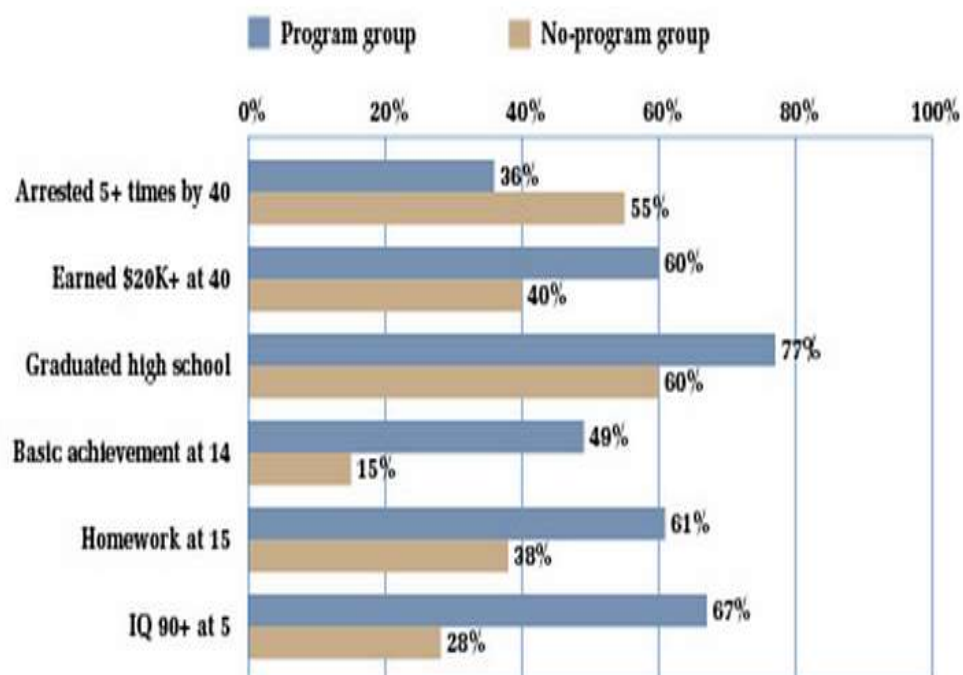
Retrieved on August 17, 2015, from

<http://www.wrightslaw.com/info/child.find.mandate.htm>

Appendix A

Major Findings: High/Scope Perry Preschool Study at 40

Figure 1
Major Findings: High/Scope Perry Preschool Study at 40

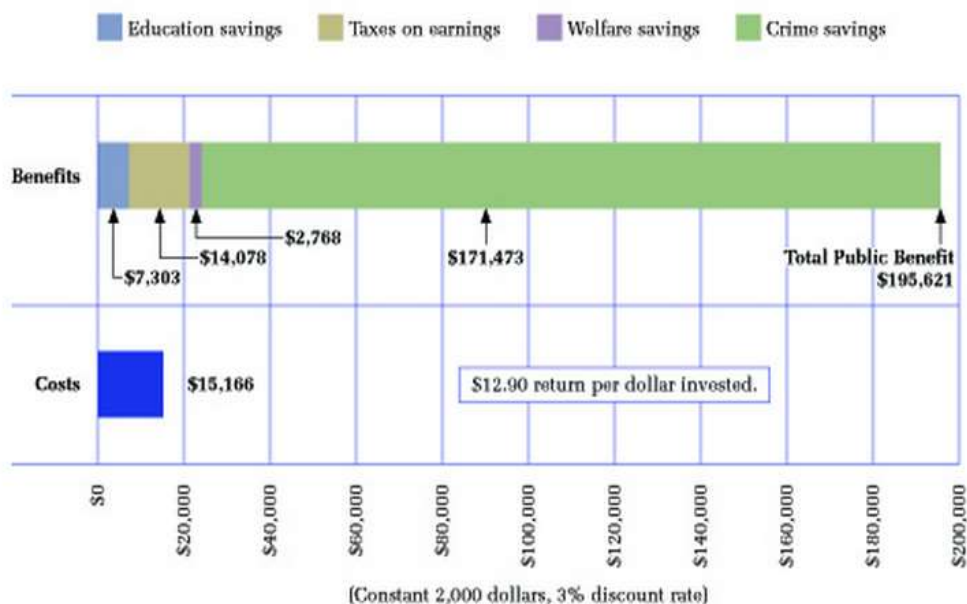


From “Major Findings of the HighScope Perry Preschool Study,” by L. J. Schweinhart, J. Montie, Z. Xiang, W. S. Barnett, C. R. Belfield, & M. Nores, 2005, in *Lifetime Effects: The HighScope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40*, Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press, p. xv. © 2005 HighScope Educational Research Foundation. Used with permission. Retrieved on 17 August 2015, from: <http://www.highscope.org/content.asp?contentid=219>

Appendix B

High/Scope Perry Program Public Costs and Benefits

Figure 2
High/Scope Perry Preschool Program Public Costs and Benefits



From “Major Findings of the HighScope Perry Preschool Study,” by L. J. Schweinhart, J. Montie, Z. Xiang, W. S. Barnett, C. R. Belfield, & M. Nores, 2005, in *Lifetime Effects: The HighScope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40*, Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press, p. xv. © 2005 HighScope Educational Research Foundation. Used with permission. Retrieved on 17 August 2015, from: <http://www.highscope.org/content.asp?contentid=219>

Appendix C

Survey Consent Email

Dear Elementary School Principal,

I am a doctoral student in the Educational Administration Department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln conducting an independent, research study. The purpose of this study is to examine Nebraska public school elementary principals personal experiences with and beliefs about early childhood education programs, particularly their role in the transition of students from Pre-K to Kindergarten. You will be asked to detail your current experiences and future views relating to early childhood education transition programs. The study will provide information related to the factors that influence the role of elementary principals in the successful transition of Pre-K children to kindergarten. Your participation is voluntary and confidential.

Nebraska public school administrators, specifically all elementary principals in the state of Nebraska are asked to complete the survey. In order to provide a large enough sample size to do statistical analysis of sub-populations, this survey will be administered to all elementary school principals in the state.

Some school districts are currently beginning the process of collaborating with various community agencies and early childhood programs to provide for successful transitions from the Pre-K education setting to a Kindergarten classroom. To better explore these collaborative partnerships and the role and perception of the educational leader in the process, I am surveying elementary principals.

The survey will be administered online and should take no longer than 12-15 minutes to complete. The survey will consist of seven (7) demographic questions and sixty-three (63) survey questions. I understand educators are very busy and I have made every effort to minimize the time needed to take the survey. You are free to ask any questions before agreeing to participate in or during the study. You may call the investigator (myself) at any time or email your specific questions. My contact information is listed within this letter.

Additionally, a small select sample of elementary principals will be asked to participate in a follow up interview based on size of schools in order to ensure there is an equal portion of rural and non-rural administrators included. If you are interested in being contacted, please include your contact information within the survey. Selected principals will be contacted to participate in a follow up interview process.

There are no known risks associated with this research. The identity of the districts and your participation in this research is completely voluntary and the information is confidential. All data gathered through this study will be reported in an aggregated format that prevents identification of individuals or school districts. You are free to decide not to participate in this study. You can withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researcher, your school district, or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Your

decision will not result in any loss to which your district is otherwise entitled. There is no compensation associated with participation in this survey.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please contact me, Josh Snyder, at (402) 350-0163 or JoshLSnyder@gmail.com or Dr. Jody Isernhagen (secondary investigator), at (402)-472-1088 or jisernhagen3@unl.edu. In addition, if you have any questions or concerns about being in the research, please contact the UNL Research Compliance Services office at 402-472-6965 or irb@unl.edu. Thank you in advance for your assistance with this study.

Sincerely,
Josh Snyder
Josh Snyder, Principal Investigator

Name and Contact information of investigator:
Josh Snyder; JoshLSnyder@gmail.com
Home: (402) 350-0163
Advisor: Dr. Jody Isernhagen
University of Nebraska Educational Administration Department UNL

Upon clicking the survey link below, you will be prompted with an option for consent. This will serve as your electronic signature and signals that you are voluntarily agreeing to participate in this research.

Thank you!

Appendix D

Rural & Non-Rural Nebraska Elementary Principals' Survey (Pre-K to Kindergarten Transitions)

Rural & Non-Rural Nebraska Elementary Principals' Survey (Pre-K to Kindergarten Transitions)

Research Purpose: The purpose of the survey is to gather data to determine rural and non-rural elementary principal perceptions of Pre-K education and your role in the successful transition of Pre-K students to kindergarten. The study will provide information related to the factors that influence your role, as elementary principal, in the successful transition of preschool students to kindergarten.

Instructions: For questions 1-7, please provide the following demographic information by selecting the appropriate response or answering each question appropriately.

Elementary Principal Data Information

1. Gender
 - a. Male
 - b. Female

2. Total years in present role
(Open Ended)

3. Total years in elementary teaching role
(Open Ended)

4. What grade level(s) have you taught?
 - Pre-K _____
 - Kindergarten _____
 - 1st grade _____
 - 2nd grade _____
 - 3rd grade _____
 - 4th grade _____
 - 5th grade _____
 - Other (Middle School and above) _____

5. Do you hold an Elementary Education Certificate?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

6. Do you hold an Early Childhood Education Certificate?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

7. Please indicate the number of early childhood courses, conferences or other pertinent training sessions you've attended. Indicate the number of applicable training, coursework and/or conferences.
(Open ended – add a number)

Please provide examples of each type of early childhood professional development you've received.
(Open ended – list)

Instructions: For questions 8-15, please respond according to your school or district.
School Data Information

8. Please indicate the Free/Reduced Lunch Rate at your SCHOOL based on Nebraska's average as documented in the 2014-2015 Nebraska State of the School's Report:
(Open Ended)
9. What is your DISTRICT's student population for the 2015-2016 school year?
(Open Ended)
10. Is your school a Title I school?
a. Title I School b. Non-Title I School
11. Please indicate all types of early childhood programs that serve your student population by placing an "x" behind each that apply:
Head Start _____
Educare _____
School Based Pre-K Center _____
Other Non-Profit Center _____
For Profit Preschool/Nursery School _____
For Profit Child Care Center _____
Other For Profit _____
Home Child Care Center _____
Other (Open Ended)
12. How many kindergarten students, if any, are typically retained at the end of a school year in your school?
(Open Ended)
13. Does your school implement a transition plan for children transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten?
a. Yes b. No

14. What challenges and barriers have you encountered in helping Pre-K children make successful transitions to kindergarten in your school district? (Open Ended)
15. What goals, related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition activities, would you like to achieve as elementary principal? (Open Ended)

The following activities relate to helping children make the transition into kindergarten. For each activity, indicate to what extent you or your school has provided or will provide this activity during this school year with current Pre-K children. Please check the appropriate box to indicate your level of agreement with each statement. In the boxes marked "other," please add any additional programs that you provide in each area.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Transition Activities focused on the Children						
16. Preschool children have the opportunity to visit a kindergarten classroom.						
17. Preschool children have the opportunity to visit their assignment kindergarten classroom (the classroom they will attend).						
18. Children receive a home visit from their kindergarten teacher prior to the beginning of the school year.						
19. Children have an opportunity for a bus ride experience prior to the first day of school.						
20. Children receive a letter from the teacher welcoming them to kindergarten.						
21. Prospective kindergarten students have the opportunity to meet with current kindergarten students to share experiences.						
22. A culture of high expectations has been developed for ALL children transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms.						
23. Communication between all stakeholders in the Pre-K to kindergarten transition process occurs and high-expectations for ALL children are discussed.						
24. Programs are in place to assist children transitioning to kindergarten in developing pro-social and respectful behaviors towards others.						
Other:						
Transition Activities focused on the Pre-K and Kindergarten Staff						
25. Preschool teachers are invited to visit a kindergarten classroom.						
26. Preschool and kindergarten teachers work together to implement a formal plan for effective transitions.						

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
27. Staff members (Preschool & Kindergarten) demonstrate respect for each other and there is an established sense of acceptance of each other's professional roles.						
28. Kindergarten teachers are invited to visit a preschool class.						
29. Release time is provided for preschool teachers to visit with kindergarten students prior to the beginning of school.						
30. Kindergarten teachers design experiences to stimulate learning in all areas – physical, social, emotional, and intellectual.						
31. Curriculum among sending programs and school programs are compared for similarities.						
32. Professional development about transition is planned for kindergarten teachers.						
33. Formal opportunities are planned for preschool and kindergarten teachers to communicate about expectations, curriculum, and assessment.						
34. Formal opportunities are planned for preschool and kindergarten teachers to communicate about individual children.						
35. Kindergarten teachers receive preschool assessment information about individual children.						
Other:						
Transition Activities focused on the Children's Families						
36. Families meet with the school nurse prior to the child entering school.						
37. Families are invited to attend sessions related to school readiness.						
38. Families receive printed materials about the kindergarten program or curriculum.						
39. Families have the opportunity to attend a Kindergarten Orientation Session in the spring.						
40. Families meet with a kindergarten teacher (not necessarily their child's teacher) prior to the beginning of the school year.						
41. Families meet with their child's kindergarten teacher prior to the beginning of the school year.						
42. Families meet with the school principal prior to the beginning of the school year.						
43. Families have the opportunity to tour the school.						

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
44. Families receive correspondence from their child's teacher prior to the beginning of the school year.						
45. Families are invited to attend a Kindergarten Orientation/Curriculum meeting in the fall prior to the beginning of the school year.						
46. Families are encouraged to volunteer in the kindergarten classroom.						
47. Families are invited to attend "Back to School" meetings in the fall.						
48. Transition activities are offered at various times of the day and days of the week.						
49. Families are included within the process of establishing high expectations for their child.						
50. Families are included in the development of the official transition plan.						
51. Family members are active participants in developing a transition plan that values diversity.						
Other:						
Transition Activities focused on the Children's Communities						
52. Public school personnel participate in community forums on kindergarten transitioning.						
53. Public school personnel participate in community-wide professional development with Pre-K staff.						
54. A variety of community stakeholders (agencies and support services) are included in the transition plan development.						
Other:						
Transition Activities focused on the School Leadership						
55. The Elementary School Principal participates with the Early Childhood Community and school personnel to implement a formal plan for effective transitions.						
56. The Elementary School Principal includes formal family input into the development of a formal transition plan.						
57. The Elementary School Principal hosts an open house for local early childhood staff to provide opportunities to become acquainted and to share information about their programs.						
58. The Elementary School Principal participates with the early childhood community in each other's policy advisory committees.						

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
59. The Elementary School Principal provides release time for school personnel to visit local early childhood centers to meet with students and staff.						
60. The Elementary School Principal allocates funds designated for transition practices.						
61. The Elementary School Principal establishes a formal process for the transfer of specific records to the school while respecting parental rights to privacy.						
62. The Elementary School Principal utilizes information about children's development for class placement.						
63. The Elementary School Principal utilizes information about friendship groups for class placement of students.						
64. The Elementary School Principal utilizes information gained from kindergarten screening for class placement of students.						
65. The Elementary School Principal leads kindergarten programs to provide for a wider range of developmental interests and abilities than the chronological age suggests.						
66. A transition plan has been developed and the Elementary School Principal supports implementation within the school.						
67. The Elementary School Principal leads the annual evaluation of the transition plan and revision if necessary.						
68. The transition plan is available to the public.						
69. The transition plan is available on your website. If yes, please include the website address:						
70. The Elementary School Principal secures funding and allocates resources to support the transition plan within the school.						
Other:						

Selected respondents may be contacted for a follow-up interview. If you would be willing to participate, please complete your contact information:

Name:

School District:

Elementary School:

School Address:

School Phone Number:

Email Address:

Hanthorn, B. L. (2007). *An examination of effective kindergarten transition practices and the perceptions of public elementary school principals* (Doctoral dissertation). *Used with Permission*. Retrieved on 4 August 2015, from ProQuest (3255640).

Survey Questionnaire Item Abstract Table/Matrix

Variable: Research Questions	Question(s) on Survey	Question(s) on Interview
Research question #1: What is the background and experience of the principal related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs, training and professional development?	#2-7 & #7 “Open-Ended”	#1-3, #6 (P)
Research question #2: Are there differences in elementary principals’ perceptions for Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans, knowledge of research, and availability of resources between: population categories, districts with higher and lower numbers of free and reduced lunch, rural and non-rural districts, Title I and Non-Title I districts	#8-10, #16-70	#1-6 (P)
Research question #3: What Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs are in place in Nebraska public schools?	#13, 24, 66, 67, 68, 69	#1 (P)
Research question #4: To what extent do the current Pre-K to kindergarten transition practices in Nebraska public elementary schools align with the work done by Dockett and Perry (2014)?	#16-70	#2 & #3 (P)
Research question #5: To what extent do transition programs impact the school readiness of students entering kindergarten?	#12, 14, 15-19, 22-23, 31, 37	#2, 5, 6 (P)
Research question #6: To what extent do Nebraska public school elementary schools principals believe financial, facility or human resources impact Pre-K transition programs in Nebraska schools?	#25, 26, 33, 34, 59, 60, 70	#3-5 (P)
Research question #7: How do the perceptions and expectations of elementary principals impact their role in the successful transition of Pre-K children to kindergarten?	#14-15 (Open Ended)	#1 & #5, 6 (P)

Appendix E

Coded Survey For Public Elementary School Principals

Rural & Non-Rural Nebraska Elementary Principals' Survey (Pre-K to Kindergarten Transitions) -- Coded Survey

Research Purpose: The purpose of the survey is to gather data to determine rural and non-rural elementary principal perceptions of Pre-K education and your role in the successful transition of preschool students to kindergarten. The study will provide information related to the factors that influence your role, as elementary principal, in the successful transition of preschool students to kindergarten.

Instructions: For questions 1-7, please provide the following demographic information by selecting the appropriate response or answering each question appropriately.

Elementary Principal Data Information

1. Gender
 - a. Male
 - b. Female

2. Total years in present role
(Open Ended)

3. Total years in elementary teaching role
(Open Ended)

4. What grade level(s) have you taught?
 - Pre-K _____
 - Kindergarten _____
 - 1st grade _____
 - 2nd grade _____
 - 3rd grade _____
 - 4th grade _____
 - 5th grade _____
 - Other (Middle School and above) _____

5. Do you hold an Elementary Education Certificate?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

6. Do you hold an Early Childhood Education Certificate?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

7. Please indicate the number of early childhood courses, conferences or other pertinent training sessions you've attended. Indicate the number of applicable training, coursework and/or conferences.
(Open ended – add a number)

Please provide examples of each type of early childhood professional development you've received.
(Open ended – list)

Instructions: For questions 8-15, please respond according to your school or district.
School Data Information

8. Please indicate the Free/Reduced Lunch Rate at your SCHOOL based on Nebraska's average as documented in the 2014-2015 Nebraska State of the School's Report:
(Open Ended)
9. What is your DISTRICT's student population for the 2015-2016 school year?
(Open Ended)
10. Is your school a Title I school?
a. Title I School b. Non-Title I School
11. Please indicate all types of early childhood programs that serve your student population by placing an "x" behind each that apply:
Head Start _____
Educare _____
School Based Pre-K Center _____
Other Non-Profit Center _____
For Profit Preschool/Nursery School _____
For Profit Child Care Center _____
Other For Profit _____
Home Child Care Center _____
Other (Open Ended)
12. How many kindergarten students, if any, are typically retained at the end of a school year in your school?
(Open Ended)
13. Does your school implement a transition plan for children transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten?
a. Yes b. No

14. What challenges and barriers have you encountered in helping Pre-K children make successful transitions to kindergarten in your school district? (Open Ended)
15. What goals, related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition activities, would you like to achieve as elementary principal? (Open Ended)

The following activities relate to helping children make the transition into kindergarten. For each activity, indicate to what extent you or your school has provided or will provide this activity during this school year with current Pre-K children. Please check the appropriate box to indicate your level of agreement with each statement. In the boxes marked “other,” please add any additional programs that you provide in each area.

a. Dockett and Perry (2014). Indicators of an effective transition program for kindergarten students:

1. Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships
2. Partnerships
3. High expectations and equity
4. Respect for diversity
5. Ongoing learning and reflective practice

	Indicator Alignment (Dockett & Perry, 2014)
Transition Activities focused on the Children	
16. Preschool children have the opportunity to visit a kindergarten classroom.	1
17. Preschool children have the opportunity to visit their assignment kindergarten classroom (the classroom they will attend).	1
18. Children receive a home visit from their kindergarten teacher prior to the beginning of the school year.	1
19. Children have an opportunity for a bus ride experience prior to the first day of school.	1
20. Children receive a letter from the teacher welcoming them to kindergarten.	1
21. Prospective kindergarten students have the opportunity to meet with current kindergarten students to share experiences.	1
22. A culture of high expectations has been developed for ALL children transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms.	3
23. Communication between all stakeholders in the Pre-K to kindergarten transition process occurs and high-expectations for ALL children are discussed.	3
24. Programs are in place to assist children transitioning to kindergarten in developing pro-social and respectful behaviors towards others.	4
Other:	
Transition Activities focused on the Pre-K and Kindergarten Staff	
25. Preschool teachers are invited to visit a kindergarten classroom.	2
26. Preschool and kindergarten teachers work together to implement a formal plan for effective transitions.	2
27. Staff members (Preschool & Kindergarten) demonstrate respect for each other and there is an established sense of acceptance of each other's professional roles.	1
28. Kindergarten teachers are invited to visit a preschool class.	2
29. Release time is provided for preschool teachers to visit with kindergarten students prior to the beginning of school.	2
30. Kindergarten teachers design experiences to stimulate learning in all areas – physical, social, emotional, and intellectual.	3
31. Curriculum among sending programs and school programs are compared for similarities.	3

	Indicator Alignment (Dockett & Perry, 2014)
32. Professional development about transition is planned for kindergarten teachers.	5
33. Formal opportunities are planned for preschool and kindergarten teachers to communicate about expectations, curriculum, and assessment.	1
34. Formal opportunities are planned for preschool and kindergarten teachers to communicate about individual children.	1
35. Kindergarten teachers receive preschool assessment information about individual children.	2
Other:	
Transition Activities focused on the Children's Families	
36. Families meet with the school nurse prior to the child entering school.	2
37. Families are invited to attend sessions related to school readiness.	1
38. Families receive printed materials about the kindergarten program or curriculum.	1
39. Families have the opportunity to attend a Kindergarten Orientation Session in the spring.	1
40. Families meet with a kindergarten teacher (not necessarily their child's teacher) prior to the beginning of the school year.	2
41. Families meet with their child's kindergarten teacher prior to the beginning of the school year.	2
42. Families meet with the school principal prior to the beginning of the school year.	2
43. Families have the opportunity to tour the school.	1
44. Families receive correspondence from their child's teacher prior to the beginning of the school year.	1
45. Families are invited to attend a Kindergarten Orientation/Curriculum meeting in the fall prior to the beginning of the school year.	1
46. Families are encouraged to volunteer in the kindergarten classroom.	2
47. Families are invited to attend "Back to School" meetings in the fall.	1
48. Transition activities are offered at various times of the day and days of the week.	1
49. Families are included within the process of establishing high expectations for their child.	3
50. Families are included in the development of the official transition plan.	4
51. Family members are active participants in developing a transition plan that values diversity.	4
Other:	
Transition Activities focused on the Children's Communities	
52. Public school personnel participate in community forums on kindergarten transitioning.	5
53. Public school personnel participate in community-wide professional development with Pre-K staff.	5
54. A variety of community stakeholders (agencies and support services) are included in the transition plan development.	2
Other:	
Transition Activities focused on the School Leadership	
55. The Elementary School Principal participates with the Early Childhood Community and school personnel to implement a formal plan for effective transitions.	2
56. The Elementary School Principal includes formal family input into the development of a formal transition plan.	4
57. The Elementary School Principal hosts an open house for local early childhood staff to provide opportunities to become acquainted and to share information about their programs.	2
58. The Elementary School Principal participates with the early childhood community in each other's policy advisory committees.	5
59. The Elementary School Principal provides release time for school personnel to visit local early childhood centers to meet with students and staff.	1
60. The Elementary School Principal allocates funds designated for transition practices.	3
61. The Elementary School Principal establishes a formal process for the transfer of specific records to the school while respecting parental rights to privacy.	2

	Indicator Alignment (Dockett & Perry, 2014)
62. The Elementary School Principal utilizes information about children's development for class placement.	2
63. The Elementary School Principal utilizes information about friendship groups for class placement of students.	2
64. The Elementary School Principal utilizes information gained from kindergarten screening for class placement of students.	2
65. The Elementary School Principal leads kindergarten programs to provide for a wider range of developmental interests and abilities than the chronological age suggests.	4
66. A transition plan has been developed and the Elementary School Principal supports implementation within the school.	3
67. The Elementary School Principal leads the annual evaluation of the transition plan and revision if necessary.	5
68. The transition plan is available to the public.	1
69. The transition plan is available on your website. If yes, please include the website address:	1
70. The Elementary School Principal secures funding and allocates resources to support the transition plan within the school.	2
Other:	

Selected respondents may be contacted for a follow-up interview. If you would be willing to participate, please complete your contact information:

Name:

School District:

Elementary School:

School Address:

School Phone Number:

Email Address:

Appendix F

Elementary Principal Interview Protocol

Elementary Principal Interview Protocol

Name _____ Organization _____ Date _____
 Title _____ Location _____

Interviewer will say:

Thank you again for completing the survey you received, which is helpful for my research. I will be recording the interview and a transcription of what we say today will be created. The interview is expected to take around 30 minutes to complete. I will be asking you to review the transcription with some of the notes I make regarding my own interpretations of what you say. It is important that I reflect in my writing what you mean. Therefore, I want you to review it to make sure I am representing your views. The transcription will be a verbatim one, so be prepared to see any “uhs” or “ahs” that you say. If I use any quotes in the final written paper, those will not be there. It is important that the transcription be verbatim so that I do not paraphrase something you’ve said with an incorrect interpretation.

I’m interested in finding out more about your perception of Early Childhood education and your role in the successful transition of Pre-K children to kindergarten. I want to assure you that the information from this interview is strictly confidential. Information provided by you is reported in aggregated form only. Districts, schools and individuals are not identified. If at any time during the interview you feel uncomfortable with the interview, you are free to decide not to participate or continue.

Are you willing to participate in this interview? (Allow for verbal consent) You’ve had a chance to review the questions I am going to ask you today and give them some thought. I really want to know your perspective so please feel free to discuss your views. I may ask you some additional questions that you have not reviewed as we go along in order to clarify what you mean. Are you ready to begin? To begin, please state your name, school, district and give your permission to record this interview (turn on the digital recorder).

Soft Interview Questions:

- 1) How do you feel the survey went?

Primary Elementary Principal Interview Questions:

- 1) What is your definition of an effective Pre-K to kindergarten transition plan or program?

- 2) What steps have you taken to ensure a successful transition for kindergarten students into your school? Please explain the process utilized to develop this plan.
- 3) What connections have you developed within your community and the early childhood education programs to foster the successful transition for Pre-K children into kindergarten?
- 4) What resources does your district devote to Pre-K programming, particularly Pre-K to kindergarten transition?
- 5) What challenges and barriers have you encountered in helping Pre-K children to make successful transitions to kindergarten in your school district?
- 6) What goals, related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition activities, would you like to achieve as elementary principal?
- 7) Is there anything that I have missed? Do you have any other comments other than the questions I have asked?

Thank you again for your time and commitment to this study! Your assistance is greatly appreciated!

The researcher will use question responses to develop further questions on current programming and the state of Pre-K to kindergarten transition plans in Nebraska.

Appendix G

Dr. Hanthorn – Survey Reproduction Permission

8/4/2015

Dr. Brenda Hanthorn
Lancaster-Lebanon Intermediate Unit 13
Early Childhood Supervisor
One Cumberland Street
Lebanon, PA 17042

Dear Dr. Hanthorn,

I am a doctoral student from the University Nebraska-Lincoln writing my dissertation tentatively titled FROM EARLY CHILDHOOD TO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP AND SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS under the direction of my dissertation committee chaired by Dr. Jody Isernhagen.

I would like your permission to reproduce and use, with some modifications, your survey instrument in my research study. I would like to use and print your survey under the following conditions:

- I will use this survey for my research study and will not sell or use it with any compensated or curriculum development activities.
- I will include your citation on all copies of the instrument.
- I will send a copy of my research study that make use of these survey data promptly to your attention.

If these are acceptable terms and conditions, please indicate so by signing one copy of this letter and returning it to me either through postal mail or email:

Josh Snyder

Sincerely,

Josh Snyder
Doctoral Candidate

Signature

8-5-15

Expected date of completion May, 2016

Appendix H

HighScope – Figure Reproduction Permission Form

8/18/2015

HighScope Educational Research Foundation

600 North River Street

Ypsilanti, MI 48198-2898, USA

To Whom it May Concern,

I am a doctoral student from the University Nebraska-Lincoln writing my dissertation tentatively titled FROM EARLY CHILDHOOD TO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP AND SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS under the direction of my dissertation committee chaired by Dr. Jody Isernhagen.

I am writing this letter to formally request your permission to reproduce and use, the following figures from: HighScope Perry Preschool Study: Lifetime Effects: The HighScope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40 (2005) in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 (Literature Review) of my research study proposal. The figures are currently (8/18/2015) located at the following URL:

<http://www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=219>

I would like to use your figures under the following conditions:

- I will use these figures for my research study and will not sell or use it with any compensated or curriculum development activities.
- I will include an appropriate citation and references with all copies of the figures.

If these are acceptable terms and conditions, please indicate so by signing one copy of this letter and returning it to me either through postal mail or email:

Josh Snyder

Sincerely,

Josh Snyder

Doctoral Candidate

Signature

Expected date of completion May, 2016

Appendix I

Dockett and Perry Permission Form

8/17/2015
 Dr. Sue Dockett
 Charles Sturt University
 Albury / ~~Wodonga~~ Campus
 Elizabeth Mitchell Drive
~~Thurgoona~~ NSW 2640
 AUSTRALIA
 PO Box 789
 Albury NSW 2640

Dear Dr. Dockett,
 I am a doctoral student from the University Nebraska-Lincoln writing my dissertation tentatively titled
 FROM EARLY CHILDHOOD TO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL
 LEADERSHIP AND SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS under the direction of my dissertation
 committee chaired by Dr. Jody ~~Isenbagen~~.

I am writing this letter to formally request your permission to reproduce and use, your table from:
 Starting School: Effective Transitions (2001) in Chapter 1 of my research study proposal. I would like
 to use your table under the following conditions:

- I will use this table for my research study and will not sell or use it with any compensated or curriculum development activities.
- I will include your citation on all copies of the table.

If these are acceptable terms and conditions, please indicate so by signing one copy of this letter and returning it to me either through postal mail or email:

Josh Snyder

Sincerely,
 Josh Snyder
 Doctoral Candidate

 Signature

 Expected date of completion May, 2016

Appendix J

Survey Follow Up Email

October, 2015

Dear Principal:

I appreciate your consideration and willingness to complete the following survey. As a former Elementary Principal, I know how important your time is. I am currently a doctoral student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the Educational Administration program and the purpose of this survey is to gather data to determine elementary principal perception of Early Childhood education and their role in the successful transition of Pre-K children to kindergarten. This research study will provide information related to the factors that influence the role of elementary principals in the successful transition of Pre-K children to kindergarten.

Some school districts are currently beginning the process of collaborating with various community agencies and early childhood programs to provide for successful transitions from the early childhood education setting to a kindergarten classroom. To better explore these collaborative partnerships and the expectations and perception of the educational leader in the process, I am surveying elementary principals. After this data is collected, purposefully selected principals will be contacted to participate in a follow-up interview process.

The survey can be accessed at the following link: To participate in the study, please click on the button marked “continue” and read the informed consent form. By clicking on the “agree” button, you are digitally signing and agreeing to participate in the study. Once you have clicked the “agree” button, the survey will open. The survey should take between 12-15 minutes to complete. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. Thank you in advance for your assistance in collecting accurate data related to kindergarten transition within your school.

Sincerely,

Josh Snyder
Doctoral Student
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Name and Contact information of investigator:
Josh Snyder; JoshLSnyder@gmail.com
Home: (402) 350-0163
Advisor: Dr. Jody Isernhagen
University of Nebraska Educational Administration Department UNL

Appendix K

Survey Follow Up Email #2

November, 2015

Dear Elementary Principal:

I thank you tremendously for the time and energy you devote to the many young learners across the state of Nebraska. You are receiving this email as a reminder to the study I am conducting regarding the role of elementary principals leaders during children's transition process from Pre-K to kindergarten. I know how busy you are and greatly appreciate your consideration and willingness to complete the following survey! The survey takes between 10-12 minutes to complete. You are free to work on the survey as time allows and the survey system will save your progress, allowing you to return to where you previously left off.

The purpose of the survey is to gather data to determine elementary principal perception of Early Childhood education and their role in the successful transition of Pre-K children to kindergarten. This information will be used to better inform transition practices in the state of Nebraska and to better identify the many great plans that are taking place across the state.

To participate in the study, please follow the link below. By clicking on the "agree" button, you are digitally signing and agreeing to participate in the study. Once you have clicked the "agree" button, the survey will open.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. Thank you in advance for your assistance in collecting accurate data related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition programs within your school and have a great week!

Sincerely,

Josh Snyder
Doctoral Student
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Name and Contact information of investigator:

Josh Snyder; JoshLSnyder@gmail.com

Home: (402) 350-0163

Advisor: Dr. Jody Isernhagen

University of Nebraska Educational Administration Department UNL

Appendix L

Telephone Script for Contacting Elementary Principals

Telephone Script for Contacting Potential Interviewees (Elementary Principals)

Name of Interview Participant: _____

School District: _____

School Building: _____

Email Address: _____

Phone Number: _____

Hello, (Insert Interviewee's name). My name is Josh Snyder and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Administration Department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and conducting an independent, mixed methods research study. Just recently you were sent an on-line survey to complete, which will assist me in investigating elementary school principals' role in the transition of children from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms.

The second part of this study is to conduct interviews with a selected number of elementary principals across the state. You have been selected as a possible interview participant in this study due to your indication of interest, as well as, your district's unique background and characteristics. This study will give you an opportunity to voice your views about programs, plans and policies related to Pre-K to kindergarten transition in Nebraska public schools.

Your commitment to this research project will include a short interview lasting approximately 30 minutes. The interviews are targeted for January 2016, and I am willing to work the interview around your schedule. I would be happy to interview in person, or conduct a Skype or Google Hangout interview. The goal is to find a method that works best with your busy schedule.

The interview will consist of eight (8) questions, with one of them being a background-building question. As a former elementary principal, I understand how busy you are and will make every effort to accommodate your schedule and minimize your time commitment as a result of this interview. You are free to ask any questions before agreeing to participate in the study, or during the study. You're free to call me or email me at any time should questions arise. If you agree to the study, I will mail a letter of consent, outlining the study, for you to fill out. The letter will also include my contact information. There will be no compensation for participating in this research.

Again, the information obtained from this study will be helpful in better understanding elementary school principals' role in the transition of children from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms across the state of Nebraska.

There are no known risks associated with this research. The identity of the districts and your participation in this research is completely voluntary and the information is confidential. All data generated by this study will be reported in an aggregated format that prevents identification of individuals or districts. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. Your decision will not result in any loss to which your districts is otherwise entitled.

Again, if you agree to the study, I will be mailing out a permission letter of consent for your to complete with my contact information listed. There will be no compensation for participating in this research. You will be given a copy of the consent for to keep for your records.

Do you have any questions or concerns about this study? Would you be willing to participate?

If so, complete information below:

Personal Interview

Skype Interview

Phone Call

Google Hangout (circle as desired)

The best days in January and times of the day for the interview to take place include:

Thank you in advance for your help with this study! The consent letter will be mailed out in the next few days. Please complete the consent letter and send back in the stamp, enclosed envelope. I look forward to meeting with you in the very near future.

Josh Snyder

Appendix M

Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement Form

Transcriptionist ~ Confidentiality Agreement

I, (_____) : transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audiotapes and documentations received from Josh L. Snyder related to his research study on the researcher study titled FROM PRE-K TO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP AND SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS

Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of audio-taped interviews, or in any associated documents.
2. To not make copies of any audiotapes/digital files or computerized titles of the transcribed interviews texts, unless specifically requested to do so by the researcher, Josh L. Snyder.
3. To store all study-related audiotapes or digital files and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession.
4. To return all audiotapes/digital files and study-related materials to Josh L. Snyder in a complete and timely manner.
5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any back-up devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally responsible for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the _____ ive access.

Transcriber's name (printed) _____

Transcriber's signature _____

Date Sept 3, 2015

Appendix N

Interview Letter of Consent

Title of Research: From Pre-K to Elementary School: Elementary Principal Leadership and Successful Transitions

Date
Name
District
Address
City, State Zip

Dear Elementary Principal,
Title of Research: From Pre-K to Elementary School: Elementary Principal Leadership and Successful Transitions
January 2016

I am a doctoral student in the Educational Administration Department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln conducting an independent research study. The title of my study is, "From Pre-K to Elementary School: Elementary Principal Leadership and Successful Transitions." The purpose of this study is to examine Nebraska public school elementary principals personal experiences with and beliefs about early childhood education programs, particularly their role in the transition of students from Pre-K to Kindergarten.

You have been selected and/or indicated interest in this study. The digitally recorded interview will consist of eight interview questions regarding elementary school leadership and successful Pre-K to kindergarten transitions. I understand that educators are very busy and I will make every effort to accommodate your schedule and minimize the time allotted for the interview. The interviews are targeted for January of 2016.

The identity of the districts and your participation in this research is completely voluntary and the information is confidential. All data generated by this study will be reported in an aggregated format that prevents identification of individuals or districts. There is no compensation for participating in the study, however, I would be happy to provide a copy of the research results once the study is completed.

You are free to ask any questions before agreeing to participate in or during the study. You may call the investigator (myself) or secondary investigator (advisor at UNL Dr. Jody Isernhagen) at any time or email your questions to the contact information listed on this letter. If you would like to speak to someone else, please call the Research Compliance Services Office at 402-472-6926 or irb@unl.edu.

Your participation is voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw your participation from this study at any time. Your decision will not result in any loss to your district in any manner, with the researcher or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln or in any way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your signature on page two certifies that you have decided to voluntarily participate having read and understood the information presented. Please sign and return or email (page 2) back to the researcher. Please also keep a copy of this letter for your records.
Thank you in advance for your help with this study!

Please sign and return or email this page back to the researcher. Email address is:
JoshLSnyder@gmail.com

Signature of Research Participant

Date

_____ **I agree to be audiotaped during the interview.**

Contact Information of Participant:

Printed Name _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Address: _____

Primary Investigator:

Josh L. Snyder
 Doctoral Candidate
JoshLSnyder@gmail.com
 Cell Phone: 402-472-1088
 Home Phone: 402-472-1088

Secondary Investigator
 Dr. Jody Isernhagen, Doctoral Student Advisor
 Associate Professor of Educational Administration
 University of Nebraska-Lincoln
jisernhagen3@unl.edu
 402-472-1088

The best days in January and time(s) of the day for the interview to take place include:

Appendix O

Challenges and Barriers to Pre-K to Kindergarten Transitions (Codes/Themes)

Challenges and Barriers to Pre-K to Kindergarten Transitions (Codes/Themes)

Codes	Frequency	Supporting Quotes (Examples)	Theme
Academic Readiness	18	Variance in skill levels, language acquisition, educational experience. The only barrier has been when we have students who meet the kindergarten entrance age/deadline but have not obtained the skills their peers have.	School Readiness
Social Readiness	28	Maturity / Skills of independence / Social skills with other students The adjustment of going to school all day. The change from a day of 60% play/free time and 40% academic to almost the opposite.	
School to Home	18	Increasing parental support from low-income families. Students are not getting help at home to advance their skills [academic and social]. Lack of parental support with students that are struggling. Parent awareness that pre-k and kindergarten are more comprehensive than "child care".	Partnerships and Collaboration
School to Private	13	Connecting the various preschools in the area with the curriculum and with our district expectations of where the children should be when they enter kindergarten.	
Staff to Staff	4	Lack of collaboration between PK and KG teachers An understanding, from the Pre-K teacher's perspective, on what Kindergarten demands are and can look like.	
Limited Access to Programs	7	Most students do not go to a pre K program Not serving all the students that will enter Kindergarten because parents can't afford preschool or have transportation.	Facility, Financial, Human Resources
Transportation	3	Transportation	
Staff Availability	3	Staffing	
No Program	2	No school based preschool so offering the transition to multiple agencies	
Program Focus	4	We have kindergarten round-up. There have been discussions about how to make this transition better	Pre-K Programming

Program Focus (Cont.)		Transitions have gone smoothly. The biggest challenge we have is a child who needed services and did not receive services or attend preschool.	
Program Quality	6	<p>A challenge that comes to mind immediately is that often students who come from other programs (not from our district Pre-K program) enter elementary with a lack of academic and social skills. I feel as though our district Pre-K program does a nice job preparing young students for Kindergarten.</p> <p>Students that do not attend the school sponsored preschool program are more likely to score below benchmark on Reading assessments.</p>	Pre-K Programming (Cont.)
English Language Learners	7	<p>Language barriers. Our population is extremely poor and English Language Learners.</p> <p>Many of our newer arrivals start Kindergarten without speaking English or have had very little academic experiences.</p>	Communication

Appendix P
Goals for Pre-K to Kindergarten Transitions
(Codes/Themes)

Goals for Pre-K to Kindergarten Transitions (Codes/Themes)

Codes	Frequency	Supporting Quotes	Theme
Increase School to Home	18	Provide more services for 0-3 year old by using home visitors and providing parents with resources. My biggest goal is for my students and parents to feel comfortable in our school. I also want to make sure that they know we are here to work together as a team and will do whatever it takes to be successful with their child.	Partnerships and Collaboration
Increase Parent Involvement	16	Increase parent awareness and collaboration with the vision and mission of the elementary. Better education for parents and families of both Pre-K and kindergarten programs and expectations	
Identify Student Needs	16	We like to know the child's abilities and get to know them. We want them to be comfortable with other students and the adults that will work with them. Identify needs as early as possible (academics, behavior)	
Staff to Staff	7	I would like to see a way for the pre-k teachers and kindergarten teachers to have conversations that will lead to impactful instruction in kindergarten. The two environments seem to be so different. The preschool perspective is often not indicative of the perspective the kindergarten teachers have. A clear understanding between pre-k and kindergarten teachers as to what students should be able to do when they start kindergarten.	
School to Private Providers	6	Streamlining the transition process so that local preschools understand the expectations our district has for children entering kindergarten. Continue to offer opportunities for transition between our schools that have preschools, and community preschools.	
Academic Readiness	14	Our goal is to have them educationally ahead and allow the kindergarten teacher to teach into first grade curriculum. Literacy knowledge, classroom management/expectations, number sense development.	School Readiness

Social Readiness	12	Maturity. Readiness for academics. Kindergarten readiness and social/emotional interventions.	School Readiness Cont.
Increased Focus on Routines & Procedures	6	A program that helps them transition into our school routines and rules. I would like to have at least a week of half day classes at the beginning of the year for kindergarten students to learn rules and routines and wait for academic instruction until the second week.	Pre-K Programming
Increased Focus on Family Needs	6	I would like to have 100 percent participation of students and parents in kindergarten round up , and parent/student events. Building relationships with students, parents, and families / Identify needs as early as possible (academics, behavior)	
Pre-K More Like Kindergarten	5	Getting the end of the year of preschool to look more like the beginning of the year kindergarten so the adjustment is not so difficult when students are expected to do more seat work and learn for a whole days instruction.	
Increase School to Home	17	Greater attendance at kindergarten orientation. I would like to get more students living in my school's attendance area to enroll.	Communication
Increase Between Staff	5	Communication between the preschool and kindergarten teacher is crucial so we know what curricular expectations are for students leaving preschool and entering kindergarten. I would like to see a way for the pre-k teachers and kindergarten teachers to have conversations that will lead to impactful instruction in kindergarten.	
Addition of a School Based Pre-K Program	4	Establish a section of school-based preschool to meet the needs of our student population that is not able to be served in a traditional private setting. Getting a quality 4 year old program that ALL students could attend.	Financial, Facility, Human Resources
Additional Pre-K Spots Available	5	The biggest activity that I feel would help with the transition would be adding another section of pre-kindergarten. I want to develop a plan to create more PK opportunities for families to place students.	

Appendix Q
Quantitative Survey Results by Item

Quantitative Survey Results by Item

	n	M	SD
Transition Activities focused on the Children			
16. Preschool children have the opportunity to visit a kindergarten classroom.	125	5.56	.95
17. Preschool children have the opportunity to visit their assignment kindergarten classroom (the classroom they will attend).	125	5.10	1.39
18. Children receive a home visit from their kindergarten teacher prior to the beginning of the school year.	124	2.77	1.57
19. Children have an opportunity for a bus ride experience prior to the first day of school.	122	3.63	1.90
20. Children receive a letter from the teacher welcoming them to kindergarten.	124	5.45	1.02
21. Prospective kindergarten students have the opportunity to meet with current kindergarten students to share experiences.	123	4.32	1.82
22. A culture of high expectations has been developed for ALL children transitioning from Pre-K to kindergarten classrooms.	124	5.26	1.05
23. Communication between all stakeholders in the Pre-K to kindergarten transition process occurs and high-expectations for ALL children are discussed.	124	4.94	1.29
24. Programs are in place to assist children transitioning to kindergarten in developing pro-social and respectful behaviors towards others.	124	5.13	1.08
Transition Activities focused on the Pre-K and Kindergarten Staff			
25. Preschool teachers are invited to visit a kindergarten classroom.	124	5.10	1.27
26. Preschool and kindergarten teachers work together to implement a formal plan for effective transitions.	124	4.90	1.40
27. Staff members (Preschool & Kindergarten) demonstrate respect for each other and there is an established sense of acceptance of each other's professional roles.	124	5.35	1.07
28. Kindergarten teachers are invited to visit a preschool class.	124	4.69	1.40
29. Release time is provided for preschool teachers to visit with kindergarten students prior to the beginning of school.	123	3.60	1.71
30. Kindergarten teachers design experiences to stimulate learning in all areas – physical, social, emotional, and intellectual.	124	5.63	.56
31. Curriculum among sending programs and school programs are compared for similarities.	124	4.30	1.46
32. Professional development about transition is planned for kindergarten teachers.	124	4.03	1.43
33. Formal opportunities are planned for preschool and kindergarten teachers to communicate about expectations, curriculum, and assessment.	124	4.50	1.47
34. Formal opportunities are planned for preschool and kindergarten teachers to communicate about individual children.	124	4.76	1.30
35. Kindergarten teachers receive preschool assessment information about individual children.	124	4.94	1.28
Transition Activities focused on the Children's Families			
36. Families meet with the school nurse prior to the child entering school.	123	4.46	1.52
37. Families are invited to attend sessions related to school readiness.	125	4.83	1.18
38. Families receive printed materials about the kindergarten program or curriculum.	125	5.40	.71
39. Families have the opportunity to attend a Kindergarten Orientation Session in the spring.	125	5.62	.90
40. Families meet with a kindergarten teacher (not necessarily their child's teacher) prior to the beginning of the school year.	125	5.34	1.09
41. Families meet with their child's kindergarten teacher prior to the beginning of the school year.	125	5.11	1.35
42. Families meet with the school principal prior to the beginning of the school year.	125	5.26	1.09
43. Families have the opportunity to tour the school.	125	5.64	.66
44. Families receive correspondence from their child's teacher prior to the beginning of the school year.	125	5.54	.82
45. Families are invited to attend a Kindergarten Orientation/Curriculum meeting in the fall prior to the beginning of the school year.	125	4.93	1.49
46. Families are encouraged to volunteer in the kindergarten classroom.	125	4.95	1.11
47. Families are invited to attend "Back to School" meetings in the fall.	125	5.42	.95
48. Transition activities are offered at various times of the day and days of the week.	124	3.85	1.54

49. Families are included within the process of establishing high expectations for their child.	123	4.75	1.18
50. Families are included in the development of the official transition plan.	124	3.80	1.40
51. Family members are active participants in developing a transition plan that values diversity.	123	3.82	1.44
Transition Activities focused on the Children's Communities			
52. Public school personnel participate in community forums on kindergarten transitioning.	123	3.34	1.50
53. Public school personnel participate in community-wide professional development with Pre-K staff.	122	3.69	1.52
54. A variety of community stakeholders (agencies and support services) are included in the transition plan development.	122	3.57	1.48
Transition Activities focused on the School Leadership			
55. The Elementary School Principal participates with the Early Childhood Community and school personnel to implement a formal plan for effective transitions.	123	4.73	1.29
56. The Elementary School Principal includes formal family input into the development of a formal transition plan.	121	4.05	1.34
57. The Elementary School Principal hosts an open house for local early childhood staff to provide opportunities to become acquainted and to share information about their programs.	122	3.84	1.69
58. The Elementary School Principal participates with the early childhood community in each other's policy advisory committees.	122	3.96	1.63
59. The Elementary School Principal provides release time for school personnel to visit local early childhood centers to meet with students and staff.	120	4.19	1.61
60. The Elementary School Principal allocates funds designated for transition practices.	120	4.08	1.52
61. The Elementary School Principal establishes a formal process for the transfer of specific records to the school while respecting parental rights to privacy.	122	5.02	1.19
62. The Elementary School Principal utilizes information about children's development for class placement.	121	4.91	1.35
63. The Elementary School Principal utilizes information about friendship groups for class placement of students.	121	4.20	1.60
64. The Elementary School Principal utilizes information gained from kindergarten screening for class placement of students.	122	4.57	1.56
65. The Elementary School Principal leads kindergarten programs to provide for a wider range of developmental interests and abilities than the chronological age suggests.	122	4.49	1.42
66. A transition plan has been developed and the Elementary School Principal supports implementation within the school.	122	4.64	1.46
67. The Elementary School Principal leads the annual evaluation of the transition plan and revision if necessary.	121	4.06	1.53
68. The transition plan is available to the public.	120	3.77	1.60
69. The transition plan is available on your website. If yes, please include the website address:	118	2.28	1.36
70. The Elementary School Principal secures funding and allocates resources to support the transition plan within the school.	119	3.77	1.60