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Transition to kindergarten : a project for the Grinnell-Newburg School District

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Transition to kindergarten : a project for the Grinnell-Newburg School District

Abstract

This project looked at the following research questions:

How can schools establish a strong transition plan for students entering kindergarten?

What information would be valuable to evaluate and revise a kindergarten transition plan for the benefit of all parties involved?

In order to answer these questions, current literature was reviewed looking at all parties involved in the transition to kindergarten: children, families, schools, and the community. The path to the project included collaboration initially with kindergarten and preschool staff and led to the final development of the project collaborating with two community members, a preschool laboratory director and a scholar who had done advanced post-masters studies in Early Childhood Education. The project was developed considering the resources in our community and based on past experiences. We considered what practices had been used in the past, such as parent meetings and the opportunity for preschool children to visit kindergarten. Based on the review of literature, additions were made to the plan to include a community-based program with the aid of a transition coordinator, who is identified as a vital part of the transition plan. We also realized that the plan would benefit all parties if it extended over a two-year period. The author believes that the transition plan outlined in this project is a good first step in providing a strong, appropriate transition to kindergarten for children, families, and the community. The author suggests multiple data points to collect regarding the current transitional kindergarten program to evaluate its appropriateness and benefit to children and families. This information will allow decision-makers to adjust the plan over time since it is intended to be dynamic and ongoing.

Transition to Kindergarten:
A Project for the Grinnell-Newburg School District

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Division of Early Childhood Education
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
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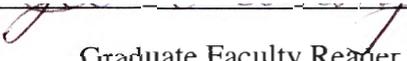
By
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April, 2013

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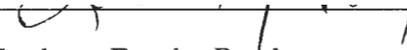
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has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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ABSTRACT

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Chapter I

Introduction

Description of Topic

“Transition into kindergarten has long been recognized as one of the most important events in the lives of children and their families” (Pianta, as cited in Dail & McGee, 2008, para. 3). This project will review current practices that are used in a variety of school districts for the transition process, and their appropriateness. The result will be a proposal for a transition or round-up program for the Grinnell-Newburg school district.

Informal discussions with several kindergarten and preschool teachers revealed a variety of practices and activities used to help children and families transition to school. This project will review current practices documented through research articles in order to develop an effective and successful transition program plan.

Nationally, entities have debated about what should or should not be included in the kindergarten transition process. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) endorsed a position statement that was developed by the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) entitled *STILL Unacceptable Trends in Kindergarten Entry and Placement* (2001). This statement was first published in 1987. It was updated and revised in 2000. “Unfortunately, the practices, which caused the members of the Association to become alarmed in the 1980’s, continue – this in spite of a preponderance of evidence of their lack of benefit and even harm to children” (NAECS/SDE, 2001, Overview of Position Statement, para. 2). Their concerns included inappropriate use of readiness tests, denying entrance of eligible children, the idea of transitional classes, and retention in either preschool or kindergarten.

Kindergarten readiness can mean a variety of things. It may mean that children have gained a predetermined set of skills before entering school. But since the National Education Goals Panel released its number one goal of having all children starting school ready to learn by the year 2000 (Shore & National Education Goals Panel, 1998), the intent of readiness has changed to also include the school's readiness for children, and family and community support. Considering the idea of children being ready for school, use of assessments and screenings has been a concern. A variety of tools have been used, such as the Kindergarten Student Entrance Profile (KSEP), a screening tool used to "assess the physical, social-emotional, and cognitive elements of school readiness" (Lilles et al., 2009, p. 73), as well as several other assessments that are either district made or more formal. The danger behind the use of screenings and assessments is that they can be abused by using them for purposes for which they are not designed; that is, using a tool as the sole basis for child placement, and lack of teacher training in their use (NAECS/SDE, 2001). The screenings and assessments do not predict outcomes for student achievement, but rather should be used as intended and for beginning information to help children succeed. "They are not used to create barriers to school entry or to sort children into what are perceived to be homogeneous groups" (NAECS/SDE, 2001, Summary of Principles #5).

More recent research has focused on how to help schools be ready. In 2004, the Annie E. Casey Foundation funded a project in six states called the Ready Schools pilot project. The research suggested that there was a lack of communication between schools and preschool programs and day care centers, that curriculum needed to be aligned – including some professional development done jointly with the two groups -- and that a need existed for

increasing connections with families as well as working with the community (Clark & Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2008).

Family support and involvement is already a part of many transition practices, but most often they take place after school has begun. These tend to be low intensity, generic contacts via flyers, brochures, and open houses. A more proactive approach would include reaching out with two-way communication, reaching backward in time before the first day of school, and reach with appropriate intensity using a variety of practices as they are needed in the community (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2002). In a survey done by McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro, and Wildenger (2007), families expressed concerns that included attending a new school, expectations for their children's ability to follow directions, as well as other behavioral problems. The researchers also found that families who qualified for government financial aid engaged in fewer transition activities, so it is "essential for professionals to reach out to these families to create linkages" (McIntyre et al., 2007, p. 87).

Rationale

The impetus for choosing this project came from a debate among my district kindergarten teachers about what should be included in a round-up. Our district hadn't had an official round-up for approximately 20 years. Much of the debate the past few years had focused on readiness testing, what to include, how the information should be used, and sharing information with parents. We also had concerns about logistics with more than one building and the barrier of not knowing which children would be in our classrooms until a few weeks before school started. McIntyre et al. (2007) recognized this barrier along with large class size and a lack of resources for teachers to prepare for the kindergarten round-up and other transition activities.

Among those teachers outside our school district whom I had informally contacted, a wide variety of transition activities were practiced in the state. Some were very low intensity – flyers, newspaper articles, open houses – while other activities were much more involved, like home visits. Our district had provided early registration, held a spring parent meeting, and invited preschools and childcare programs to bring their school-age children for a short walk through our buildings. In the fall, children and their families came to school the day before school started to meet their teachers and see their classrooms.

Another aspect of our recent transition practices was collaboration between preschool and kindergarten teachers. Our community was chosen to participate in Communities of Literate Iowa Kids (CLIK). Part of the funding for this program allowed collaboration and group learning of a variety of topics related to kindergarten and preschool. We started to develop sets of benchmarks that we would like children to strive toward in order for them to be ready for school. We had found that there was great variety in what was offered in our community and believed CLIK would be of benefit to children. Within a few years of this effort, the Iowa Early Learning Standards were developed. Along with this came the state four-year-old program that had also helped to give preschools guidance to help children develop. This collaboration had declined in the past few years, but one thing that remained was inviting school-aged children to visit kindergarten classrooms in the spring.

Finally, we had a new administrator who was in favor of reviving some sort of round-up and I had kept in touch with several local preschool teachers who saw the need as well. The governor of our state had also proposed that more be done with transition and readiness as part of his early childhood plan. Therefore, I saw that the study of kindergarten transition would be of benefit to the children in my district as it could actually be implemented.

Purpose of Project

Reviewing the topic of transition practices will give me information about the variety of activities that are currently implemented in a variety of districts. After studying this information I can determine what is appropriate, and how to include the diverse families and children in our district including children with disabilities and families from a variety of cultures.

Since we have not had a round-up in our district, this project will also help to determine what should be included in an appropriate round-up as well as other activities that will help families and children transition to school. Additional activities will help to lead teachers and other school staff, as well as preschool staff, to develop transition practices well before school begins in the fall to help start the kindergarten year off in the most positive light for everyone.

This project will end with a proposal to my district for a transition plan that will benefit all parties involved, including children, families, school, preschools, and the community. It will also include a way to evaluate what we have done in order to find ways to continue to learn from and improve our plan.

Importance of Review

The details gained in this project will be of benefit to my community as we look at how to develop a kindergarten round-up and transition program. It could be shared with a variety of groups, such as preschool teachers, administrators, families, and community members so that they could understand the choices that we make in our programming. It could also be shared with other communities.

An effective transition to kindergarten can help parents develop positive relationships with teachers so they can work together to support children's progress. Information gained in this

review can support this, as well as generate positive attitudes toward school and the district in general.

Terminology

Following are definitions of terms that will be used in this study.

Transition – The process or a period of changing from one state or condition to another

Readiness – School readiness, in the broadest sense, is about children, families, early environments, schools, and communities. Children are not innately “ready” or “not ready” for school. Their skills and development are strongly affected by their families and their interactions with other people and environments before coming to school (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004).

Transitional classes – A developmental or readiness class that allows a child’s entrance to kindergarten to be delayed or a class between kindergarten and first grade to help children be ready for the demands of the program (NAECS/SDE, 2001).

Retention – to hold back, in this case, a child from promotion to the next grade in school.

Eligibility – Legal entry cutoff date for kindergarten enrollment (NAECS/SDE, 2001).

Round-up - Activities done prior to kindergarten entry to acquaint children and families with school and provide a means of pre-registration for families so that schools can plan for the upcoming year.

Culture – any group that has a shared set of values, beliefs, practices, access to resources, social institutions, and a sense of identity, and that communicates those values, beliefs, and so forth to the next generation (Doucet & Tudge, 2007).

Continuity – The connections between settings/events over time (SERVE Center, 2005, p. 6).

Research Questions

This project will address the following research questions.

1. How can schools establish a strong transition plan for students entering kindergarten?
2. What information would be valuable to evaluate and revise a kindergarten transition plan for the benefit of all parties involved?

Chapter II

Methodology

Procedure to Develop the Project

In this section, I will divide the information into two parts. The first part will explain how I chose articles and books for the literature review. The second part will look at the steps I took to gather other information needed for the project.

Literature Review Resources

Method to locate sources. I began my research by using Rod Library's database. I accessed the ERIC search engine and looked for articles on *transition*. This gave me quite a few articles, but I needed to narrow it down. I added the descriptor of *kindergarten*. I had also decided to look for peer-reviewed articles and chose *early childhood* as well. After looking at the abstracts of some of the articles I thought might work, I noticed that the term *readiness* was used in several and decided to search with that and *kindergarten* as well.

I knew that NAEYC had developed position statements that addressed these issues, so I went to the organization's website to access these statements. From there, I looked at the references cited to continue the search. I used this practice of considering references cited in articles I had chosen from the ERIC search engine as well.

I wanted some more general information about what other districts were doing for transition and did a Google search for *transition in kindergarten* and in another search used the term *readiness*. I used Google Scholar with the same descriptors to see if there were other sources I would want to choose. I searched my own documents since I remembered I had done a paper on kindergarten readiness earlier in our Master's program and I considered the articles I

had chosen for this paper as well. One of the professors who are reading this project suggested authors and sites that would be worth investigating for added information.

Method to select sources. To narrow down the articles and searches, I was sure to choose articles that were related to kindergarten or early childhood education. Some of the transition articles were about other types of educational transition. At first, I focused my selection of articles that were published since 1999, knowing that education had changed during the President George W. Bush era. After looking at references of some articles I had chosen and the position statements, I decided to include some articles that were older since they were the basis for some current research. I also chose articles that were cited in several of the articles since they were a basis for those authors as well.

To build my own background, I selected some sources that were not research articles, but reviews that would lead me to more sources and consolidate some of the information I had been reading. I also looked for information that parents or other members of the general public might access and then base their decisions about transition to kindergarten.

Procedures to analyze sources. As I skimmed each article, I highlighted statements that fit my interests. I sorted these articles by the topic on which they focused – families and transition, readiness, transition practices. From there, I noted if they were duplicating information; the quality of the article's content; such as whether it contained research, or brief, general information; and authors that were cited repeatedly. These guidelines helped me to decide what sources were of high quality and would give me information to build the project.

Criteria to include literature. Articles that I chose to include met the requirements I had set to select sources. Some were position statements that I felt were very necessary when trying to decide on appropriateness of transition practices and readiness. Other criteria included authors

who were cited frequently in the reference sections of articles I had found. Some of the articles gave me new information about current best practices with kindergarten transition and examples of programming that were used by studies from reputable sources.

Other Project Resources

Principal interview. Before choosing this option for my Master's Project, I talked with my principal to get her thoughts on what we might need for a kindergarten round-up and transition program. Questions I asked included why we should have a round-up, what we would gain from a round-up, and how I could assist the district with this project.

Contact with other schools. As part of the request of my principal and to get a well-rounded perspective, I contacted several schools to get information on what they do for a round-up and transition program. I intentionally chose districts within a few miles of our schools, but also chose other districts in Iowa and one out of state, that might have populations different from ours, such as higher levels of diversity, larger enrollment, as well as nationally recognized Iowa districts, both public and private. I looked at district websites to find out information there as well, but with little success.

Other Schools' Transition Plans. There are many ways to offer transition plans for kindergarten. If the Grinnell district follows this plan and has the Community Steering Committee as well as the School Team, it would allow us to look at ways to improve our current plan for the benefit of children, families, and our community.

Transition plans in other districts and programs. I would like these groups to consider activities done by other districts, such as the National Blue Ribbon Awarded St. Paul the Apostle Catholic School in Davenport, which has a parent meeting at which they discuss national percentile rankings, a typical day in kindergarten, the curriculum of kindergarten, school

expectations, along with questions and answers and an optional school tour. Other transition plans have had these options that I think would benefit our district. J. Delaney (personal communication, May 8, 2012)

The Fort Dodge School District breaks the incoming kindergartens into two groups and provides a center time for the children, invites parents to have lunch with their children, and have an overview of kindergarten by the staff. This schedule offers the children a chance to experience being in school and also gives parents information about school. M. Ristau (personal communication, March 5, 2012)

The Dubuque School District has opted to offer their programming for transition at times that are family-friendly, in the evening. Their plan includes an hour for children to be in classrooms, and experiencing large group, small group, and individual activities with two kindergarten teachers in each room, one teaching and one documenting. The schedule also includes some play time and a snack. Meanwhile, the parents meet with the principal to learn about curriculum, routines to help at home, and paperwork expectations. Then they have time to complete paperwork, with support for those who have English as a second language or other needs. When completed, there is a snack and conversation area for parents along with stations for the school nurse, transportation, and other support staff to respond to any questions. Finally, children join their parents for a tour of the building, providing a way for parents to share an experience with their child and make that school-home connection. Dubuque also offers an evening in the fall for fun family-centered activities, free food, the opportunity to receive immunizations that children may be needing, and an introduction to city-wide services and agencies that may benefit families. Grinnell currently has an event similar to this for preschool

aged children that could be adapted to meet the needs of kindergarten children and families. N. Murphy (personal communication, February 29, 2012)

In other states, similar activities are available. In Seattle, parents are invited to Kindergarten Transition Nights from early November through January. Teachers have Open Houses in their classrooms and talk with families about support provided to their children as they transition to kindergarten, as well as what to expect in kindergarten. Parents can also meet with principals and family support workers to learn about other resources. Child-care is provided and interpretation services are available as Seattle Schools have families using over 12 different languages. M. Popelka, M. Fickes (personal communication, April 30, 2012)

Head Start includes transition as part of their programming. Interactions aim at the issues over which the parents have power and what their responsibilities are in the transition process. Children enrolled in Head Start are no longer eligible for services if they are legally eligible for kindergarten. Therefore, younger children in Head Start cannot stay an additional year even if parents would prefer that arrangement. They are eligible for kindergarten and generally are entered in the public school district.

Finally, as a resource to local districts as well as a way to make programs across the state consistent, the Minnesota Department of Education (2006) developed a set of Kindergarten Transition Resources that are grouped to be used as strategies by community members, teachers and caregivers, policymakers, and families. These resources could be valuable for our Community Transition Steering Committee and the School Level Transition Team. Although this applies to policy set in Minnesota, it is valuable for other states and districts as well.

Parent empowerment. The National Education Association offers a Parent's Guide to a Successful Kindergarten Transition (2007) that gives parents information about how

kindergarten today is different from their experience. This approach empowers parents to prepare for the transition as well as how to prepare their children, and especially includes information about transitioning a preschool child with special needs. (National Education Association, 2007)

Kindergarten teacher team developments. As I was working on this project, our school district moved forward with a round-up and transition program. It started with collaboration of the kindergarten teachers and what we thought would be important to include in the round-up. The implementation of an official round-up also impacted other transition activities that we had done in the past.

Collaboration with community members. As part of this project, I collaborated with the director of a local college preschool laboratory, who had been very involved in the four-year old program as well as the CLIK program that was mentioned earlier. Another collaborator was a community member who had started on her doctorate in Early Childhood Education at Tufts University. I thought that their concern for children in our community, along with their expertise in early childhood education would be good resources for a high quality transition plan.

Literature Review

Child Perspective. The first part of the literature review addresses transitions and children. Children's experiences before kindergarten are different from what they were a generation ago. Classes are larger, so children need to be able to deal with more children and fewer adults than in preschool – an aspect that I have witnessed in terms of how children are affected. The emphasis of kindergarten has changed through an increase in more formal instruction and skill acquisition; this kind of programming requires higher maturity levels in order for children to be able to sit for longer periods of time, use self-control, and attend to the

teacher or activity (Pianta, Cox, & National Center for Early Development & Learning, 2002).

Much of the information focuses on the idea of readiness.

Readiness. Traditionally, the idea of readiness places the burden of proof on the child and blames children's families for their lack of opportunity (NAEYC, 1995). Unfortunately, there are still unacceptable trends for entry and placement in kindergarten. Some practices for placement and entry are based on concerns that children won't be able to cope with the increasingly inappropriate curriculum in some kindergartens. Kindergarten curriculum is more similar to later elementary grades in its focus on academic achievement. Some people believe that the effect of educational programming and an increase in the number of children attending preschool has made children "smarter" (NAECS/SDE, 2001). Some parents are also requesting teaching with a stronger academic focus similar to the higher grades.

Gift of Time. A second concern is that some parents are being discouraged from enrolling their age-eligible children in kindergarten to allow them the gift of time. To keep a child out of school so that he or she can be more ready assumes the child should fit a rigid set of expectations instead of the fact that programs should adapt for each child's individual needs and growth (NAEYC, 1995). Many of these children are the ones that would benefit the most from being in school and getting additional help if needed. However, it is still important to allow parents to make this decision for their child. The challenge is helping them make this choice for the right reason and not because of an inappropriate curriculum.

Parents who are concerned about the academic emphasis may choose to delay their children's entrance to kindergarten, or they may opt to retain their children in kindergarten for an additional year. However, research has suggested that children who have been retained show

more social aggression, have more behavior problems, and are less likely to graduate from high school (Clark & Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2008).

Testing. The third concern is that testing is being used in ways not intended and as barriers to school entry. Readiness testing should be used as a way for teachers to plan how to individualize for each child (Nelson, 2004). Typical assessments for older children are inappropriate because young children's learning patterns are episodic, they have short attention spans, their capacities and knowledge are better captured in a less formal setting, and young children are sometimes afraid of unfamiliar adults (Kagan & Kauerz, 2007). Another misuse of readiness testing is the dramatic growth of extra-year programs. Placing children in these transitional, readiness, or developmental classes can make the children, peers, parents, and teachers see them as failures with lowered expectations and fewer positive peer role models.

Positive transition. Experiencing early academic and social success can pave the way for children's later positive school adjustment (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Children who have a positive transition to school gain confidence in their ability to adapt to new situations and academic demands, are open to new experiences and relationships with both peers and adults, expand problem-solving skills, and trust their families and teachers who have helped them. Positive transitions also lead to more positive, cooperative, self-directed, personally responsible, communicative, and motivated behaviors for the children (Hand, 2004). Social emotional transition activities are evident with a positive transition program and the emotions that go along with them enhance learning. Even having a familiar playmate in the class helps children be more successful with social skills, have fewer behavior problems, and gain greater academic competence as well as benefit younger or limited English speaking children. Readiness deals with the whole child: physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional

development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognitive and general knowledge (The Association of Small Foundations, 2008). Graue (1993) looked at readiness from the view of a sociologist and stated, “When readiness is framed from a social rather than psychological perspective, the focus becomes broadening the views of children to enhance their experiences rather than on sorting children by readiness levels and providing services to match readiness need” (p. 256). This perspective reverses the idea of readiness for school to readiness for learning, which focuses on growth instead of lack of skills, claiming that all children are ready for school but that not all schools are ready for them.

Children at-risk and with special needs. It is important to include transition of children at-risk and with special needs. When Head Start was reauthorized in 2005, the goals of the National Education Goals Panel were included in what became the School Readiness Act. This Act specified expectations for children entering kindergarten from Head Start. The main areas were language knowledge and skills, prereading knowledge and skills, premathematics knowledge and skills, cognitive abilities related to academic achievement, social and emotional development, and, for children with limited English proficiency, progress toward acquisition of the English language (Snow, 2007). For children with disabilities, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires advance planning for the transition, which can include administrative functions and cross-agency communication and collaboration. However, for the child, the transition is often time bound, since it would need to be done in the last few weeks of a program in order to get the child and family ready for the new environment or in the first few weeks of school to help the child adjust (Rous & Hallam, 2012). A successful adjustment to school for a child with disabilities may be better measured by the child’s adaptation to the classroom culture and structure and his or her engagement in a new setting.

Family Perspective. When considering the family perspective in the transition to kindergarten I will include information about several dimensions. The most obvious part of this perspective is what parents' expectations are for their child. Impacts on the family perspective include how social class and minority groups are affected by the transition. Finally, as the transition to kindergarten becomes more real for families, how they are involved in the transition is important in the success of the plan.

Family friendly. With an increase in programs for three and four year old children, schools will need to be more family friendly (Pianta & Cox, 1999). "More than any other grade, parents have a stake in the child's kindergarten year" (Graue, 1993, p. 229). Parents may have less freedom to choose their child's kindergarten, compared to their child's preschool. The kindergarten class may serve a more diverse population compared with the option of a homogeneous population in some preschools. Parental contact with kindergarten teachers and administrators is more formalized and conversation may focus on learning or social problems, compared to the kind of interaction between parents and preschool teachers (Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman & Cox, 1999). Families feel encouraged when their interactions with schools are based on the family strengths, rather than their failures (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). In one study, the top five concerns of families about their children's transition to kindergarten were attending a new school, compliance, following directions, behavior problems, academic skills, and getting along with peers (McIntyre et al., 2007). As the result of a positive transition to school, children are successful in the classroom, families gain confidence in their child's adjustment to new settings, families communicate more effectively with school staff, and parents acquire a greater knowledge and appreciation of the adults who helped their children adjust. When parents learn

more about school, it builds their confidence as well as their children's confidence about new experiences (Hand, 2004).

Impact of social class and minority. In her research on readiness in three very different communities (working class, middle class, and a heterogeneous community), Graue (1993) found that working class families were excited about their children going to kindergarten and thought their children were bright. Middle class families worried about children's readiness based on their relative age, maturity, and social readiness. In the heterogeneous community, which included a large Hispanic population, the parents were disconnected and did not have expectations for kindergarten other than wanting their children to be happy. Different classes have different values about child rearing as a result of their different life experiences (Doucet & Tudge, 2007). All parents want their children to be successful, but they differ in the strategies they think will help their children be successful. A parent who values following the rules, regurgitating what teachers have taught, arriving on time to work, and carrying out the bosses' instructions might raise their children to do what they are told, be neat and organized, believing that these skills will lead to success.

Doucet and Tudge's (2007) data showed that parents who have attended college have learned to think for themselves and are more likely to encourage their children to be self-directing to be successful. When looking at literacy based experiences, children from working class families are encouraged to say the words in the books correctly, while children from middle class families are taught by their families to make connections between what they read and their own experiences. In terms of transition practices, parents who have taught their children the alphabet and numbers, have read to their children from infancy, have talked to their children about the upcoming change, have visited the school to orient the children to the classrooms and

meet the new teachers, and have sent their children on their way with the confidence that they will adapt are most likely white or middle class parents. Families who represent minorities or who are poor, are least likely to own children's books, or do not read to their children. They "realize that the time has come for their children to begin kindergarten", and if the children have attended preschool, the parents assume that they have learned enough there, sending "the children on their way with little thought to developing a relationship with the teacher and with no plans or time to be actively involved in the children's schooling" (Doucet & Tudge, 2007, p. 312).

Economic and educational resources of families influence the children's academic knowledge at kindergarten, as well as the impact of a non-English language spoken at home. If a child is behind in his or her native language abilities, this impacts other readiness skills. Parents' amount and type of language interactions have been shown to influence their children's language development and emergent literacy skills (Espinosa, 2007). Family cultural values are sometimes cited as a reason why immigrant families are less likely to enroll their children in preschool programs. Children with low family income and limited English proficiency may be most likely to benefit from these programs. However, the Hispanic cultural emphasis on family cohesiveness, respect, and the moral development of Mexican immigrant families may provide a foundation of social security for their children. Another strength for Mexican immigrant families is that most children live in two parent families where there is a strong work ethic.

Family involvement in transition. In order for children to have successful transitions and a good start to their kindergarten year, it is important to consider how families are involved in this experience. "Families feel encouraged when their interactions with schools are based on their competencies, rather than their failures" (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre 2003, p. 12). Researchers

usually define parent involvement as preparing children for school, attending school events, and fulfilling any teacher requests. Also included could be the ideas of providing children a place to do homework and being sure that they complete it. Social class has something to do with how much parents are involved in their children's schooling. Middle class parents are more likely to promote verbal development, read to their children, take their children to the library, attend school events, enroll children in summer activities, and complain to the principal more than those parents from working-class or lower-class families (Lareau, 2000). Lower elementary teachers typically work hard to increase parent involvement. Lightfoot and Ogbu (as cited in Lareau, 2000) claimed that middle class families feel more welcome in schools than working-class or lower-class. Epstein's research (as cited in Lareau, 2000, p.7) "has shown that some teacher 'leaders' are more successful in getting parents to become involved, regardless of social class, and are less likely to use social class as an explanation for why parents are not involved" (p. 7). Relations between the school and working class families are characterized by separation because these families may believe that teachers are responsible for education. Therefore they do not seek out any information about school or the curriculum, and their criticisms of the school focus on non-academic matters. In turning over this responsibility to the school, working-class parents were deferring to the idea of professional expertise. They looked up to their children's teacher. Although parent involvement may benefit all children, for socially disadvantaged students, promoting family-school partnerships may be crucial (McIntyre et al., 2007). Families who receive government financial aid report significantly less involvement in kindergarten transition activities and their children may be more at risk of transition difficulties, making it important for teachers to reach out to these families to create linkages (McIntyre et al., 2007). Upper-middle-class families make relationships that are characterized by scrutiny and interconnectedness

between the family and school life. They believe that education is a shared responsibility, have a lot of information about their children's schooling, and are very critical of the school including the professional performance of their children's teachers. The shared responsibility is demonstrated by parents trying to supplement schooling during the summer and by integrating educational goals into what happens at home. If school did not provide opportunities in a certain area, parents of upper-middle-class were more likely to compensate by enrolling their children in community programs. Mothers in this social class are more likely to attend school events, supervise their children's progress at school, and work to bring their home activities in alignment with school activities. Fathers are kept apprised of their children's development and make decisions that are more significant in shaping their children's school careers than their wives' decisions. Social class does not entirely determine parents' actions, but it does allow for resources and parents need to know how to activate these resources (Lareau, 2000).

Parent-teacher partnership. What teachers really want is a partnership with parents (Lareau, 2000). Ideally, this would start in the preschool years and then continue into the kindergarten year as schools try to incorporate families into their programs (Pianta, 2004). A first step in involving parents in the transition to kindergarten could be asking them to provide information about the skills and strengths their children bring to school, as well as including them in other transition activities (Graue, 1993). The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools found several common characteristics in effective family and community connections with schools programs.

Staff in these schools deliberately create a culture that promotes:

- Relationships among family, community members, and school staff that foster trust and collaboration,
- Recognition of families' needs and class and cultural differences that lead to greater understanding and respect among all involved, and
- Involvement of all stakeholders in a shared partnership of mutual responsibility for student learning. (Ferguson, Wood, & Southwest Educational Development Lab, 2005)

School/Teacher Perspective. “NAEYC believes that it is the responsibility of schools to *meet the needs of children as they enter school* and to provide whatever services are needed *in the least restrictive environment* to help each child reach his or her fullest potential” (NAEYC, 1995, p. 1). Expectations for the skills and abilities that children bring to school must be based on knowledge of child development and the ways that children learn best. This requires that schools are able to respond to a diverse range of abilities and the curriculum in the early grades needs to provide meaningful contexts for children’s learning rather than focusing on isolated skills acquisition. This requirement for schools reinforces the need for differentiation for each child. To aid in this, NAEYC suggests that “class sizes be reduced and additional adults be made available to ensure individualized instruction. Investment in classroom equipment and materials are also needed so that children have access to a wide array of materials and activities for hands-on learning” (NAEYC, 1995, p. 3).

Effect of accountability movement. The reality is that a movement for accountability has emerged in American education. On one side, it holds potential for enhancing the quality of education, and clear communication can enhance transition processes when these expectations are the basis for constructive communication about a child from all sources – home, school, and between programs. On the other side, the accountability movement has produced a rash of new

testing and assessment that are not consistent with the emerging conceptual model that underlies educational practice for young children. This in turn is likely to produce tension for educators interested in this transition from preschool to kindergarten (Pianta & Cox, 1999). For more than a century, early childhood pedagogy has recognized the uniqueness of each child and worked toward the goal of exciting children about learning, knowledge, and inquiry. The accountability movement has produced standards that are becoming universalized and prespecified. Previous methods like the invented curriculum and the teachable moment that focused on the child are being replaced by strategies that accommodate the child, but give precedence to prescription. In other words, it switches the educational pedagogy from the child to the content (Kagan & Kauerz, 2007). Throughout the evolution of early childhood education there have been three beliefs that have been constant.

1. Children are competent and eager learners whose natural curiosity allows for rich learning experiences.
2. Children learn in an active way so that learning in a specific subject area ideally takes place within the context of child generated experiences.
3. Children need exposure to all domains of development so that no single domain takes precedence over any other. (Kagan & Kauerz, 2007, p. 22)

The push for better academic outcomes for young children and at the same time, closing the achievement gap is evidence of a growing momentum to shift from a focus on all domains to those that have a greater emphasis on literacy, language, and math skills. Teachers express concern in terms of social adjustment of entering kindergartners, such as challenges in social skills, adjustment, and attention that are not included in many readiness assessments. The advent of readiness assessment puts pressure on early education to accelerate the development of the

nation's lowest performing children; additional pressure exists to contribute positively to the gains for those who are capable. This difference in social class orientation means that early educators need to be careful not to widen the achievement gaps that are already present at the start of school (Pianta, 2007).

Models of readiness. Social class affects school relationships related to readiness too. Some schools will use an environmental component where all children are considered to be on equal footing by the end of the kindergarten year. Staff shares responsibility for meeting student needs by providing cross grade performance and an extended program for those who need it. A maturational model of readiness has rigid boundaries for student performance in order for promotion to the next grade. Schools with this model tend to have extra year programs to provide children more time to develop either before kindergarten or after kindergarten (Graue, 1993). The interventionist approach works to develop alternatives to meet the needs of the children – a unique set of performance expectations that meet their learning needs (Graue, 1993).

Inappropriate assessment. The attention on more formal assessments has raised concern in the early childhood community because the formal assessment results are increasingly required for program funding and stray from the informal assessments of observing and recording children's behaviors in order to individualize instruction that has been a part of early childhood education.

Ready schools. To continue to look at the broader picture, the vertical alignment of programs helps to build a good transition from one program to the next. If the preschool and kindergarten standards, curriculum, and assessments fit together and build on each other, the transition for children and families will be smoother (Kagan & Kauerz, 2007). Teachers want

children to be ready for school culture. The school also needs to be ready for children with the guidelines of these 10 keys to ready schools:

1. Ready schools smooth the transition between home and school.
2. Ready schools strive for continuity between early care and education programs and elementary schools.
3. Ready schools help children learn and make sense of their complex and exciting world.
4. Ready schools are committed to success of every child.
5. Ready schools are committed to the success of every teacher and every adult who interacts with children during the school day.
6. Ready schools introduce or expand approaches that have been shown to raise achievement.
7. Ready schools are learning organizations that alter practices and programs if they do not benefit children.
8. Ready schools serve children in communities.
9. Ready schools take responsibility for results.
10. Ready schools have strong leadership. (Shore & National Education Goals Panel, 1998, p. 5)

Kindergarten has evolved from a socially oriented curriculum to an increasingly academic program. Considering a social view of kindergarten readiness, there are four major issues. The entrance policy for schools should rely only on chronological age and making schools ready for children wherever they are in their development. The curriculum should be broader to meet the needs of a variety of children and therefore, eliminate the use of extra year

programs. Structures within the school to allow for collaboration between and among grade levels could broaden the view of children and their activities in the classroom. Standards for performance need to be considered in this broader view to differentiate for each child (Graue, 1993).

Despite the fact that 98% of all children in the United States attend kindergarten and more than 60% of these children are enrolled in full-day kindergarten, teachers still report that 48% have moderate or serious problems transitioning into kindergarten. Children's needs vary, from academic to social or emotional to their home environment (The Association of Small Foundations, 2008). While a smooth and successful transition is shown to be of great importance, less than 20% of schools in the United States have transition practices that support the needs of children and families (Clark & Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2008).

When several Indiana schools studied how to improve their transition programs they used the Ready School Assessment developed by High/Scope. The assessment covers eight of the ten keys to ready schools. After the self-assessment, the committees from each district were able to consider what was important to improve transition to their schools (Clark & Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2008). Teachers have focused on practices that transmit information to families regarding school expectations through orientation sessions and information packets that are mailed home, holding an open house after school starts, or a brochure sent home after school starts. For several reasons, teachers are less likely to provide time intensive activities such as home or preschool visits, calling the children before or after school starts. Teachers cited barriers of large class sizes and not having the information on their students' families prior to school starting, the absence of a plan that develops transition policies and practices, and a lack of school support for effective transition. Teachers also cited a lack of funds to support the extra time that teachers would need

to conduct a good program. This is simply too little, too late and does little to involve families and build family-school partnerships (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000). Teachers do like to have face-to-face contact with parents. Teachers with early childhood backgrounds and veteran teachers are likely to invite parents to visit the classroom as a way to exchange information about the child and classroom expectations. Teachers with this philosophy may schedule a more formal orientation for parents as a vehicle to stress the importance of parent involvement. Experienced teachers will also invite children to visit the kindergarten classroom (Nelson, 2004).

Community Perspective. There is a growing concern about equity and access in American society, which is reflected in achievement gaps that exist even when children enter school. This gap is often associated with race and ethnicity, but economic status most closely correlates with educational underachievement. Businesses and the corporate world have packaged education as a means to increase the competitiveness of American children in the global marketplace. The comparatively stable funding for K-12 education has made the idea of preparing children to succeed in school a framework for advancing an early childhood agenda to both policy makers and the public. The federal government has had a strong influence on state policy to define and measure outcomes of learning for K-12 students as well as younger children (Kagan & Kauerz, 2007).

Communities are important for successful transition. According to Nelson (2004), a network of preschool and public school administrators should be formed to develop a system to exchange information and create a transition plan. Policy changes that can benefit transition and children are to strengthen the bonds between preschools and elementary schools, require transition planning teams in localities, strengthen bonds between families and schools, and

provide high quality kindergarten classroom experiences for children (Pianta, Cox, & National Center for Early Development & Learning, 2002).

Chapter III

Project

Transition Activities prior to 2011-2012

As noted in the rationale for this project, the Grinnell School District utilized a variety of activities over the past 15 years for transition to kindergarten. Consistently there has been pre-registration in February or March and an Open House the day before school starts for children and families to see their classrooms, meet their teacher, and drop off school supplies. The pre-registration included paperwork that families needed to complete and some information about health and development expectations for incoming students.

Fundraisers, like a carnival that was open to the public, were held in each elementary building each spring. This allowed families with preschoolers the opportunity to become involved in the school community. Our building also had a fall festival that was more of a community building activity with a simple meal and fall related activities. If they learned of it, some preschool families would attend this, but it was more of a vehicle for families to get to know each other, which was beneficial to kindergarten families and those new to the school. The fundraiser and fall festival were both organized and run by the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO).

Each fall, our elementary buildings held a curriculum night in mid-September where the classroom teacher would meet with the parents of children in their class to present what the children would be learning during the year. With a change in administrator, the staff opted to change this to a fall open house where families would come into school in the evening and children would then be able to show their family “their” school. The curriculum information evolved into handouts that went home with families at this event. It also provided the opportunity

for the library to have a Book Fair that was very well attended. Along with this change, a parent meeting for incoming kindergarten families was developed and held in spring, with the hope of getting more families to register. This event allowed the entire kindergarten staff and administrators to present our curriculum in a way similar to what had been done at the curriculum night, and to include going through a parent handbook explaining how school works, including information about specials, 6 day cycle, weather impacts, communication with school and expectations for entering students, such as toileting and other self-help skills, bedtime, and encouraging reading and writing. There was time allowed for questions from families either publicly or individually.

Finally, with our involvement in the CLIK project, we began to invite the local preschools to bring their prospective kindergartners for a brief tour in late spring. This allowed familiar adults to help in the transition by showing similarities between the two environments to their students.

Changes for 2011-2012

In the fall of 2011, we had a change in administration. Our district had utilized the organizational framework of an elementary principal at the 3rd and 4th grade building and an assistant principal at the K-2 and preK-2 buildings. In 2011, the lower elementary buildings shared a principal. This change was an impetus to revise what happened for transition to our kindergarten program. In addition, this principal was in charge of our community's four year old program and in 2012, this program would have a state visit to check on compliance, so she was involved in ensuring that the components required by the state were being met by the programming of the community partners of this cohort. Our new combined principal had been a 1st grade teacher, so she was also familiar with lower elementary development and had expressed

to the staff at the building where she was previously assistant principal that she would like to see a kindergarten round-up in Grinnell. In preparation for this project, I interviewed her in the fall of 2011 to determine what she would like to see in a kindergarten transition plan. She noted that the use of the Creative Curriculum GOLD assessment in use by the state four-year old programs would give all kindergarten and preschool staff some good information about the children entering kindergarten to help with placement in classrooms (Iowa Department of Education, 2012). She also noted that even though the preschoolers come to visit kindergarten, not all preschool children are included. She believed it was important to see the interaction of children in a round-up. In discussing a round-up, she was aware that Knoxville had a 1:1 meeting between the teacher and a parent and child along with a small group experience. She noted that Chariton, where she had taught before, had a half-day round-up. Another idea was to have a parent meeting during the half-day program. Her suggestion to me was to contact other nearby schools to see what they do for transition.

Transitional kindergarten discovery. The next step was when our principal gathered all the kindergarten teachers together to start discussing a possible round-up for Spring 2012. Along with learning more about the children coming into kindergarten, she was interested in starting a transitional kindergarten program for children who were school-age eligible, and a round-up would give us information to determine which children might benefit from this additional program. With that idea in mind, we broke into groups to see what a transitional program might look like. Our principal set up visits to Oskaloosa, Knoxville, and Newton to see their programs and arranged for time over the teachers' lunch period to ask questions. We developed questions for us to focus our visits and make them consistent. Two kindergarten teachers and the principal were on each visit. One teacher went on an additional visit to Decorah to learn about their round-

up. We analyzed all the collected information to choose what we believed would give us the best information about each child for the principal to use in assigning children to the kindergarten classes and for the transition program.

Parents were informed about transitional kindergarten (TK) at pre-registration. We had decided that information we gained at round-up, plus consideration of the child's age would determine who would be eligible for this program. The team set the class size for TK at no more than 18 with a full-time para-educator. If a child qualified, his or her parent would be contacted and a conference with the parent, our principal, and the guidance counselor would take place. Parents had the final say in which program their child would attend. Parents also had the opportunity to change their minds on enrolling their child in the transitional program up through the first month of school. If a child made great progress in the transitional year, our plan was that the child could join a regular kindergarten class for the last quarter of the year to be sure they could maintain their growth.

Round-up plan. The team debated several options for when to hold the round-up and decided that we would use two school days and have our current kindergartners not attend school so we could use the classrooms and give the incoming class a "school" experience. Parents would have their choice of sending their child on either morning when they signed up at pre-registration. In the afternoons of round-up, the kindergarten team and guidance counselor would go over the information. Early on the second afternoon, preschool teachers from the local four-year old program would join us to share additional information about any children we had questions about or that they would like to give us insight about, either academic or behavioral.

Now that we had some of the big ideas ready, we went to work on deciding how the round-up would look. We decided that there would be four places that the children would travel

with different activities at each. Information would be documented at each station for the team to use. A para-educator would accompany each group as they traveled and each group would have a “homeroom” to leave coats, and to establish a place to which they would return after recess, for snack, and to say goodbye. We decided that the following activities would give us the best information for our initial round-up experience. In one classroom, they would hear a story so we could observe their ability to attend and then do a simple craft with scissors and crayons for some fine motor information. In another room, they were asked to draw a person and then were encouraged to build with a variety of blocks while we observed their building skills and how they worked with others. The third classroom contained activities consisting of copying basic shapes, writing and spelling their names, and some table toys. Finally, they went to several stations in the gym where teachers checked other academic and communication readiness skills.

As the team debriefed after this first round-up, we talked about aspects that were valuable and those that we would like to drop for the following year. The children were excited to come to school and still talk about who their teacher was at round-up.

At the beginning of the school year, our principal provided the information gained at round-up plus Creative Curriculum GOLD data for any children who were in the four-year-old program for each teacher’s class. She also included the parent questionnaire for each child in our class. This helped teachers to learn more about the children in their classes.

Changes in family involvement. Family related events that changed during this year included the spring fundraising event. Since there is increasing motivation to have the two lower elementary buildings collaborate, the PTOs of each building have combined and decided to have a joint carnival. Since it would be so large, it was held at the high school instead of in each elementary building. This fall, the Open House that had been held in mid-September was

replaced with a literacy night, including the Book Fair, Bingo in the gym with books as prizes, and each classroom decorated their doors. The classrooms were not open and teachers did not need to attend. Curriculum materials were sent home earlier in the year.

Development of Transition Plan

Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003) have identified four models of transition to kindergarten that are perceived by preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers, principals, and family workers in different ways. The four models are 1) the skills only model; 2) the environmental model; 3) the linking environments model; and 4) the developmental model. The skills only model focuses on the child and looks at transition based on the abilities and skills that children have on their first day of school; adjustment to school is based on the child's readiness and level of maturation. The environmental model adds the concept of how social contexts contribute to a child's adjustment to school, but doesn't consider interaction of these contexts. The linking environments model does consider these social systems' interactions with the child, his or her family, peers, school, and community, but considers these relationships as static rather than developing over a period of time. The fourth model, developmental, takes this idea one step further and considers how all these systems develop over time as a complex and dynamic process. The developmental model recognizes how these factors are both interconnected and interdependent with one another through the transition process. I will be striving to use the developmental model for this transition program.

Children and families will experience a smoother transition if there is a continuity of experience between environments. Therefore, if there are bridges built between schools, families, preschools, day care providers, and other community partners, children will benefit by having an alignment of expectations and experiences (SERVE, p. 6).

After studying transition plans from First 5 California, Terrific Transitions from the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina, and the articles mentioned previously in this paper, I chose to base this transition plan on the direction given by Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003). Their guide was cited in many of the articles and the basis of their plan was incorporated by the two plans mentioned above, as well as other transition plans from schools that I contacted. Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003) stated, “This approach has been adopted statewide in several states as a guide for facilitating transition in local communities and unifying the approach to early childhood programming for children from birth to age 8” (p. 16). It follows the developmental model that considers all the systems that may impact a child’s transition to kindergarten.

Knowing that the transition plan that is developed needs to fit our community, I met with the collaborators mentioned earlier to decide what we thought would benefit all parties involved with transition in the Grinnell School District. We walked through each section of the menu provided to make the choices we felt were appropriate. We realized that as this plan is implemented it will need to change based on the real community members that bring it to life.

Transition Project Proposal

Committees to develop the plan. Two committees were needed to insure continuity in the transition to kindergarten for children and their families. The Community Transition Steering Committee would be composed of the Transition Coordinator, childcare and preschool leaders, the school superintendent and lower elementary principal, family support staff from Mid Iowa Community Action (MICA), health care professionals, and other agencies that the group may find relevant. Their task would be to identify community-wide transition needs and what current practices and resources were available to parents, children, schools, and preschools. With

this information, they would be able to provide resources, direction for the school level, and coordinate the agencies involved. The School Level Transition Team would include the transition coordinator, the principal, kindergarten and preschool teachers, and parents who would represent the diversity in our community. Their role would include identifying transition needs, learning about current practices and resources in our district, identifying a transition coordinator, and implementing, evaluating, and revising the transition plan in a timely manner.

Transition Coordinator. We decided that the Transition Coordinator was the most important part of this plan. Our vision was that this position could be utilized throughout the community for transitions that children and families experience through high school. Currently, as is required by law, children with special needs have transition plans when moving from one program to another. We have transition to kindergarten, but children also transition to our 3rd-4th grade building, to middle school, and to high school. Principals, guidance counselors, and teachers are the staff that help with these transitions, but we believed a consistent coordinator to help families along the way would benefit everyone involved and could aid in working with other agencies that may be needed as resources. We think thought this could easily be a full-time position, but would still include those staff members previously used, although creating this position would reduce the time commitment they currently had. In the remainder of this plan, when I refer to the coordinator, I will focus on his or her duties specifically with transition to kindergarten.

Create a Transition Timeline. Prior to creating the timeline, a list of possible transition activities could be brainstormed. My collaboration team chose to go ahead with looking at the menu of options suggested by Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003) to initiate this step. Since transition to kindergarten should have continuity for children and families it was important to have a plan

that starts a year in advance. This would aid in “strengthening the linkages between children and their families with schools before the start of school” in order to “ease families’ concerns and ward off problems down the road. If problems did arise, the established pattern of positive interaction may help resolve them more easily and promptly” (p. 27). Our plan would cover a two-year span starting in preschool and continuing into the kindergarten year.

Choices for transition activities. Our collaborative team chose the following activities based on the information and experiences we have about the Grinnell community and our experiences with children and their families. The activities are divided into the types of connections that were made, but may ultimately include more than one type of connection.

Family-school connections. In order to meet the needs of families, the transition coordinator would meet with families either prior to preschool or within the first few weeks of preschool, depending on the preschool’s practice, to make initial contact with the family. Preferably, this initial contact would coincide with the preschool teacher’s early contact, but the intent was to start to build the relationship with the family, determine if there were any concerns that existed, and include a family needs assessment to determine any support the family may need such as: resources, behavioral consultation, or health and dental care. The coordinator would also maintain contact through the transition period to guide families with a variety of assistance, from guidance on bedtime and routine to helping families learn to advocate for themselves. It may also include the art of helping families with the change in teacher-parent contact from preschool to kindergarten.

The teachers and transition coordinator could also encourage family participation in home learning activities. These would be designed to encourage parents to work one-on-one with their children, which would foster parent participation in subsequent grades. In addition, helping

parents learn how they can participate in classroom and school events would give them more ownership in these programs. Providing large or small group meetings about the transition would strengthen the family-school connection. In the preschool year, kindergarten teachers and parents of kindergarteners could share information with preschool parents. A representative of the PTO could inform parents about how to become involved with school through their organization. This could be part of the parent meeting held in the spring. In addition, the transition coordinator could facilitate individual meetings to share information about any particular children with the family, preschool teacher, and kindergarten teacher. This year we had a group session after round-up and this collaboration team learned that some preschool teachers were uncomfortable sharing their concerns with other preschool teachers present. Providing this opportunity through the transition coordinator would get the information in a more confidential way to the people who would benefit from it. The coordinator would follow up on any concerns in the fall. Newsletters from the coordinator could keep families up to date on springtime activities, parent rights and responsibilities, summer transition activities, and the beginning of kindergarten events.

Child-School connections. Children benefit from knowing who their teacher will be. We would encourage the class lists for kindergarten to be set in a timely way so that preschool children can visit their kindergarten teacher in the spring of preschool. We would also suggest that kindergarten teachers, and other kindergarten support staff, have the opportunity to visit the preschools as well. With our current calendar, it would be possible for kindergarten teachers to visit preschool on the Mondays of the month that were designated for professional development, without taking them away from their current classes.

Other opportunities for child-school connections were for preschool children to be invited to school-wide activities. If our Spring Carnival could be held in the elementary buildings, it

would be a way for children to experience a fun event at “their” school and for their families to meet others. If there was an assembly at the end of the year, like our Character Education assemblies that are held during the year, preschool children could be included, and it could help in their transition as well. Returning to the Open House in mid-September would give new kindergartners the opportunity to show their family “their” school and to strengthen the home-school connection.

Our programs were trying to develop a flow of expectations from preschool to kindergarten including some familiar activities for the preschoolers. We would encourage preschool teachers to stay in contact with their former students. Currently teachers of the four-year-old program meet regularly in an elementary building and a visit to check in on kindergarten could be a part of this meeting, especially in the first half of the kindergarten year.

Peer connections. Getting along with peers is a concern of kindergarten teachers. The transition coordinator could facilitate making these transitions during preschool and the summer before kindergarten. Since preschool programs in our community were community wide and did not focus on children going to one school or the other, the coordinator could come to preschools to facilitate play with children who would be going to the same school in order to develop those relationships. In the summer before kindergarten, play dates could be set up on the school playground with the children in a particular classroom or all kindergartners at that school with teachers in attendance and perhaps a treat.

Another activity we would like to see would be for current kindergarten children to visit preschool to let the children know about their experience in kindergarten along with an opportunity for preschoolers to visit kindergarten and interact with kindergartners on a visit to school. With our round-up this year, we had fewer children who came to see what kindergarten

was like, but the collaboration team thought it would ease transition for preschoolers to see what kindergarten looks like with kindergartners there.

Community connections. Collaboration between programs benefits everyone. This year with information about a child's development through the Creative Curriculum GOLD and information from round-up and preschool teachers, we were able to collaborate on placement and screening. Additional considerations we would suggest are that some children who attended preschool together could be in the same classroom and "arranging for a child to have the same kindergarten teacher as his or her older sibling. This can help build on existing family-school connections" (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003, p. 52). The transition coordinator would be able to mediate some of these choices based on information shared from preschool teachers and families.

Allowing time for preschool and kindergarten teachers to meet and discuss classroom practices, management, and clear expectations for children's development are important. This fall the preschool and kindergarten teachers revived our collaboration. The development of the Iowa Early Learning Standards has established clear expectations for curriculum in preschool that will lead to success in kindergarten. The state Department of Education endorsed using the Creative Curriculum GOLD assessment to be a standardized means of sharing a child's development prior to kindergarten.

Assessment of the plan. In order to collect data to improve the program for all systems involved in the transition program, we suggested starting with collecting the following information. Since this plan was developmental in nature, we anticipated that it would be ongoing and dynamic and changes would be made over time.

Kindergarten transition contact log. This item could be a Google doc that is shared with the transition coordinator, preschool teachers, and kindergarten staff. It would include the date of contact, topics discussed, and follow-up. This could be utilized between preschool staff and kindergarten staff, as well as between families and team members. A log with this information would be a guide as to concerns during the transition process and to what degree these concerns were an issue. Based on this information, changes in the plan could be made.

Kindergarten transition menu checklist. This would be list of all activities related to transition and which children and families participated in them. It could be broken down by family-school connection, child-school connection, peer connections, and community connections. Review of the checklist would give us information on successful activities, activities that might only attract a certain clientele, as well as activities that were not successful. We could evaluate to decide whether activities could be improved, would meet the needs of an important few families, or should be dropped based on attendance.

Kindergarten transition parent interviews. These interviews would provide a vehicle for families to make connections with schools as well as gaining information about family experiences related to school and home. The interviews could be done by teachers, but preferably by the transition coordinator. It was suggested that they be held September, February, and May of the preschool year and in September and February of kindergarten. The team could choose to use a random sample of families for the picture this would provide to make it more practical. The interview would focus on parents' perceptions of their child's school experience, behavior, family relationships with schools, and peer contact outside of school.

In a way, it would be an assessment tool for a family's strengths and needs. The interviewer could ask about what the family did to prepare for preschool or kindergarten, what

forms of parent involvement they prefer, and any concerns the family would like to share, as well as reflecting on the transition process. The information gained from these interviews could be used to help individual families, as well as to collect detailed information about a variety of aspects of the transition program.

Transition activities and team member input. A list of transition activities and the opportunity to respond to their usefulness, barriers that were realized, and questions about activities could be useful information taken from the school level transition team. Any additional activities that were added by members during the transition process could be included in this list as well. This reflection would be used to implement any changes in the program.

Chapter 4

Recommendations and Conclusion

This project has addressed current research related to transition to kindergarten and how it impacts the children, families, school, and community. Through collaboration with other professionals in the Grinnell community, we developed a developmentally appropriate transition plan following the recommendations of current research. Our decisions took into account the history of our community and dynamics that currently impact the transition program.

A transition plan should be ongoing and dynamic. This plan includes several ways to collect data to determine what is working and what should be changed for the benefit of children and families.

Recommendations

Schools need to base transition on reaching out and linking with families and preschools to establish relationships and have two-way communication about transition. Schools also need to reach backward in time and establish links with families before the beginning of school. Finally, schools need to function with appropriate intensity by providing a range of practices – a menu of transition activities (Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, & Cox 1999).

If the transition plan is started as suggested, I believe the Grinnell School District will have a good start on an appropriate and strong transition plan. The weakness that I see in the current plan is that the focus is on the academics of the children and how they will fit the school, instead of including the family and how the school fits the child.

I can understand that some may disagree that the development of the transitional kindergarten program is a way to help the school fit the needs of the child, but there will always be children who are younger in a class and children that have not had the experiences of others.

One of the principles for kindergarten entry and placement by the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education stated that, “ 2. Children are enrolled in kindergarten based on their legal right to enter...families are not counseled or pressured to delay entrance of their children for a year by keeping them at home or enrolling them in other programs” (NAECS/SDE, 2001, Discussion of Principle 2). And, “6. All children are welcomed – as they are – into heterogeneous kindergarten settings...they are not segregated into extra-year programs prior to or following regular kindergarten” (Discussion of Principle 6). “While there is some evidence that older children tend to do better initially, the differences due to age are small and disappear with time” (Discussion of Principle 2, para. 3). On the positive side of this dilemma, these children are in school for a full day and can be identified for any special needs that may be discovered. States differ in their cutoff dates for kindergarten entry, but there are always children that are younger. In addition, the district is able to collect funds from the state for these children since they are age-eligible for kindergarten. Our district has done a good job of providing services for children outside of the regular curriculum through title programs. It would be interesting to track the progress of children currently in our TK program compared to children in regular kindergarten who are receiving Title services to see if the children level out by third grade as is anticipated by current research (NAECS/SDE, 2001, Discussion of Principle 2, para. 1).

The plan that was used last year through our kindergarten round-up will be changed, since the state of Iowa has adopted the Creative Curriculum GOLD as a tool for transition to kindergarten (Iowa Department of Education, 2012). I would anticipate that our kindergarten round-up will be aimed at letting preschool age children gain the experience of being in kindergarten and becoming used to the school setting instead of an evaluative experience.

Research related to Grinnell transitional program. The transitional kindergarten program that started this school year was intended to give the “gift of time” to those children who were among the youngest in the class and demonstrated that their skills in the spring before kindergarten were lower than the typical child. Children were placed in this full-day program with the intent of helping them be more successful once they were in regular elementary programming. Some of these children would have come into the regular kindergarten classes, but some parents expressed that they would have chosen to “red-shirt” their children for an additional year. A transitional program goes against the current joint position of NAECS/SDE. It is aligned with the maturational model of readiness that Graue (1993) described, instead of the interventionist model, which is more individualized for children and meets them where they are developmentally at kindergarten entrance. If our district chose to eliminate the transitional kindergarten program, an option might be a shared summer school program documented by Dail and McGee (2008). Their program was over a six week period in the summer for five half-days a week. The children that participated were considered at-risk and were taught by both preschool and kindergarten teachers. This program had three purposes:

1. Develop a supportive relationship between local kindergarten teachers and preschool teachers and their families.
2. Provide a seamless transition in activities and teaching approaches from late preschool to early kindergarten.
3. Increase the social and academic skills of children most at risk for school failure.

One of the members of our collaborative team had developed a similar program for children at-risk to aid in their transition to kindergarten and to provide both the children and their families activities to make the transition to kindergarten easier.

Policy decisions. School districts are impacted by policies set by both state and federal legislatures. School boards have power to affect change in their districts as well. Our district could set policy to establish this transition plan and a part of it would be to have a member on the Community Transition Team. The Grinnell School Board was presented with the plan for round-up last year, along with the transitional kindergarten program. School Board approval would be needed to add the transition coordinator to the district. Another consideration would be to compensate staff for the extra time needed to meet in the School Transition Team and for any summer programs that may come from the plan.

Conclusion

Based on the research provided in this project and the plan developed, the Grinnell School District would have a strong, appropriate plan for children transitioning to kindergarten. The resources suggested in the assessment would provide valuable data to make changes to the plan based on information from families, school and preschool personnel, and the participation of children. State and federal requirements may change as the plan is implemented, but the teams developed will have the background and data available to them to make informed choices for the children and families of Grinnell in any changes required.

According to Ramey and Ramey (as cited in SERVE, 2004, p. 4) the early signs of successful transition to school are:

- Children will like school and look forward to going to school.
- Children will show steady growth in academic skills.
- Parents will become actively involved in their children's education – at home, in school, and in the community.

- Classroom environments will promote positive feelings for both teachers and children.
- Teachers, staff members, and families will value each other.
- Schools and programs will celebrate cultural diversity in their communities.
- Developmentally appropriate practices will be visible within the classroom.
- The community will show consistent investment in the education of children and will strive to increase available learning opportunities.

Even though the Grinnell School District provides some aspects of an appropriate transition plan, utilizing the idea of a menu of options could greatly improve the outcomes. These options include involving all parties involved in the transition process, providing a two-year transition plan, and most importantly, collecting consistent data over time. Implementation of this project will get the Grinnell School District closer to reaching these signs of a successful transition to kindergarten for all children.

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