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Head Start Preschool Parent-Teacher Engagement and the Parent's Transition to Kindergarten

Nicole Gagnon – Arsenault
University of Maine at Farmington

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Head Start Preschool Parent -Teacher Engagement and the Parent's Transition to Kindergarten

Nicole Gagnon- Arsenault

The Opportunity Alliance Head Start Program

University of Maine Farmington

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-method study seeks to better understand the relationships that Head Start preschool teachers have with parents and how those relationships impact a parent's transition to a public school when their child enters kindergarten. Findings revealed that parents have a deep connection to their child's Head Start teacher, feel informed and empowered to advocate for their child's needs. Interviews revealed that parents do not feel as connected to their child's education in the public school. Recommendations for educators include creating more opportunities for parents to connect to the public school during the supportive Head Start school year.

Keywords: transition; Head Start; parent engagement; parent-teacher interaction; school-readiness.

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Introduction

A successful transition from preschool to kindergarten is a key component of school readiness. Yet, quite often this major step in a child's life is neither planned nor well-coordinated. Thoughtful planning for this transition, however, can have a positive impact on children, families, teachers, schools and communities that last well beyond the first weeks of school. Research conducted by the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL) supports the view that the transition to kindergarten is a significant time to establish competencies critical to a child's school success and achievement. The transition is not only about how children adjust to kindergarten, but also how families and schools interact and cooperate with each other. Research conducted by the center documents that it is not just the child who makes the transition—families and school personnel are also involved (NCEDL, 2002).

Head Start takes a comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of young children. When Head Start was first launched in 1965, the idea of providing comprehensive health, nutrition, and education services to children in poverty was revolutionary, if not radical. The Head Start Model, developed over the decades has been built on evidence-based practices and is constantly adapting - using the best available science and teaching techniques to meet the needs of local communities. Head Start programs offer an ideal laboratory for the study of effective child development and learning. The Department of Health and Human Services funds extensive research every year that reinvigorates practices, ensuring that programs meet children's needs by creating a deep understanding of how they learn and what supports healthy development.

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Children enter Head Start with serious socioeconomic disadvantages that can hold them back for life. Head Start supports families facing difficult circumstances and seeks to mitigate obstacles to learning in the early years. What makes the whole child and whole family model so powerful? Nobel-prize winning economist James Heckman has suggested that the social-emotional development cultivated by programs may be the true contributor to long-term impacts, and health benefits which range from decreased child mortality to adult health behaviors. Furthermore, an additional motivator behind children's success through elementary school and beyond are very likely parents. By helping families who are struggling with poverty and other socio-economic challenges achieve their goals for education, employment, and housing, Head Start plays a transformative role across two generations.

A successful transition from preschool to kindergarten is a key component of school readiness. Yet, quite often this major step in a child's life is neither planned nor well-coordinated. Thoughtful planning for this transition, however, can have a positive impact on children, families, teachers, schools and communities that last well beyond the first weeks of school. Research conducted by the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL) supports the view that the transition to kindergarten is a significant time to establish competencies critical to a child's school success and achievement. The transition is not only about how children adjust to kindergarten, but also how families and schools interact and cooperate with each other. Research conducted by the center documents that it is not just the child who makes the transition—families and school personnel are also involved (NCEDL, 2002).

Literature Review

Head Start teacher and parent as partners in the classroom

When families are involved in their children's early childhood education, children may experience greater success once they enter elementary school (Kreider, 2002). Research suggests that family involvement in education can boost young children's academic success and that the transition between early childhood and elementary school can be a crucial period in children's development (Molina, 2013). Less is known about the experience of kindergarten transition from parents' perspective and the ways that children's early childhood education might promote their parents' involvement throughout the child's schooling career. A review of early childhood education and intervention literature, by Barnard, suggests that these experiences can affect parents' current and future beliefs and practices (Kreider, 2002). Compared to non-preschool parents, parents of children who participated in preschool activities had higher parental involvement at home and at school.

Given the greater educational risks that face young children in poverty, parent involvement in education is especially important. The protective potential of parent involvement is recognized by Head Start, the nation's largest federally funded early intervention program for low-income children. Head Start's national performance standards require programs to promote parental participation in every facet of their children's early educational experiences, from the daily activities of the classroom to program governance. Much of the research in Head Start on parental involvement relates to child outcomes and child achievement and less towards attitudes parents have toward the role of the preschool teacher and attitudes during kindergarten transition.

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Parents respond positively to schools that are intentional in their attempts to collaborate with parents (Bruckman & Blanton, 2003). Educational programs influence parents' involvement in children's education by offering invitations and opportunities to them to be active participants in their child's education. Parents tend to view involvement in their children's education as important when they perceive themselves as competent and able to have a positive influence on their children's learning (p. 147).

Preschool teachers seeking to develop productive partnerships with parents by understanding the complex issues that they face each day. Low-income families initially may not have the background of confidence to become collaborative partners (Bruckman & Blanton, 2003). However, with sensitivity and planning on the part of the preschool teacher, a strong relationship can be built over time. Offering parents a variety of ways to be involved such as volunteering in the classroom, at-home learning activities and chaperoning field trips may help to ensure parents have several opportunities to participate. Facilitating positive interactions and parent-teacher collaborations are well worth the teacher's effort in the preschool years with hopes to build a solid foundation for the child's future academic career.

Community Engagement and Partnership in the Classroom

Developing sustained and comprehensive relationships with schools, families, and the community is a long-standing area of need and inquiry for schools and researchers alike. There is no curriculum guide that provides a step-by-step approach to developing powerful connections between schools, families and communities that would be applicable in all contexts and surmount the incredible complexity and unique nature of the relationship in a Head Start setting. These relationships take time, vigilance, a deep understanding of the demographics, and a desire to bring together the schools, the families, and the communities together to identify needs, and

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most importantly, the abundance of hard and soft resources to support the one unifying mission—the aspirations of the children in the community (Molina, 2013). Within these layers, there are a multitude of stakeholders that play an important role in the lives of these children. Part of the success of these partnerships is identifying stakeholders, having sustained conversations where their concerns are heard and addressed. Other areas include supporting leadership initiatives from the different constitutes so that these voices can be heard and their negotiations can be more bidirectional in understanding and influencing school decisions that affect their children (Molina, 2013). Most importantly, it is ongoing collaborative learning opportunities that need to be integrated into the professional development of teachers, staff, parent groups, families and community members on the integral nature of education where assumptions and beliefs can be explored and experienced as a whole group rather than in segregated pockets. Understanding the significant role that families and communities play in the success of children in schools is of paramount importance and begins with pre-service teacher education and continues through ongoing professional development within the schools, and beyond through collaborative efforts within families and communities. Pre-service teachers can benefit from opportunities to participate in parent-teacher conferences or school-wide events with experienced, veteran teachers, staff and administrators who have had success in involving families and communities in their classrooms (p, 237). Consistent with previous research studies, the initial data showed that parents and beginning caregivers generally perceived their relationship positively. (Cantin, Plante, Coutu & Brunson, 2012). Thus, even if beginning caregivers feel insufficiently prepared to build strong connections with their families, they managed to build relationships positively. Another interesting finding is that both parents and caregivers reported higher levels of confidence and collaboration, whereas lower ratings were obtained for affiliation. Therefore,

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it seems as though a parents and caregivers already perceived that their relationship was based on confidence and collaboration (p 271). Although this interpretation is speculative, the lower levels of affiliation may partly reflect that parents and caregivers did not perceive that their relationship was based on friendship and whether or not the parent and teacher liked each other on a personal level; which is not a sign of an unhealthy relationship.

Family-teacher relationships can be complex and include many different areas such as the teacher's relationships with the children; the teacher's relationships with the children's families; the teacher's relationships with colleagues; and the teacher's relationship with the community. Often, early childhood teachers attend only to their relationships with the children. Yet, our ability to teach children expands past the children and includes family, colleagues, and our own community. By involving all of these components we create a rich environment for our children and serve as models for the children to create positive relationships with other people. Family-teacher relationships are essential for learning about the children from an additional and valuable source, promoting children's emotional health, and helping children deal with difficult problems that may have lifelong consequences.

Teacher Quality and Retention in Head Start

Parent and teacher relationships have long been viewed as important and necessary within the field of education. How teachers approach encounters with parents from the first day has a profound effect not only on how parents view the school, but also on the child's experience in and outlook on school and learning as a whole. Good parent teacher communication is essential for a child's success in school. Recent studies indicate that the more actively involved a parent is in her child's school life, the more the child excels (Cantin, et al., 2012). When parents and teachers work together, a child has a team of adults who are committed to bringing out his

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best. Like all relationships, the parent teacher relationship is a dynamic. What one does affects the other, but the person who is most impacted is the child.

Preschool teachers have a turnover rate of 25-50% per year with nearly one-fifth of child care center-based staff leaving early education field (Wells, 2015). In comparison Wells (2015) found that it takes teachers of school-aged children three to five years of teaching to reach those percentage levels. Researching preschool teacher retention is a complex task, since preschool teachers leave their positions for a myriad of reasons. Michael Wells conducted a study where he surveyed 69 newly hired Head Start teachers. These teachers were given a job satisfaction survey and he noted the five major “risk-factors” stated by the teachers. Overall work happiness, relationship with their supervisor, work environment, educational background and whether or not the teacher truly wanted to work in early education were the five categories generated by the survey (Wells, 2015). Wells goes on to note in his conclusion that having two or more of the five risk factors increased the probability of the teacher leaving their place of employment mid-year. In a study conducted by Mendez in 2010, it was noted that teachers who interact more frequently with parents at school report greater feelings of connectedness with their families and likewise with the parents. The classrooms where the teacher was more engaged with the parent, the parent felt connected to their child’s learning and could transfer the school-home connection.

Summary and Conclusions

Family involvement in education has been identified as a beneficial factor in young children’s learning. Examining the parent-teacher relationship is a relatively understudied aspect of children’s experiences during preschool and a factor that may help parents take advantages of services.

Research Design

The purpose of the Research.

In this study, parent-teacher connection will be explored, specifically around transitioning to kindergarten in the public-school system from Head Start. From a parent perspective, do they feel prepared to advocate for themselves and their child in the public-school system after experiencing the Head Start model? In the Head Start Model, the program is designed to support the family unit. Family Advocates are assigned to each classroom and work closely with the family to ensure all the family's and child's basic needs are met. The family advocate arranges services for food, clothing, shelter, referrals to case management, therapies and other services that will strengthen the family unit. Health, dental and vision screens are conducted in the classrooms. The family advocate and teachers work with parents and provide monthly parent education on a wide range of topics. Teachers and family advocates have contact with the parents at least twice a day and build strong relationships with the parents. Since this is such an intense and intimate model, and most parents first expose to "school", does this model "prepare the parent for Kindergarten?"

Obtaining information from the surveys and parents in the interview will offer perspective and data for teachers and family advocates to use in their practice when working with families on the transition to public school.

The Research Question.

Does the Head Start model prepare the parents for building a strong teacher-parent relationship when navigating the public-school system? What are the expectations of the

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teachers from parents who completed a Head Start Program? Are parents “Kindergarten-Ready”?

In the Head Start Model, the program is designed to support the family unit. Family Advocates are assigned to each classroom and work closely with the family to ensure all the family’s and child’s basic needs are met. The family advocate arranges services for food, clothing, shelter, referrals to case management, therapies and other services that will strengthen the family unit. Health, dental and vision screens are conducted in the classrooms. The family advocate and teachers work with parents and provide monthly parent education on a wide range of topics. Teachers and family advocates have contact with the parents at least twice a day and build strong relationships with the parents. Since this is such an intense and intimate model, and most parents first expose to “school”, does this model “prepare the parent for Kindergarten?”

In the research, I have found so far, the literature focuses on the parent-teacher relationship and the child’s education. I am exploring the parents’ readiness or comfort level for when their child first enters public school. Since the Head Start Model looks at the whole family unit when designing the child’s educational plan, this information will be helpful for the important step of the child’s educational career; transitioning into kindergarten.

The central concepts related to the investigation.

Parent-teacher relationship in any educational setting can have a variety of different definitions and looks very different from classroom to classroom. In this research, I would like to look through the lens of a parent and their experience and expectation of their child’s teacher in Head Start to see if their expectations and experiences change or are altered once their child is in a public-school setting.

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The general approach of the investigation.

This research will be narrowed to classrooms I oversee in the City of Portland. My supervisees will help with the delivery of the printed-out surveys and a quick explanation of the survey's intended use. If I am not present to answer questions, I will connect with my teaching teams for any follow-up with parents. Surveys can be anonymous. There will be a spot at the end of the survey if a parent is interested in a short 10-20-minute interview. Arrangements will be made if interpreters are needed. My goal is to have at least two parents who have experienced the transition into public school and two parents who have not transitioned be a part of the in-depth interviews. I will be using a mixed-methods approach to present the data. After collecting all the data, I will interpret the surveys quantitatively and look for patterns and produce the data in numerical form. The quantitative data will work alongside the qualitative data of the interviews. With the interview data, I will look for keywords and concepts that are in each conversation to analyze the findings to better explain the answer to my research question.

The methods of inquiry

Surveys will be sent via email and paper copies will be distributed to include all parents involved in Head Start Program located in Portland. From the surveys, the four parents will be chosen for an in-depth interview. This research project will focus on parent perspective of parent-teacher relationships and the transition to Public School. Two parents with no history of children entering the public school will be interviewed and two parents who have history of completing Head Start and transitioning to Public School will be interviewed.

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Research Methods

Setting: The Head Start Program in Cumberland County is managed/delivered by the Community Action Agency, The Opportunity Alliance. The Opportunity Alliance supports Head Start locations in the cities of Portland, Westbrook, Gorham, Bridgton and Casco. The Head Start Program offers early educational opportunities and interventions to low-income families and children pre-natal to the age of five; entering kindergarten. The Early Childhood Education programs strive to provide all children with a safe, nurturing, engaging, enjoyable, and secure learning environment, to help them gain the awareness, skills, and the confidence necessary to succeed in their present environment, and to deal with later responsibilities in school and in life. Each child is treated as an individual in an inclusive community that values, respects, and responds to diversity. Head Start is a federal program that promotes the school readiness of children ages birth to 5 from low-income families by enhancing their cognitive, social, and emotional development. Head Start programs provide a learning environment that supports children's growth in language & literacy, cognition & general knowledge, physical development & health, social & emotional development, and approaches to learning. Head Start programs provide comprehensive services to enrolled children and their families, which include health, nutrition, social, and other services determined to be necessary by family needs assessments, in addition to education and cognitive development services. Head Start services are designed to be responsive to each child and family's ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage. Head Start emphasizes the role of parents as their child's first and most important teacher.

In Portland, the Head Start students are quite diverse. 26 different languages are spoken within the city and a clear majority of the student base are families are new Mainers and new to the United States. Classroom's also have a high percentage of families in crisis, students with

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identified behavioral and educational needs and are receiving services (OT, PT, Speech Therapy, Play Therapy) to meet educational appropriate developmental benchmarks for kindergarten. In Portland, the Opportunity Alliance offers three different models of Early Childhood classrooms: Head Start, Public Pre-K and Child Care. **The Head Start Model:** Head Start is a program that provides all children with a safe nurturing environment while supporting parents while they identify and meet their own goals and nurture the development of their children. Head Start is a four day, 4-hour program that runs September to Mid-May. Head Start is a free program to qualifying families. **The Public Pre-K Model:** Head Start partners with the Public-School System. Head Start and Department of Education funds are used to deliver this model. In these classrooms, transportation is provided by the school districts. To be eligible for these programs children must be 4 years of age and live in the identified school district. Programming runs 5 days, 5 hours and follows the public-school calendar. This is also a free program, income and family size is considered, however there are some slots available with no regard to income. And, the **Child Care Model:** Childcare is offered full-day/full year. We serve children 6 weeks to 5 years old. Subsidized child care fees are on a sliding scale and are based on household income and family size. To qualify for subsidized childcare slots, parents must be working, or going to school, or in job training. We accept CCSP vouchers, Aspire and Transitional child care clients. We also have some slots available without any regard to income.

Sampling/Participants

Surveys will be sent via email and paper copies will distributed to include all parents involved in Head Start Program located in Portland. To obtain a big enough sample of data I am including all the parents in the Head Start program in Portland (roughly 100 families). Return rates for previous surveys with in the program have averaged around the 20% range. The

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classrooms in Portland have an 88-100% English Language Learner population with parents with varying degrees of comfort of the English language. From the surveys, at least four parents will be chosen for an in-depth interview. The families will be chosen simply based on willing to participate further. I am hoping I will have two volunteers who have gone through the Head Start Program and transitioned into public school and two volunteers who have only been involved in the Head Start Program. If more families agree, I will arrange to meet with all willing to be a part of the interview as I do not anticipate a large group of volunteers. This research project will focus on parent perspective of parent-teacher relationships and the transition to Public School. Two parents with no history of children entering the public school will be interviewed and two parents who have history of completing Head Start and transitioning to Public School will be interviewed.

Description of methodology

The methods I will be using are surveying and interviewing. I chose these methods as I can obtain data from a wider group through the surveys and then a more detailed, personal data through the interviews. The interviews will explain the survey data in more depth and to allow more open ended questions to explain the complexity of the issue.

Operational measures

Data will be collected via surveys and interviews. The surveys will have a mixture of closed-ended questions, Likert-style assessment and the interviews will have similar questions with the additional open ended questions to offer more clarity and personal experiences.

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Data collection

I will start the collection of data after the holiday break in January 2017. I first will look at the demographic data collected during the students' enrollment process. This can provide background of the respondents. Surveys will be distributed to the families via email and printed handouts will be available for parents without email or if they prefer a paper copy. I will be available for questions or if any families need assistance with reading/writing. (See Appendix B for a copy of the survey). I will open the distribution and return of surveys for two weeks. Once I receive back as many as I can I will look to see who is interested for a more personal interview. I will then schedule with the four volunteers and arrange for any interpretation services if any of the volunteers do not speak English as their first language. Data collected will be recorded and transcribed with the volunteers' permission. (See Appendix C & D).

Data analysis

After collecting all the data, I will interpret the surveys quantitatively and look for patterns and produce the data in numerical form. The quantitative data will work alongside the qualitative data of the interviews. With the interview data, I will look for keywords and concepts that are in each conversation to analyze the findings to better explain the answer to my research question.

Expected findings

I believe I will find that parents not only see the Head Start preschool teacher as their child's teacher but more as the family's resource worker to help them navigate the social service systems and are at a loss when their child enters the public-school system. I believe there will be

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a difference between what parents expect from public-school than what parents experience in public-school.

Potential issues and weaknesses

The biggest barrier for my population of parents will be the English language. Materials will be distributed in English and will be explained face-to-face. Since the surveys are voluntary, a potential issue will be a lack of participation due to the language barrier. Interpretation services will be provided for interested families.

Research/Inquiry Narrative

Questionnaire

Fifty-four surveys were hand delivered to the parents of the Head Start students in two Head Start locations in Portland, Maine. The surveys asked parents about their communication and connection with their child's Head Start teachers. In the two locations, 91% of the parents identify with English not being their first language, 11% are or have been homeless in the 2016-2017 school year, 18.5% of the families have been in Maine less than six months, 15% of the children have identified IEP plans and 12% of the children are participating in Child Outpatient Play Therapy. Twenty-three parents (43%) responded to the survey. Of the returned surveys, I do not have an accurate number of families who needed assistance from a teacher or supporting staff member to fill out the survey. The questionnaire revealed that families have a deep connection to their child's teacher, feel informed and have frequent conversations. Parents expressed comfort with their child's teacher to talk about their child's behavior and their personal family stressors. The written surveys did not explore the connection between parent teacher relationships and the transition to public school. The information gathered provided a

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small amount of non-objective information about parent- teacher interactions. From these twenty-three surveys, four mothers volunteered to be interviewed to offer deeper discussion of parent teacher relationships and the transition to public school.

Interviews

Four mothers participated in interviews. Three of the mothers have experienced having children in the Head Start program and having older children in the public-school system. One mother only has experience with having a child in the Head Start preschool program and is anticipating a transition to the public school in the Fall of 2017. The interviews allowed for me to gain a deeper explanation of how parents felt connected to their child's teachers and perspectives that were not noted in the questionnaires. The interviews started out with formal questions yet with each participant, the interview turned into a conversation that offered a deeper understanding of parent-teacher relationships and the needs of parents as their children transition into public school from Head Start.

Data Analysis

The objective of this research was to look at the relationship parents have with their child's Head Start teacher and other educational support staff. The surveys had a mixture of closed-ended questions, Likert-style assessment and the interviews had similar closed- ended questions with the additional open ended questions to offer more clarity and personal experiences. The research provided a connection to work being done currently done it the Head Start Program around transitions.

The participants were parents from the three straight Head Start classrooms in Portland. Out of the 54 families who were asked to fill out the paper survey, 23 surveys were returned.

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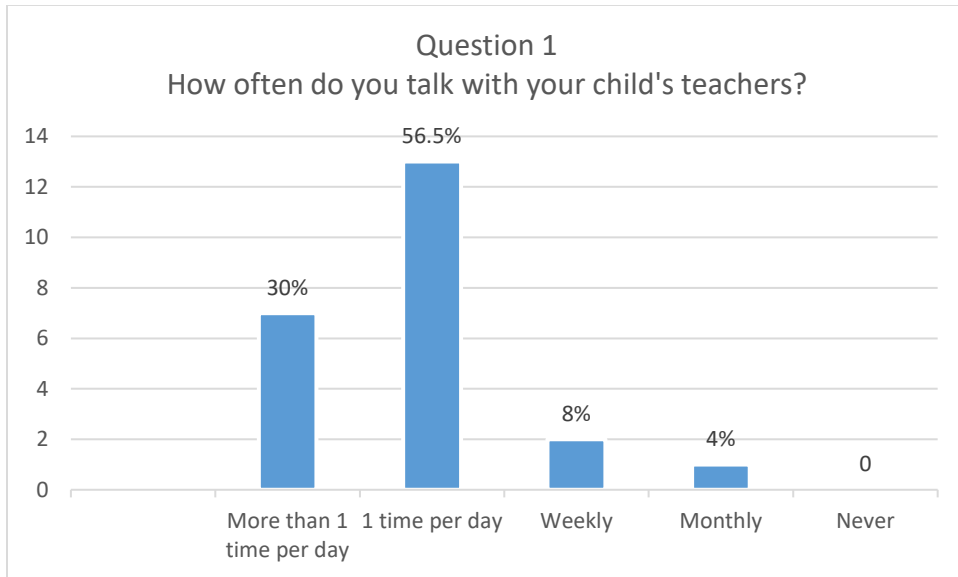
The clear majority of the returned surveys revealed that the families felt informed and connected to their child's classroom. A unique focus of Head Start is encouraging and supporting families to be actively involved in their children's early learning and empowering them to become lifelong advocates for their children's education. A high percentage of responses reflected that parents spoke mostly with their child's teacher about the child's behavior and/or education. Parent involvement activities were also top conversation topics between parent and teacher.

When families are involved in their children's early childhood education, children may experience greater success once they enter elementary school. Research suggests that family involvement in education can boost young children's academic success and that the transition between early childhood and elementary school can be a crucial period in children's development. Less is known about the experience of kindergarten transition from parents' perspective and the ways that children's early childhood education might promote their parents' involvement throughout the child's schooling career. A review of early childhood education and intervention literature suggests that these experiences can affect parents' current and future beliefs and practices (Barnard, 2001 as cited in Kreider, 2002 p. 1). Compared to non-preschool parents, parents of children who participated in preschool activities had higher parental involvement at home and at school.

The interviews were much harder for me to calculate as the conversations all had different themes. All the conversations stressed the parent's deep connection to their child's Head Start teacher, that the parents wanted the best educational experience for their children and that the three Non-English speaking mothers relied on their peers in the community for support when their child transitioned to public school.

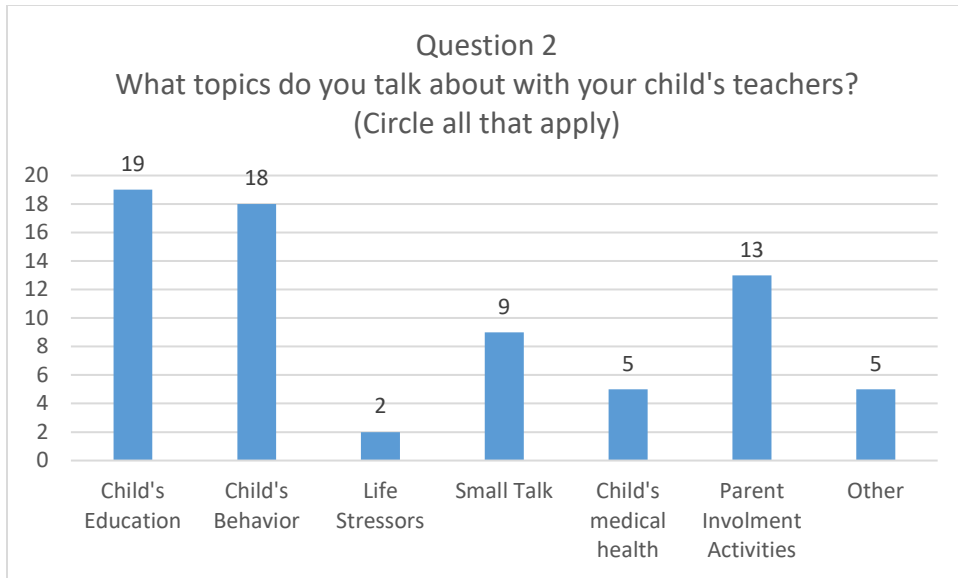
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Survey Results



From the returned surveys, 86.5% of the respondents reported that they talk to their child's teacher one or more times in a day. Preschool teachers seeking to develop productive partnerships with parents by understanding the complex issues that they face each day. Low-income families initially may not have the background of confidence to become collaborative partners (Bruckman & Blanton, 2003). However, with sensitivity and planning on the part of the preschool teacher, a strong relationship can be built over time. Offering parents a variety of ways to be involved such as volunteering in the classroom, at-home learning activities and chaperoning field trips may help to ensure parents have several opportunities to participate. Facilitating positive interactions and parent-teacher collaborations are well worth the teacher's effort in the preschool years with hopes to build a solid foundation for the child's future academic career.

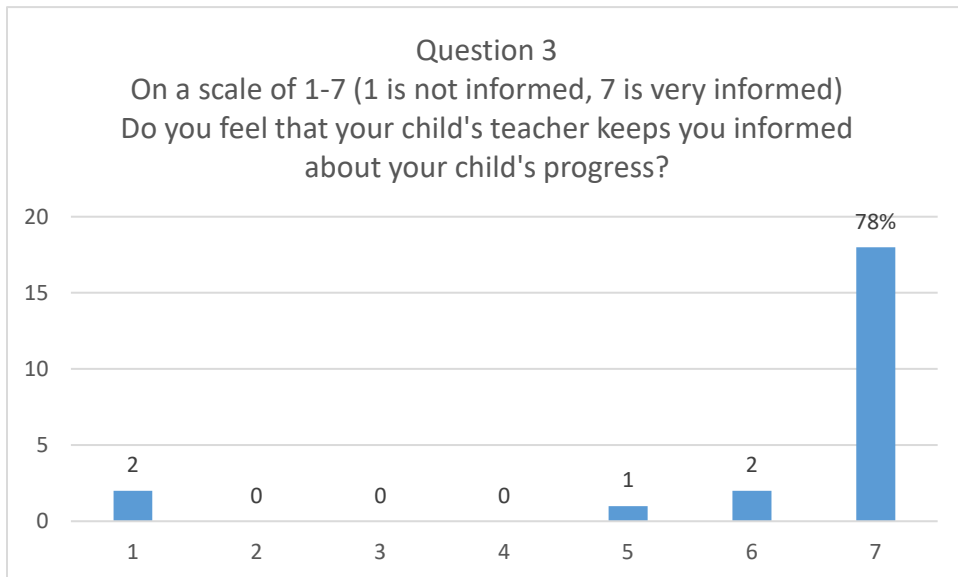
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Parents and teachers must work together to meet the diverse learning needs of children.

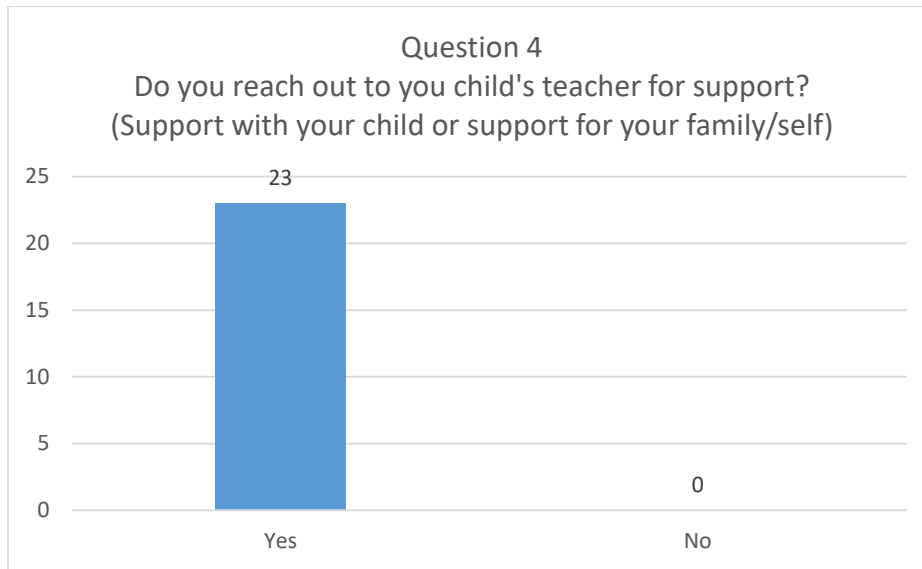
Parents are aware of the increasing emphasis on academic preparation and want to teach their children specific skills and behaviors alongside the classroom teachers.

I guess I just hope that he go and he pay attention, and he learn and just do the best he can. And if he can't I'm still gonna be his mom and I'm still gonna love him. But I'm going to push him to do the best that he can and I just hope that he's good. (Parent A, 2017).



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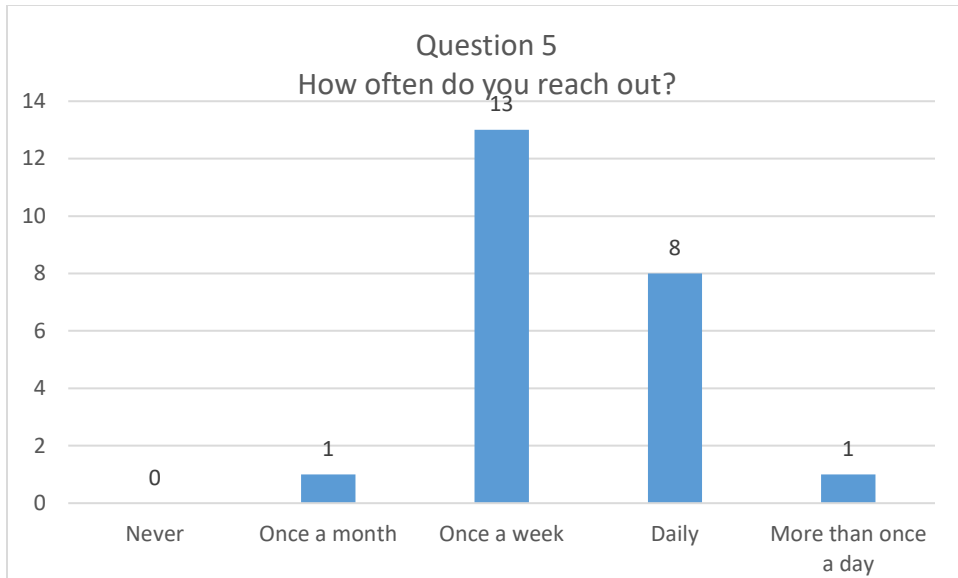
78% of the families felt very informed about their child's progress. Two out of the twenty-three families did not feel informed. With anonymous surveys, I am unable to follow-up with the parents who answered who felt uninformed.



Parents respond positively to teachers that are intentional in their attempts to collaborate with parents. Educational programs influence parents' involvement in children's education by offering invitations and opportunities to them to be active participants in their child's education. Parents tend to view involvement in their children's education as important when they perceive themselves as competent and able to have a positive influence on their children's learning (Bruckman & Blanton, 2003).

Head Start teacher make me feel special even when I homeless, with nothing and hungry. I was new to Maine, I did not know anyone. The nurse at WIC told me about Head Start for my daughter. I was so happy, the teachers are so nice, family. The teachers are like my sisters. I just love them. (Parent C, 2017)

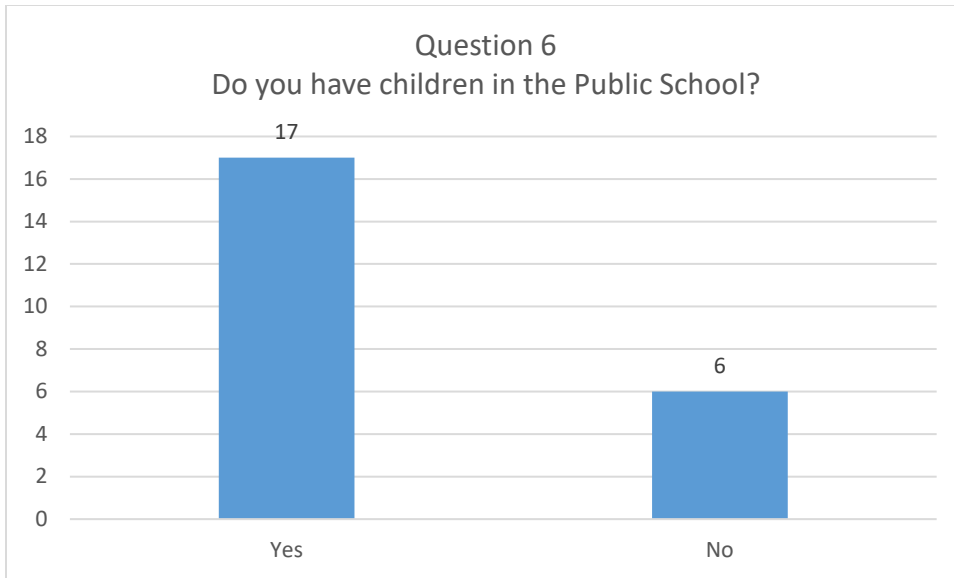
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Family involvement in education has been identified as a beneficial factor in young children’s learning. Examining the parent-teacher relationship is a relatively understudied aspect of children’s experiences during preschool and a factor that may help parents take advantages of services. In a study conducted by Mendez in 2010, it was noted that teachers who interact more frequently with parents at school report greater feelings of connectedness with their families and likewise with the parents. The classrooms where the teacher was more engaged with the parent, the parent felt connected to their child’s learning and could transfer the school-home connection.

“I can ask my child’s teacher for help with anything. Grace has helped me with housing and food. Somedays I need help with doctors and Grace always helps. She sometimes goes with me when I am nervous my English” (Parent C, 2017).

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From the 23 returned surveys, I had four mothers willing to volunteer for an interview to discuss the answers to these six question with more detail. Three of the mothers have experience with Head Start and the transition to public school and one mother will be transitioning to the public school when her child enters kindergarten in the fall. “I do not know what to expect when Tonya goes to Kindergarten. I hope the new teachers still help me.” (Parent B, 2017)

Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to examine parents’ “readiness” as they transition to Public school when their child enters Kindergarten. The goal from this research was to understand the behaviors, attitudes and interactions between Head Start Parent and teacher and whether coming from a Head Start classroom affects if parents are feeling supported entering Public school when their child enrolls in Kindergarten. Findings underscore the importance of collaborative efforts between Head Start, parents and schools to effectively support families in the transition to kindergarten.

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Much of the data indicates that parents feel connected, supported and informed to their child's preschool classroom and teachers and disconnected once their child enters public school. Non-English speaking parents rely on peers that have been through the transition from Head Start to the public school to navigate through the public-school system with their first child. The finds reveal a greater understanding of the needs of parents and inform the development of new strategies to address the challenges involved. Collaborations between Head Start and elementary schools can help reduce the culture shock experienced by parents. Head Start teachers can prepare parents for the differences in how communication will look like in elementary school versus Head Start. Teachers and other Head Start staff can provide parents opportunities to practice advocating for their children in the elementary school before their child is enrolled by offering supportive opportunities to engage in the elementary school.

Parents feel connected, supported and informed in Head Start

Effective communication is essential for building school-family partnerships. It constitutes the foundation for all other forms of family involvement in education. Positive parent-school communications benefit parents. The way schools communicate and interact with parents affects the extent and quality of parents' home involvement with their children's learning. Parents also benefit from being involved in their children's education by getting ideas from school on how to help and support their children, and by learning more about the school's academic program and how it works. Perhaps most important, parents benefit by becoming more confident about the value of their school involvement. Parents develop a greater appreciation for the important role they play in their children's education. "The teachers are like my sisters. I just love them." (Parent C, 2017)

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Non-English Speaking parents seek out non-English speaking peers who have been through the transition for support

Personal contact, including conferences, home visits, telephone calls, and curriculum nights or open houses, seems to be the most effective form of communication and may be among the most familiar. However, the establishment of effective school-home communication has grown more complex as demographics quickly change in neighborhood schools. The great diversity among families means that it is not possible to rely on a single method of communication that will reach all homes with a given message.

“When my son started school, my neighbors told me about bus and if I need to talk to he teacher. We go together she English better, she talk for me” (Parent D, 2017).

In the various conversations with the three ELL mothers, it was clear that once the children transition to Kindergarten, they do not expect the same level of support from their kindergarten teachers as they do from the Head Start teachers. One mother was happy she had younger children who will be in the Head Start program in the next school year for the continued support. All the mothers have support within their cultural community and will rely on peers for support. Also, there was an undertone belief that once the child entered into school, “teachers were the experts” and parents are not qualified for that role as formal educator.

Parents do not feel connected, welcomed or supported in Public School

For children to feel safe and secure in their new learning environments, they need guidance, assurance, and as much continuity in expectation and experiences as possible. Parents need the same thing.

I don't think there is a very good transition of parents...it's a huge culture shock for parents who were in this warm, supportive, welcoming, help with everything..anything

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environment of Head Start...then you go to the public school and it's not the same at all, it's a huge culture shock. I learned to advocate and stand up for myself and my son's education in Head Start. When he went to the public school, I couldn't just drop in. I had to make an appointment. Every time I felt like I was a hassle, a trouble-maker when all I wanted to do was help my son. I wish I could talk with them (kindergarten teachers) like at Head Start. I know teachers are busy at Kindergarten sometimes I don't know about things at school and they don't know what goes on at home (Parent A, 2017).

Transition practices need to be effective to make a difference. Effective transition practices are activities that teachers, families, and community members can use to create supports and foster familiarity across early childhood settings and kindergarten (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008).

Implications

Expanding access to high-quality preschool programs is a growing focus for policy-makers across the United States. Research shows that high-quality early education, such as Head Start, can ensure that children are prepared for kindergarten. A unique focus of Head Start is encouraging and supporting families to be actively involved in their children's early learning experience and empowering them to become lifelong advocates for their children's education. (Fuentes and Troe, 2015). In 2015, Yvette Sanchez Fuentes and Jessica outline three key components that have helped facilitate successful transitions from Head Start to kindergarten.

- Implement school visits and introduce kindergarten expectations and policies in Head Start programs
- Create a family-to-school relationship
- Build regular communication and records transfer between programs

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Implement school visits and introduce kindergarten expectations and policies in Head Start programs

Providing parents with the information about the logistics of the transition process (how to register, when to register, when orientations and other meetings are, when they can visit schools, etc.) as well as other details about the elementary school logistics was one of the key things parents talked about as important for helping them with the transition process. It also appeared to provide the foundation for reducing parents' feeling of helplessness and engaging them in the transition process. For these parents, information was power and without the help from the Head Start teachers, parents would lack the critical information for understanding and navigating the transition process. "The teachers at Head Start were the ones who did everything to help us get to kindergarten. They gave us lots of information and reminded me of our appointments. The teacher also organized a meeting before so we knew where we were suppose to go and what to expect (Parent A, 2017).

Because I did not know anything, I was wondering what I needed to do especially since I do not speak English. I was scared, and the things Grace (Head Start Teacher) did made me feel more relaxed and supportive during my child's meeting at the school (Parent B, 2017).

All the mothers interviewed also expressed the importance of visiting their children's kindergarten yet expressed how their first visit is done during their child's kindergarten screening which is a very stressful time for the parent. As a program, Head Start should consider ways to build a deeper connection to the area public schools and hold events that welcome parents to visit without the stress of a screening. The Head Start program should also invite leaders and teachers from the area elementary schools to their classrooms to highlight differences in the practices. By highlighting the different practices, teachers will gain a perspective and

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build transition activities into their work to support the differences. For example, in a Head Start classroom, meals are served family-style offering an environment rich in dialog, servings and support from teachers. In elementary school, mealtime is cafeteria based with more structure and expectation to be self-reliant. If a Head Start teacher can begin to prepare the children for this difference, the transition will be less foreign to the child upon entering. Also, if the kindergarten teacher understands that the child is coming to school with a different view of mealtime at school, the teachers can bridge the connection between the two designs. Allowing public school leaders and teachers into the Head Start classroom will strengthen the professional relationship between programs. This strengthened collaboration will support parents when the children transition from one school to the next.

Create a family-to-school relationship

Developing sustained and comprehensive relationships with schools, families, and the community is a long-standing area of need and inquiry for schools and researchers alike. There is no curriculum guide that provides a step-by-step approach to developing powerful connections between schools, families and communities that would be applicable in all contexts and surmount the incredible complexity and unique nature of the relationship in a Head Start setting. These relationships take time, vigilance, a deep understanding of the demographics, and a desire to bring together the schools, the families, and the communities together to identify needs, and most importantly, the abundance of hard and soft resources to support the one unifying mission- the aspirations of the children in the community (Molina, 2013).

Head Start requires teachers to conduct two home-visits per year. The first is conducted prior to the start of the school year and the second is done in the spring to discuss kindergarten transition. The definition of a home visit: a visit by a teacher to the student's home in the hope

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of increasing connections between school staff and students in their community. There are many possible goals for these visits including: bridging cultural barriers, reporting on academic progress, enlisting parental support to increase academic achievement, and giving parents the tools to do so. Ideally the first visit conducted before the school year begins helps the teacher find out about the needs of the family and interests of individual students. This initial meeting is important because it helps the parent and student become acquainted with the teacher in a non-intimidating way. This visit can also help teachers have a better understanding of the various strengths and challenges faced by each student and to meet the student and their family in a relaxed setting. During the visit the teacher documents and records important information about the student including issues that could become potential problems such as health issues, relevant family situations, or previous school problems.

By leaving the classroom and entering the homes of their students, the place where parents and families have the most authority, teachers are recognizing the fact that parents are their children's first educators and know their child better than anyone else. Parents may be more willing to share their concerns and teachers can encourage their continued involvement in their child's academic life. At this first relationship-building visit the parent is personally invited, by the teacher, to the school's first parent night/open house. Opening the lines of communication early, the teacher can enlist the parents to be actively involved in their child's education. After all, home is more than a physical meeting space or four walls, it's where values and beliefs are formed and nurtured. By understanding family values the teacher gains priceless insight into what makes her students tick. It is realistic to expect that there may be some parents who are unwilling or unable to meet with the teacher in such an intimate fashion but an effort must be made none the less.

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I have always thought of education as a three-legged stool: student, parent, and teacher. With all three legs intact, the student has a solid foundation, however if one of those “legs” is missing then the process is more challenging. Teachers, administrators, and parents must all be part of the foundation of student success and be willing to support the student in their academic career.

Before the school year began, Grace made an appointment to meet me at my home. I was very nervous. She was so sweet. I was so proud when she said my home was nice and Tonya was able to show her her bedroom. I did not have to worry about my English and I was able to let Grace know about the landlord. Everyday Grace asks me how I am doing. It makes me feel good (Parent C, 2017).

Build regular communication and records transfer between programs

The art of communication involves listening and speaking as well as reading and writing. Teachers need to be highly skilled in all these areas to excel in their profession. Proficient communicators receive information, understand and synthesize it and express themselves at a high level. They make excellent teachers because they can transmit knowledge, skills and values at the same time they communicate their caring for the students entrusted to their care. They help motivate students to learn.

Communication is both receptive and expressive. Teachers must be skilled at listening to their students as well as explaining things clearly. Teachers need clarity of thought to present the material. They must be able to break down complex ideas into simpler parts and smaller steps to transmit to their students. They must be able to adapt their methods of communication to all students regardless of ability or learning style. They can "read" their students and adapt to the needs of the individual. Effective communication includes transforming the boring into the interesting and having good presentation skills.

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In addition, good teachers communicate concern and caring by their tone of voice and use of body language. They transmit genuine commitment and affection for their students. Good teachers care about their students' progress and let their students know it always. They get to know their students' hopes, fears and preferences and communicate this knowledge to their students and families. They communicate their appreciation for what their students do by celebrating their successes and constantly encouraging them. This helps students and parent feel recognized and validated.

Teachers must be able to express themselves both verbally and in writing to report student progress to parents. They need to explain the strengths and weaknesses of their students so that parents will understand the message and be receptive rather than defensive. This is especially important when the teacher conveys a difficult message about the student's misbehavior or learning problems. The message must be delivered clearly and with tact. Teachers should be comfortable communicating with parents regularly, with phone calls and informal notes in addition to formal reports (Silver, 2016).

Lastly, teachers must be able to communicate their observations and recommendations to teachers and/or leadership in the transferring elementary school. Teachers in Head Start have daily interactions with the families and children and can transfer that valuable information to the new schools. The teacher ultimately becomes that bridge between preschool and public school and if done in a way the parent can be involved in the process, the parent can ultimately begin a relationship without starting completely from the beginning with a new teacher.

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Personal Reflection

Thinking about how to sum up the process of a project of this magnitude, I am reminded of one of my favorite Chinese Proverbs, “The journey is the Reward”. This Capstone process has been quite rewarding. In the beginning, I feared committing to a topic. Now I am finding ways to infuse my research into my work. When I began this process, I had recently transitioned from working as a director of the preschool program in an RSU to a mid-level manager in Cumberland County’s Head Start preschool programs. In both educational settings, the transition to kindergarten was a focus. Emphasis is placed on teachers to prepare the students for this transition yet I wonder if the parents are truly prepared for this momentous step in their child’s educational career? How do teachers support this process with the parents?

At both the RSU programs and the Head Start programs, staff turnover was extremely high. Often teacher positions were vacant and classroom teaching teams worked with unqualified substitute teachers or worked in high ratios. Staff moral and retention was extremely low. Initially, I believed that parents and children would not have meaningful relationships with the teachers due to the stress of the staffing situation. Would parents feel supported when the teachers were constantly changing? I discovered that this variable did not seem to factor into parent perspective. Parents could develop daily communication and meaningful relationships with the teachers even when teaching teams were inconsistent. Teacher did not present to parents as stress or insincere. In Head Start, teachers work in teams of three in the classroom which offers three separate teachers for parents to connect with and communicate during the school year. In my role, I have a deep connection with the families. I directly supervise the Lead Teachers and Family Advocates and can bring concerns from families and employees to committees at a management level to offer recommendations for change.

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Head Start requires a yearly self-assessment that looks at the program's design and how it meets the standards set by Head Start. This year, I participated in the sub-committee that examined children's transitions. The committee determined there is not adequate guidance for teachers on how to support one another when a child transitions internally through the different program models or classrooms. We also noted that there was not a transition plan written for children entering kindergarten. The recommendations made through this study will be presented to the committee and included in the continuing work of the group. The goal of the committee work is to design professional development opportunities for the teachers that will discuss the following: The importance of the parent-teacher relationships, how it is important for teacher and parent to visit the new schools, to introduce kindergarten expectations and policies during the Head Start program year, and to build regular communication and records transfers between Head Start and the public school prior to the start of the child's entrance to the public school.

During this research period, I was plagued with unpredicted events that took me away from direct contact with families. Constant staffing deficiencies, two building closures and an excessive amount of snow day closures limited my time to gather data from all the Head Start classrooms in Portland. I feel as though my data was very limited yet truly represented the program. The interviews with the four mothers offered a beautiful, on-going conversation that has deepened my relationship with the parents. This small amount of data has generated the beginnings of future program improvement.

Now, as I conclude this part of the journey with graduation, I feel like a new adventure is beginning because of this project. The process of examining a broad topic, parent-teacher relationships, in my work environment allowed me to question, investigate and improve areas of the program. The collection of data, though small, will drive me to the next question to evaluate.

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I look forward to presenting my research process to my colleagues. The recommendations from literature and the parents involved will provide me with a road map to suggest to the committee charged with the design the professional development opportunities for teachers. Parents will now be better represented because of the inquiry and children will benefit as they begin their public- school career.

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Appendix A

Administrator's Consent Form

Dear Head Start Director,

As part of the University of Maine at Farmington's M.S. Ed. program, I am being asked to conduct research as part of my Capstone Project. The purpose of the research will focus on parent perspective of parent-teacher relationships and the transition to Public School.

I have created anonymous surveys for parents to fill out and have asked for four parent volunteers to participate in 20 minute interviews exploring their perceptions "parent-readiness" for public school. I am seeking your approval for this research to occur. Interview transcriptions of the interview will not contain any identifiable information, such as location, or name of school has been removed from the transcript. I will also ensure that the audio file and transcription file will be deleted from their computer. The de-identified transcripts may be used in the body of the Capstone paper, and the data may be used for a publication or presentation outside the course.

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact the course instructor,

Dr. Christopher Strople, Christopher.Strople@maine.edu

Thank you for considering this request to conduct research,

Nicole Gagnon

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Appendix B

ADULT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Nicole Gagnon, in connection to a class at the University of Maine at Farmington. The purpose of the research is to gather information about parent teacher communication in their child's transition into Kindergarten.

What Will You Be Asked to Do?

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to take part in one 20-30-minute interview. This interview will be recorded and transcribed. After the transcription, any identifying information will be removed.

Risks

- There is the possibility that you may be uncomfortable. Feel free to skip any questions you do not wish to answer.
- The time and inconvenience of the meeting may be risks of participating in the study.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to you from participating in the study. However, as a participant you may enjoy that your offered perspective will benefit the Head Start program in the future. Aside from this benefit to the participant, this research will help me and my colleagues learn more about parent-teacher communication during preschool-kindergarten/Head Start/Public School.

Confidentiality

The research is being conducted under the direct supervision of the course instructors at the University of Maine at Farmington. Your identity will be known by myself and the instructors but you will not be identified in the documents produced by this course or any publications or presentations. The original Informed Consent and participant key will be kept by course instructors in locked file cabinets. The audio file. And my original transcription will be kept until the course is completed then destroyed. The transcripts, with no identifiable information, will be kept for up to five years by the researcher.

Voluntary

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

I, _____, fully understand the purpose of this research and the procedures to be followed. I understand that my records will be kept confidential, my participation is voluntary, and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I also recognize that I may skip any questions I don't wish to respond to. Results of this research will be shared in the form of one or more publications and verbal presentations. If you have any questions about this study, please contact me, Nicole Gagnon, at Nicole.gagnon@opportunityalliance.org or (207) 553-5956. By signing below, I assert that I fully understand the above and give my consent to serve as a subject in this research. (If you would like a summary of the results, please make the request of the researcher at the contact given above).

(Date)

(Signature)

HEAD START PARENT-TEACHER ENGAGEMENT

Appendix C

Interview for all parents:

1. How often do you talk with your child's teacher?
 - a. More than 1 time per day
 - b. 1 time per day
 - c. Weekly
 - d. Monthly
 - e. Never
2. What topics do you talk about with your child's teacher? (circle all that apply)
 - a. Child's education
 - b. Child's behavior
 - c. Life stressors
 - d. Small talk
 - e. Child's medical health
 - f. Parent involvement activities
 - g. Other
3. On a scale of 1-7 (1 is not informed, 7 is very informed)
Do you feel that your child's teachers keep you informed?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
4. Do you reach out to your child's teachers for support?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
5. How often do you reach out?
 - a. Never
 - b. Once a month
 - c. Once a week
 - d. Daily
 - e. More than once a day
6. Do you have older children in Public School?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
7. Are you willing to participate in an interview with Nicole Gagnon to discuss the above questions in more detail?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

If yes, please provide name and the best way to contact for interview:

Thank you for your time and participation in this study

Nicole Gagnon

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Appendix D

Interview for parents without transition:

1. How often do you talk with your child's teacher?
 - a. More than 1 time per day
 - b. 1 time per day
 - c. Weekly
 - d. Monthly
 - e. Never

2. What topics do you talk about with your child's teacher? (circle all that apply)
 - a. Child's education
 - b. Child's behavior
 - c. Life stressors
 - i. Small talk
 - d. Child's medical health
 - e. Parent involvement activities
 - f. Other

3. On a scale of 1-7 (1 is not informed, 7 is very informed)

Do you feel that your child's teachers keep you informed?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4. Do you reach out to your child's teachers for support?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
5. How often do you reach out?
 - a. Never
 - b. Once a month
 - c. Once a week
 - d. Daily
 - e. More than once a day

What types of support do you look for from your teachers? Why don't you reach out for support?

6. Do you expect your Head Start teachers to be a part of the transition process to public school?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

7. Your child is about to enter kindergarten, what types of communication do you expect from the kindergarten teachers and the new school? Do you expect teacher communication to be the same as in Head Start or can you imagine it to be different?

Thank you for your time and participation in this study

Nicole Gagnon

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Appendix D-cont.

Interview for parents with Head Start and Public School experience:

1. How often do you talk with your child's Head Start teacher? Public School Teacher?
 - c. More than 1 time per day
 - d. 1 time per day
 - e. Weekly
 - f. Monthly
 - g. Never
2. What topics do you talk about with your child's Head Start teacher/Public School Teacher?
(circle all that apply)
 - a. Child's education
 - b. Child's behavior
 - c. Life stressors
 - d. Small talk
 - e. Child's medical health
 - f. Parent involvement activities
 - g. Other
3. On a scale of 1-7 (1 is not informed, 7 is very informed)
Do you feel that your child's teachers keep you informed?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4. Do you reach out to your child's Head Start/Public School teachers for support?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
5. How often do you reach out?
 - a. Never
 - b. Once a month
 - c. Once a week
 - d. Daily
 - e. More than once a day

What types of support do you look for from your teachers? Why don't you reach out for support?

- Is support different in Head Start than Public School? Can you describe the difference? Do you/did you expect the same level of support from your public school teacher as from your Head Start teachers?
6. Do/Did you expect your Head Start teachers to be a part of the transition process to public school?
 - Did your Head Start teacher support you with your older child when you transitioned? What did that look like for you and your child?
 7. Your younger child is about to enter kindergarten, what types of communication do you expect from the kindergarten teachers and the new school? Did this happen in the past?
 8. Are there any supports/communication you miss or wished that public school had like in Head Start? And vice versa, is there some supports/communication in public school you wished Head Start offered?

Thank you for your time and participation in this study

Nicole Gagnon