

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

By

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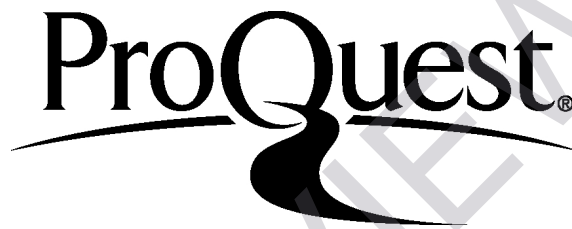
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University of Nebraska, 2016

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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.