

TRANSITION TO KINDERGARTEN:  
THE IMPACT OF PRESCHOOL ON KINDERGARTEN ADJUSTMENT

BY

BETHANY CLAES

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BY

BETHANY CLAES

ROBERTS WESLEYAN COLLEGE. B.A. (2006)

ALFRED UNIVERSITY, M.A. (2008)

**APPROVED BY:** \_\_\_\_\_ Dr. Nancy Evangelista  
Committee Chairperson

\_\_\_\_\_ Dr. Cris Lauback,  
Committee Member

\_\_\_\_\_ Dr. Ellen Faherty  
Committee Member

\_\_\_\_\_ Committee Member

**ACCEPTED BY** \_\_\_\_\_ Dr. Nancy Evangelista  
Chairperson, Division of School Psychology

**ACCEPTED BY** \_\_\_\_\_ Dr. Nancy Evangelista  
Associate Provost and Director of Graduate Studies

**ACCEPTED BY** \_\_\_\_\_ Dr. William Hall  
Provost & Vice President for Academic Affairs



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## Abstract

A successful transition to kindergarten is important for future success in school. However, research has not defined a clear relationship between the type of preschool a child attends and that child's kindergarten adjustment. Participants were recruited from a small city school district, where 155 kindergarten students were split into 5 groups based on the type of preschool attended previously, and school adjustment ratings were completed by both parents and teachers for each of the students. Results from teachers indicated that students who attended universal prekindergarten classrooms in the elementary school buildings were rated as having significantly higher levels of overall adjustment than students who did not attend preschool ( $p \leq .01$ ). Results from parents did not indicate any significant results. Preschool and kindergarten teachers also provided qualitative information regarding what helps students adjust best to kindergarten.

## Transition to Kindergarten:

### The Impact of Preschool on Kindergarten Adjustment

The transition into kindergarten for children has been a topic of research interest for over three decades (Kagan & Neuman, 1998). The importance of this period in a child's life has been consistently demonstrated, which has further established the need to ensure that the transition process occurs smoothly (Bradley, Caldwell, & Rock, 1988; Landry, Smith, Swank, Assel, & Vellet, 2001). Having a positive transition is particularly important because research has demonstrated that the first few years of formal schooling are formative for the rest of the child's school career (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994). Despite the importance and emphasis on transition services in the research literature, most of the research has focused on describing what schools are typically doing to aid the transition process and barriers to utilizing those transition services in schools (Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005). It has been logically assumed that certain practices will work better than others, but there is little empirical research to support these claims. Specifically, having experiences in preschool that closely align with the experiences a child will have in kindergarten is believed to significantly ease the transition process, but there is no conclusive evidence regarding this matter (Desimone, Payne, Fedoravicius, Henrich, & Finn-Stevenson, 2004).

The need for a smooth transition, where students have positive school adjustment and a successful year in kindergarten, has been amply supported in the literature to date. Several studies have concluded that early school performance, that which occurs during the first and second year of formal schooling, has a significant impact both on later

school performance, and on graduation rates (Alexander et al., 1997; Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Entwisle & Alexander, 1993). This is due to the initial perspective that the child and his or her family have toward the school, as well as the student's academic performance in those first few years (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, Cox, & Bradley, 2003). In addition, given the way that our current school systems operate, the permanent records, and even teacher opinions, follow the student from kindergarten through high school, so that poor performance in kindergarten may influence each teacher's expectations for the student's success or failure (Entwisle & Hayduk, 1988).

Along with ensuring that a poor first experience with the school does not have a negative impact on the student's academic career, the process of entering kindergarten involves a significant transition in the child's life. There is a lot to adjust to in kindergarten, including having a new role as a student, having a new reference group of peers to whom the child is being compared, and needing to reach the academic standards that are set by the teacher and school. Poor academic grades and behavior problems in later grades have been traced to having difficulty adjusting in kindergarten (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994).

In addition to the aforementioned research, kindergarten teachers have indicated the importance of having a positive transition experience for later academic success. According to research conducted by Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox (2000), many kindergarten teachers feel that the majority of the children in their class have some difficulties adjusting to formal schooling in one or more areas. Some of the most

common difficulties that were identified by teachers were difficulty following directions, poor academic skills, and the impact of coming from a disorganized home environment. This study also found that 16 percent of students were identified by their teachers as having significant difficulties adjusting to kindergarten, defined as serious concerns in one area or having difficulties adjusting in many areas.

The federal government has also recognized the national need to help children be ready for school by kindergarten. In 1990, the National Education Goals Panel was established to monitor progress toward eight educational goals that were created by the federal government to be met by the year 2000 (National Education Goals Panel, 1999). The first of these goals is that all children will enter school ready to learn. The panel looked at meeting this goal by increasing health initiatives, preschool attendance, and inspiring parents to become each child's "first teacher" through reading to their child each night. Although the focus was not directly on how preschool and kindergarten preparation for new students may help meet the readiness goal, it inspired much consideration among researchers and professionals on how preschool and kindergarten classrooms can accomplish greater readiness success.

Despite this emphasis on providing services that ease transition, achieving the goal of having all schools use effective transition practices involves overcoming barriers that have slowed progress. One barrier that has caused difficulties is that most teachers have not been trained in transition (Early, Pianta, & Cox, 1999). For example, some studies by Early et al. (1999) and Kagan and Neuman (1998) found that few teachers have received information on strategies for enhancing transition. Another barrier,

described by Love and Yelton (1989), is that few schools have a formal policy regarding the implementation of transition services. This is unfortunate, as detailed transition plans for students with disabilities often exist in schools, though these plans have not been broadened to include students from the general population (Repetto & Correa, 1996).

Though there are significant barriers to utilizing transition services to their greatest extent, much of the recent research has demonstrated that transition practices are occurring in most schools. Some of the most common strategies utilized include having an open house for the parents to visit the school and meet the teachers, and sending home newsletters about the kindergarten school day (Early, Pianta, Taylor, & Cox, 2001). However, the practices that are most commonly used tend not to be effective due to the limited number of transition strategies being used, or the way that they are being implemented (LaParo, Kraft-Sayre, & Pianta, 2003; LaParo, Pianta, & Cox, 2000a). For instance, most schools engage in transition activities after the first day of school has begun, but research has suggested that activities that begin prior to the first day of school are most effective (McGann & Clark, 2007). Similarly, schools tend to engage in the practices that are convenient, so preschool students who have their classroom in the public school building may have significantly better options for participating in the transition activities than preschool classrooms in separate settings, as well as being familiar with the school building (Desimone et al., 2004; LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer, & Pianta, 2008).

Despite the lack of empirical research supporting many of the claims and assumptions about the transition into kindergarten, recent studies have provided more

conclusive evidence on the importance of utilizing transition practices. Schulting, Malone, and Dodge (2005), found that utilizing a greater number of transition practices resulted in higher academic achievement at the end of kindergarten. This study which utilized data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Sample (ECLS-K) determined that students achieved at a higher level with more transition practices, even while controlling for socio-economic status (SES). The effect was stronger for students who were from low and middle class homes.

A second study, by LoCasle-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer, and Pianta (2008), provided additional evidence for the effectiveness of transition activities. This research was based on the National Center for Early Development and Learning's (NCELD) Multi-State Pre-Kindergarten study. In classrooms that used more transition practices in pre-kindergarten, the teachers perceived the students to have more positive social competencies and fewer behavior problems in the kindergarten classroom. Once again, this effect was stronger for students who come from families who have social or economic risk factors.

Previous research has demonstrated that the quality of childcare or preschool experiences positively impacts the child's development in the areas of language development, academic skills, and social skills (D. Clifford, Peisner-Feinberg, Culkin, Howes, & Kagan, 1998). There are federally funded preschool programs, such as Head Start, that provide opportunities for students from low income backgrounds to attend preschool at no cost to parents (National Head Start Association, 2009). However, Head Start, which is run by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, does not have

stringent education requirements for teachers (an associate's degree or bachelor's degree is not required) (Gerde & Powell, 2009). Thus, students who attend Head Start often have diverse outcomes as the quality of Head Start programs may vary widely.

In many states, the regulations and standards for state supported preschools (universal prekindergarten or UPK), are typically higher and more rigid than private preschools with regard to the minimum level of teacher training needed, class size, and curriculum (Morrisey, Lekies, & Cochran, 2007). The standards are also considerably higher than the requirements for the federally funded Head Start.

These standards may not only improve the quality of preschool experience when compared with a more typical preschool, but they also may be more closely aligned to curriculum goals and routines of kindergarten. This may further allow the transition to kindergarten to occur more smoothly. Consequently, when the UPK is located within the school building, the students may be at a further advantage as they are already familiar with the school environment and may have more opportunities to participate in transition services out of convenience and proximity than children from other preschool backgrounds.

The effectiveness of UPK, compared with other preschool programs, is of particular interest in that UPK is common in districts and is continuing to grow (Gormley, 2005). For example, universal prekindergarten is present in more than one quarter of school districts in New York State (Morrisey et al., 2007). With UPK becoming more widespread, it is important to consider the effectiveness of the program and how increased standards and regulations influence kindergarten performance.

Thus far, research on the effectiveness of UPK has tended to be positive, with students making considerable cognitive gains and increases in school readiness, particularly for students who are at risk (Assel, Landry, Swank, & Gunnewig, 2007; Garcia & Jensen, 2006/2007). In comparison to most private preschool programs, UPK stands out as a program that enhances school readiness for children (Winsler et al., 2008; Wong, Cook, Barnett, & Jung, 2008). However, most research has focused on academic readiness and not on school adjustment. It seems logical that students would adjust to school better when they are better prepared academically, but this specific idea has not been adequately researched.

In summary, there is considerable support for utilizing transition practices for students who are entering kindergarten. However, much of this support is based on logical assumptions that engaging in practices that help the students become familiar with the school and be prepared academically will ease this process. Little empirical research exists that supports these claims. The purpose of the present study is to examine the relationship between children's preschool experiences and their transition to kindergarten as perceived by their kindergarten teachers and parents. This study seeks to determine if and how the transition into kindergarten differs for children coming from different preschool backgrounds including: Universal Prekindergarten programs located within elementary schools, Universal Prekindergarten programs located in community based settings, private preschool programs, Head Start classrooms located in a community based setting, and those with no preschool experience.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review

Previous research on the transition to kindergarten has amply demonstrated the importance of this process and its potential effect on future schooling. Interest in this period of children's lives has been present in research for over three decades, and it does not appear that it will be declining at any point in the near future (Kagan & Neuman, 1998). Past research has focused on how this transition process is highly influential on behavior later in life, which further demonstrates the need for a smooth transition into formal schooling (Bradley et al., 1988; Landry et al., 2001). In addition, research has demonstrated that early school performance has a strong impact on future school performance and retention (Alexander et al., 1997; Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Entwisle & Alexander, 1993).

There are several theories explaining why these first few years are so important to later school performance. Research by Mantzicopoulos (2003) and Rimm-Kaufman et al., (2003) has suggested that families interactions with the school in kindergarten and first grade have an impact on their attitude toward school for rest of the child's school career. Another potential reason for the sizable impact of early schooling is that grades and permanent records follow students from year to year, and teachers increasingly rely on the cumulative record to inform them of the students they will be working with that year (Entwisle & Alexander, 1999; Entwisle & Hayduk, 1988). Particularly for students who attend smaller districts, as teachers review files and discuss a student's progress with previous teachers, preconceived notions and expectations for the child's success or failure become established ahead of time.

The transition process is also significant for young children because of the number of changes that children must adjust to in order to become successful students. Kindergarten is a big change for many children who now have a new role as a student, a new reference group for comparison to other children, and who are now being held to academic standards (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Meisels, 1999). Difficulty adjusting to these new roles and standards can make academic progress particularly difficult to achieve. For example, a study by Belsky and MacKinnon (1994) demonstrated that later academic difficulties can often be traced to adjustment difficulties and underachievement during the first few years of school. For these reasons, it is important for this first formal school experience to be successful for these young students.

According to research by Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2000), 46 percent of teachers reported that at least half of their class had difficulty adjusting to formal schooling. Some of the most common difficulties that students displayed were difficulty following directions, lack of preparation in academic skills, and coming from a disorganized home environment. These are variables that could be affected positively by engaging in activities that smooth the transition process. The researchers also found that teachers reported that 16 percent of students have major difficulties adjusting to kindergarten, which includes having serious concerns in one area or having difficulties adjusting in several areas.

Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003) have suggested that in order for the transition process to occur smoothly, it is necessary to establish four types of connections. These connections have been developed based on an extensive review of the literature by the

authors of the study. The first involves developing a connection between the family and school, by getting the family involved in the school early on and developing a relationship with the family. The second connection occurs between the child and the school, and is developed through having the child visit the school and meet the teachers. The third connection is between peers, demonstrating the importance of shared experiences for peers in preschool and kindergarten. The final connection needs to be established between the community and the school, and involves collaboration between professionals. As research has demonstrated the importance of these connections, this present review of the literature will focus on the development of these connections.

In addition to the above noted connections, Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003) have suggested that in order for the transition to kindergarten to occur smoothly, three important components must be present. The first necessary component is collaboration. This is a key element that will be discussed thoroughly throughout this review of the literature. Collaboration is also a key piece of each of the four connections previously discussed, and has a positive impact on the transition process and academic performance later in school. The second key element is a conceptual model that leads to a comprehensive plan or policy for the transition practices to be most effective. The final element is that there must be an emphasis on a combination of the local community goals as well as the individual needs of children to implement effective transitions. Each of these components will also be addressed throughout the review.

The present literature review will therefore consist of the following topics: The definition of transition services that will be utilized for this study, the history of the

national focus on early childhood education, the impact that the family has on the child's transition to kindergarten and later school success, the importance of collaboration with preschools and communities, and the significance of social relationships for children transitioning to formal schooling. Current transition practices and the effectiveness of those practices will also be discussed. Finally, a review of the literature on universal prekindergarten in comparison to other preschool programs will be discussed, with the possible implications for UPK in the transition process being further examined. The section will conclude with the theoretical implications of the research discussed and an outline of the research questions and hypotheses that the present study seeks to answer.

#### Definition of Transition Services

Before the discussion continues of what constitutes a positive transition experience, it seems important to define "transition services" or "transition practices." As stated previously, there is little consistency among schools regarding transition services, and many schools choose individually what practices they will employ to aid this process. Because of the range of activities in school districts, it is important that the definition be inclusive. For the purpose of this study, transition services will be defined as *any activity of which the specific goal is to help the child and/or family adjust to the child's first year of formal schooling*. This definition is purposefully broad enough to include all practices that schools are utilizing in hopes of improving this adjustment, regardless of the effectiveness of the service.

It is clear that schools recognize the importance of a healthy transition and are typically doing something to help ensure the process occurs smoothly. Some examples of

transition services used by schools include: Sending letters or brochures home to parents, phone calls or home visits to parents at the beginning of the year, preschool classroom visitations to the elementary school, visitations to the school by the child and family, and collaboration with preschool teachers regarding curriculum goals and behavior management (Early et al., 2001).

### Past Research on Kindergarten Transitions

#### *Ecological Model*

The field of transition research has evolved considerably over the past several years. Several national studies have been funded which have instigated more interest and research in specific areas of the field. One area of disagreement has been whether transition occurs smoothly due to child variables, environmental variables, or a combination of both. In the past, the emphasis has been on what could be done to make the child ready for school, and if a child was not “ready” for school, then he or she would not be allowed to start kindergarten (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). The only way for a child to be ready for school was through his or her own individual growth and maturity, as readiness was not seen as something that could be forced. As a result, schools used transitional kindergarten classes (such as Readiness Kindergarten, Begindegarten, etc.) and many children were simply delayed for another year from entering school. Recent research summarized by Zigler, Gilliam, and Jones (2006a) has demonstrated that delayed school entry is not effective in preparing children for kindergarten, but unfortunately many schools still utilize this strategy as a way to deal with the problem.

Since 30-40% of American children are still not ready for school when they begin kindergarten (Zigler et al., 2006a), the focus has shifted from the child, to the role that the community and the school have in helping children become ready to learn. This ecological approach examines the interaction of the child in his or her environment, and how this impacts school readiness (Early et al., 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). The model is more inclusive and holds more people responsible for promoting school readiness in children. This important shift has led to many changes in the focus of research and legislature, and also influenced the development of the National Education Goals Panel.

#### *National Education Goals Panel*

In 1990, an education summit was convened with President George H. Bush and representatives from each of the 50 states. Six educational goals were established at this summit, and two more were added later (Zigler et al., 2006a). One of the emphases of these goals was the importance of early childhood education in improving later academic outcomes. These eight goals were set to be attained by the year 2000, and were signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 2004 as the Goals 2000: Education America Act (National Education Goals Panel, 1999; Zigler et al., 2006a). Though Goals 2000 was initially a federal initiative, federal funding dropped considerably in the ensuing years and some state governments assumed fiscal responsibility for trying to make this vision a reality.

Despite the lack of funding, some progress was made toward the three objectives that comprised the first goal that all children would be ready to learn by kindergarten

(Zigler et al., 2006a). The first objective was that all children would have access to high quality and developmentally appropriate preschool education. The second objective was that parents would become each child's "first teacher" and set aside time to read to their children each day prior to school beginning. The final objective was that children would enter school with healthy minds and bodies, so that physical ailments or weariness would not deter them from learning. Though none of these objectives were fully met, the implementation of universal prekindergarten in several states has brought some progress toward these goals. The continued development of universal prekindergarten is likely to further improve early childhood education.

While the National Education Goals Panel fell short of meeting their objectives, the goals themselves inspired much intellectual debate about how to best help children in the education system. As previously discussed, the past focus of what characteristics make a child become academically and socially ready for school is no longer at the forefront of the readiness debate (Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, & Cox, 1999; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). The shift to an ecological approach that examines the interaction of the child in his or her environment places the emphasis on teaching schools and communities how to become ready for the new students (Early et al., 1999; Melton, Limber, & Teague, 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). This has a considerably different impact as it identifies schools and communities as equally responsible parties in preparing children to be ready for school.

*Barriers to Transition*

Despite the need for a smooth transition to kindergarten, many schools are not utilizing best practices for the transition process. This occurs for several reasons, several of which will be described here. One barrier to the implementation of transition services is that there is a concerning lack of training for teachers and administrators regarding this process. Research conducted by Early et al. (1999) demonstrated that most teachers have not received any training regarding the transition process, and only 24% have engaged in specialized training through classes or in-service training specifically focused on transition services. In addition, this study found that only 23% of teachers receive information on strategies for enhancing the transition process throughout their career. This lack of training and sharing of information makes it difficult for schools to implement best practices.

Another barrier is that most schools do not have a formal policy regarding the transition process, with only 13% of schools having any written policy (Love, Logue, Trudeau, & Thayer, 1992). One of the necessary components of effective transition, as previously discussed, is to have a conceptual model that informs a comprehensive plan or policy (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). This lack of a plan means that collaboration and consistency across the different kindergarten classrooms may or may not occur in schools, and that transition practices could vary widely even within a single school district. This is particularly unfortunate as schools appear to have the tools necessary to create a more formal policy, since most students who receive special education services tend to have well planned transition plans (Repetto & Correa, 1996). Unfortunately,

schools are mandated to provide transition services *only* to students who are classified as having a disability, even though all students could likely benefit from such a service. It also seems that if schools would follow their model for special education transitions in terms of policy, this process may run more smoothly.

### Contributors to Positive Transitions

#### *Family Involvement in School*

Family involvement in the schooling process is another important variable for school success. Family-school and child-school connections are two of the necessary connections that have been supported in the literature (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Several studies have shown that the amount of involvement a family has with the school is an important indicator of success in school overall (Bates et al., 2006; Fowler, Schwartz, & Atwater, 1999). Strong family-school partnerships also lead to better academic outcomes in school (McIntyre, Blacher, & Baker, 2006). In addition, familial attitude toward the school has influential power over academic progress. This familial attitude shapes school outcomes such as academic performance, parental satisfaction with the school, and parental involvement in the school (Griffith, 2000). Mantzicopoulos (2003) also demonstrated that parental involvement, estimates of school adjustment, and satisfaction with the school are all predictive of the risk of non-promotion.

The importance of family involvement is commonly understood by early childhood professionals. However, Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2003) found that although both family involvement and family attitude are consistent predictors of academic achievement and social competence, family attitude toward the school is a more

consistent predictor than teacher's reports of family involvement. In this study, teachers rated 223 kindergarten children in the areas of family involvement, and social and academic competencies. Academic and social competencies were measured through classroom observations and teacher reports. The researchers found that the combined effect of attitude and involvement toward school had a significant impact on academic and social outcomes even while controlling for socio-economic status. This study is paramount in demonstrating the impact that family has on school performance, and further displaying the need for collaboration and positive relationships between schools and families.

While this research demonstrates the need for a good relationship between home and school, this bond is often hindered by many aspects of the public school. One variable that may be particularly salient to parents during this period is that the expectations for family involvement in kindergarten are often quite different from the expectations of family involvement in most preschool programs. Parents of kindergarteners are not expected to be as involved in their child's education, especially if the child is not having significant difficulties. Thus, in kindergarten the contact between school and home occurs less frequently and is often more negative in nature, focusing primarily on behavior and academic problems (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 1999). This sets up a pattern of negative interactions that could have a harmful impact on parental involvement and satisfaction with the school.

Recent research conducted by McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro and Wildenger (2007) demonstrated that families want to be more involved in schools, and specifically

in the transition to kindergarten. The researchers examined the relationship between family involvement and kindergarten preparation in 132 families. Results demonstrated that most of the parents who participated in the study wanted to be more involved in this transition process than was expected by the school. Parents would also like more written communication about their child's kindergarten teacher and the academic and social expectations for kindergarten.

Collaboration and a focus on individual needs of students and families are two of the necessary components for effective transition discussed previously (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). It seems that families who are unable to get as involved as they would like, may feel that the school is being unresponsive or may feel disconnected from the school. This is unfortunate, as family involvement is important for school success, and some families are not given the opportunity to participate as much as they would like.

The fact that parents wish they could be more involved sets up an opportunity for schools to establish a good relationship with families where their involvement in school is a valued component of their child's education. There are several ways that utilizing transition services can potentially increase family involvement in kindergarten. Research by McGann and Clark (2007) suggests that transition services that occur prior to the first day of school improve family involvement, by reaching out to the families before any problems can occur. In fact, Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (1999) have suggested that developing a relationship with families during the transition process is the most important factor for an effective transition. A relationship is most likely to develop through face-to-face interaction and contact regarding positive as well as negative events.

Prekindergarten or preschool classrooms that are located within the public school building could make it easier to engage in the practices described above, which may increase the number of transition services being used simply because of convenience. A preschool classroom housed in the elementary school may also increase family involvement as the family is already familiar with the school and some of the teachers. The location of the preschool classroom may be a central variable in transition effectiveness, but as Desimone et al., (2004) have noted, little research has examined this variable.

#### *Collaboration with Preschool & Community*

Collaboration between community programs and school is one of the necessary connections that builds effective transitions (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Typically, preschools are housed within the community apart from the school district. Yet, preschool attendance leads to higher levels of kindergarten readiness and is an important connection between school and community that should not be ignored. For example, research by Taylor, Gibbs, and Slate (2000) demonstrated that participation in preschool produces higher levels of kindergarten readiness in children, than for children who do not attend preschool. This effect is even greater for students who are at risk by socio-economic status or ethnicity. While full-time preschool versus part-time preschool attendance does not consistently seem to impact school adjustment, attending preschool in some variation does have a positive impact on school readiness and adjustment (Howes, 1988). Thus, a connection between the preschool and kindergarten classrooms is

established which needs to be utilized to foster effective transitions from one setting to the next.

In order for schools to be successful in aiding children's academic growth, they need to play a significant role in each child's life prior to the child's first day of kindergarten (R. M. Clifford, Early, & Hills, 1999; Ramey & Ramey, 1998). The best way for this to occur is through collaboration between schools and families, and between schools and preschools. Collaboration may focus on coordination of services and curriculum, or on providing opportunities for young children and their families to visit the school prior to school beginning.

Research by Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, Rimm-Kaufman, Gerke and Higgins (2001) has suggested that in order for this collaboration to occur effectively, it is necessary that a connection be developed where shared vision and mutual respect are present in the relationship. There were 110 families who participated in this study which examined the collaborative efforts of preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers, and parents. They found that not only is a mutually positive relationship important to the collaboration process, but for most families and teachers, a positive relationship tends to exist. Thus, creating a positive atmosphere for collaboration among professionals and parents should not be difficult to achieve, as participants of this study tended to view one another positively and wanted to collaborate together.

According to a study by Burkham, Michaels, and Lee (2007), collaboration has a positive effect across the grade span. Collaboration between teachers within a school has a positive impact on student achievement through the alignment of curriculum goals. Yet,

Kagan and Kauerz (2007), found that currently there is little curriculum alignment occurring between prekindergarten and kindergarten. Furthermore, they found that having a greater span of grade levels housed within the same building can have a positive impact on student success. Reasons for this have not been fully investigated by the authors, as their study focused primarily on whether or not collaboration simply occurred more frequently in the same setting. However, it seems plausible that simply providing a convenient way for more teachers to collaborate across the grade span could be a contributing factor.

#### *Social Relationships*

Although not thoroughly explored in existing research, Ladd and Price (1987) have suggested that social relationships are important variables to consider for a transition to occur smoothly. The researchers examined 58 children during three different periods of the transition process: Late preschool, early kindergarten, and late kindergarten. They found that children who engaged in more cooperative play in preschool, maintained more out-of-school friendships, and who attended kindergarten with a larger group of familiar peers transitioned better than those who engaged in more aggressive play, had fewer out-of-school friendships, and attended kindergarten with less familiar peers. This study demonstrates the value of social relationships for children attending kindergarten.

As discussed previously, Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003) have also considered peer connections to be one of the four important connections that need to be built for effective transition. Specifically, the research by Ladd and Price (1987) and research by Entwisle

and Alexander (1998) have demonstrated that children who are enduring social stress transition poorly compared to children who are not experiencing social stress.

Furthermore, children who experience poor social adjustment, and who have low parental involvement, are more likely to be referred for an evaluation or additional services (Mantzicopoulos & Neuharth-Pritchett, 1998). This finding suggests that social relationships are a form of support for young children, and when children lack this support they are more likely to have problems indicative of a poor transition.

There is little research on how students who stay within the same building from preschool adjust to kindergarten; however, Entwisle & Alexander (1998) found that students who did not switch school buildings between kindergarten and first grade had a better transition to first grade than students who did switch buildings. This study utilized tools of meta-analysis to examine the impact of full day versus half day kindergarten, among other characteristics, on the transition to first grade. The meta-analysis demonstrated that there were consistent positive results across studies for children transitioning to first grade, when they had participated in full day kindergarten programs and stayed within the same school building. It seems that having the additional support of an intact set of peers from a previous setting who transition together, helps this process occur more smoothly.

## Transition Practices

### *Current Practices*

Most of the literature that has been discussed thus far focuses on what practices appear to contribute to better transitions. This next section will discuss what practices

schools are currently most likely to utilize and some of the problems that schools currently face in implementation. Though it is becoming clearer what schools should be doing, most schools are not engaging in the activities recommended as best practices. Only 20% of schools have a broad enough range of transition activities that meet the needs of families (Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, et al., 1999).

McGann and Clark (2007) have suggested that transition activities which occur prior to the first day of school are most beneficial. However, most transition activities that schools engage in begin after the school year has begun (Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999). In addition, individual attention is important for developing the relationship between the parents and the school, but most schools, and particularly those in high poverty areas, tend to rely on large group activities such as having an open house or a community meeting that occurs after school has begun (LaParo, Pianta, & Cox, 2000b; Pianta & Cox, 1998). The students in high poverty areas are also the same students who might benefit most from a comprehensive transition plan.

The majority of research conducted through surveying school districts has consistently found that most schools do engage in transition practices to some extent (LaParo et al., 2000a; LaParo et al., 2000b; Pianta, Cox, et al., 1999). However, the activities are often not effective due to the low number of practices being used or the way that they are implemented (LaParo et al., 2003; LaParo et al., 2000b; Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, et al., 1999). Furthermore, LoCasale-Crouch et al. (2008) and Schulting et al. (2005) have empirically demonstrated that the higher the number of transition practices being utilized, the more effective they are in helping students transition smoothly.

LoCasale-Crouch et al. also discussed that though parental involvement is recognized as being an important component of school success, few transition plans directly involve parents.

### *Practical Considerations*

Among the barriers to implementation previously discussed, is that most schools do not have an actual policy or even a transition plan (LaParo et al., 2003; Nelson, 2004), and that most teachers have not received training in transition services. Early et al. (2001) demonstrated the importance of training by examining the practices engaged in by teachers who had received training versus teachers who had not received training. The study found that teachers who had received training were more likely to begin the transition process prior to the first day of school and also to collaborate with community preschools.

Even if teachers have received training or are aware of best practices, they may face other barriers to implementation. One of the most commonly cited problems from kindergarten teachers was that they receive class lists too late to initiate contact prior to the first day of school (LaParo et al., 2003; Nelson, 2004; Pianta, Cox, et al., 1999). The majority of teachers reported not receiving class lists until just two weeks prior to school beginning (Pianta, Cox, et al., 1999). Having such little time for kindergarten teachers to initiate contact with families makes it impossible to use transition practices prior to the first day of school.

Another frequently cited problem is that teachers do not get paid over the summer for the extra work that a research based transition plan would require (LaParo et al.,

2003). In order to establish a relationship prior to school beginning, teachers would have to spend time putting together newsletters and organizing open houses over the summer. In addition, class sizes are often too large to engage in more interpersonal or individualized practices (Nelson, 2004). This limits the amount of individual face-to-face contact a teacher would be able to engage in prior to school beginning. Most of these problems could be relatively easily solved, particularly if it was more convenient for teachers to engage in the practices that research has suggested are most important and if they were compensated for their work during this time.

#### *Transition Practices Effectiveness*

Most of the literature to date has focused on parent or teacher perception of what activities work best in the transition to kindergarten, and what activities occur most often. While this has provided valuable information regarding what teachers and parents believe is most effective about transition services, little research has focused on empirical outcomes of utilizing transition services. In many cases it has been logically assumed that providing a specific transition service will lead to better outcomes, but there is not sufficient research to support these assumptions. Thus far, there have been two studies that have empirically examined the impact of utilizing transition services for students entering kindergarten.

A study by LoCasle-Crouch et al. (2008) examined the impact that the number of transition practices utilized had on behavior and social competencies. This study examined data gathered by National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL), which included 722 children from 214 prekindergarten classrooms. The

research team found that using a higher number of transition practices leads to fewer behavior problems and more positive social competencies at the end of kindergarten. The average number of transition activities the participating classrooms reported using was 5.95. Specifically, when the transition activities consisted of collaboration between kindergarten and preschool teachers with regard to curriculum goals and discussion of specific students entering kindergarten, the kindergarten teachers perceived the children as having better behavior and social competencies as measured by teacher rating scales. This effect was even stronger when it occurred for children coming from high risk backgrounds. This study demonstrates how practices intended to help children make a smooth transition have a direct effect on the child's behavior in school.

Schulting et al. (2005) examined the number of transition services utilized, and how this impacts academic achievement. They used the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten samples (ECLS-K), which consisted of 17,212 students in 992 schools. Academic achievement was measured through individual assessment in reading, math, and general knowledge of the physical and social world. When a higher number of transition practices were utilized, students exhibited higher academic achievement at the end of kindergarten, even while controlling for socio-economic status. This effect was stronger for students who came from families with social and economic risk factors.

Despite the limited number of empirical studies, this initial research suggests that transition practices do have a significant impact on behavioral and academic outcomes. However, the extant research on transition has primarily focused on transition practices; there have not been connections made between the different preschool experiences that

children come from and how those experiences affect the child's transition to kindergarten. The next section will cover some of the literature on the preschool experience itself, focusing specifically on the effectiveness of universal prekindergarten programs.

### Preschool Experience

Over 65 percent of children attend preschool in preparation of starting kindergarten, and an extensive body of research has demonstrated that preschool has a positive impact on early school performance (Malakoff, Zigler, Gilliam, & Jones, 2006). Despite this global finding, it is not clear exactly what the child's preschool experience should look like. Many states have different standards and models for preschool, and preschools themselves have different philosophies and standards. In addition, the preschool day can range from just a few hours a day to a full day program, and from a heavy focus on academic skill development to programs that primarily focus on social and emotional development through play. With so many differences among preschool programs, it is important to examine which programs are most effective in preparing children for kindergarten.

Several preschool models have been used in communities in preparation for kindergarten. In addition to the wide variety of models used in many private preschool programs, one program that has been specifically designed to work with the lower socio-economic status population is Head Start. This program is available in many communities to lower income families to provide free preschool services that focus on environmental enrichment, socialization with peers, and helping prepare the children and families for

kindergarten (National Head Start Association, 2009). Head Start offers a diverse range of services including education, health, and parental involvement services for lower income families making it a unique preschool environment. However, Head Start has also been criticized for having low teacher standards and lacking an emphasis on early literacy skill development (Vu, Jeon, & Howes, 2008). Despite these critiques, Head Start has generally been able to achieve higher levels of family involvement through home visitations and consultation with parents, than typical preschool classrooms.

Day care programs are often considered another form a preschool; however, the emphasis is typically on effective, quality care rather than academic preparation (Melhuish, 2001). Though day cares may be run very similarly to an actual preschool, day cares are not required to follow the same academic standards as preschools. In contrast, universal prekindergarten is a state-run preschool program that is free and available to the public regardless of SES or disability (Zigler, Gilliam, & Jones, 2006b). However, as the ensuing discussion will demonstrate, though UPK is increasing in accessibility, it is still far from universally available.

#### *History of Universal Prekindergarten*

The concept of universal prekindergarten began through the development of National Education Goals Panel (Zigler et al., 2006a), and continued as state governments took hold of the initiative and tried to provide opportunities for all children to attend preschool regardless of socio-economic status or disability status. In New York State, universal prekindergarten was established in the early 1990's, though it is only accessible to about one quarter of eligible children due to lack of funding (Zigler et al.,

2006b). Nonetheless, UPK in New York State has higher standards and higher levels of accountability than most other preschool programs.

The universal prekindergarten concept has been supported by early childhood advocates and policy makers for a considerable period of time (Zigler et al., 2006b). Some of the national organizations that have voiced their support for universal prekindergarten include the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National Head Start Association, and the National Council of Chief State School Officers. National support has also been demonstrated through public polls, which documented that most parents would like their children to attend preschool though not all parents can afford it (Zigler et al., 2006b). Much of this support has grown as a result of the education summit that began the National Education Goals Panel (Zigler et al., 2006a), resulting in considerable effort on the part of various state governments in making preschool “universal.” Universal prekindergarten (UPK) has made its mark on the education system for young children, and is increasing in popularity (Gormley, 2005). In 2005, UPK was present in 29% of New York State school districts (Morrisey et al., 2007). Though as of yet preschool is far from being truly universal nationwide, the efforts being made have contributed significantly to the eventual goal of having preschool be truly universal.

#### *Universal Prekindergarten Standards*

What makes the UPK experience different from a typical preschool experience? One important difference is that UPK has higher standards for teachers, and higher quality control than community based preschool programs. For example, in New York

State, preschool teachers working at a UPK must have their Master's degree in early childhood education as well as their teaching certification (Morrisey et al., 2007). Several studies have shown that higher training has been linked with higher quality preschool programs, so this training standard makes a considerable difference in comparison to community preschool programs (Bogard, Traylor, & Takanishi, 2008; Gormley, 2005).

In addition to higher standards of training, UPK in NY must utilize a program model that is in line with what research suggests is developmentally appropriate and must provide comprehensive services to all students (Morrisey et al., 2007). UPK must also use a research based curriculum in the classroom, and align curriculum goals with New York State Learning Standards. Utilizing a research based curriculum model has been linked with higher quality preschool programs which have led to better academic outcomes. For example, a study by Assel et al. (2007) demonstrated that using a research based literacy preschool curriculum led to greater development in language and literacy skills than non-standardized literacy programs.

These aspects of UPK ultimately lead to a higher quality preschool program, which may further lead to more positive academic outcomes for students. Research by Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Bryant, and Clifford (2000) demonstrated that quality child care is linked with stronger pre-academic skills and higher language development, regardless of the occurrence of risk factors. Furthermore, a study by Peisner et al. (2001) confirmed the finding that the quality of childcare has modest long-term effects on cognitive and social-emotional development.

*Effectiveness of Universal Prekindergarten*

Specifically with regard to public school prekindergarten, research suggests that UPK is more effective than community based preschool programs. A study by Winsler et al. (2008) demonstrated that though all children who attended preschool made some gains, children who attended a public school prekindergarten made greater gains cognitively and in language development, than children who attended other types of preschools. Their study utilized data collected by The Miami School Readiness Project, and examined the performance of an ethnically diverse population of 1,478 children attending community based child care, 1,611 children attending Title 1 public school prekindergarten and 749 children attending fee-supported public school prekindergarten. Fee-supported public school prekindergarten is similar to other public school preschool classrooms, except that a fee is required for the children to attend. Children were assessed in cognitive, language, and fine motor development at the beginning and end of the preschool program they attended. The children who attended a public school prekindergarten program made greater gains in cognitive and language development. Another study by Wong et al. (2008) had similar findings, including that children who attend UPK may make greater gains in cognitive development.

Gormley, Gayer, Phillips and Dawson (2005) found that children who attended a UPK program in Oklahoma also demonstrated strong academic outcomes and kindergarten readiness. The UPK program model in Oklahoma has similar standards to the New York State program, but has higher rates of participation; about 63% of eligible children participate. The Gormley research team examined 1,567 “older” children

attending universal prekindergarten in Oklahoma, and 1,461 “younger” children attending kindergarten in Oklahoma who had already participated in the UPK program the prior year. This was done to ensure there was not a significant discrepancy in age between the two groups. The children’s academic skills were assessed utilizing three subtests from the Woodcock Johnson Tests of Achievement – Third Edition. Results showed that the kindergarten children who had attended the universal prekindergarten program the prior year experienced larger academic gains and that this impact was consistent for children from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds.

Having the preschool classroom within the school building has also demonstrated a number of positive changes in the transition process. Desimone et al. (2004) examined preschool programs housed within elementary school buildings, by surveying 20 preschool teachers, 22 kindergarten teachers, and 53 parents from ten schools in five states. The researchers found that having the preschool classroom within the school building led to increased opportunities for the preschool and kindergarten teacher to collaborate regarding coordinating the curriculum goals and meeting the needs of individual students. It also led to improved overall transitions to kindergarten, as well as increased and sustained parental involvement.

The effectiveness of UPK in developing cognitive, academic, and social skills has been supported throughout the literature. However, there is no conclusive research regarding how this academic preparedness impacts school adjustment in kindergarten when compared with children who attend other preschool programs or no preschool. In addition, UPK classrooms are often housed within the public school building, making it

much more convenient for transition services to occur, and for the children and families to participate.

### Conclusion

The importance of having a smooth transition to kindergarten has been amply supported in the research to date. However, little research provides empirical examples of how transition practices support a smooth transition to kindergarten. Most activities that are thought to be best practices are based on parent and teacher perceptions, or logical assumptions, of what would be the most helpful in aiding this transition process. Even the empirical studies by LoCasale-Crouch et al. (2008) and Schulting et al. (2005), which found that utilizing more transition practices leads to better academic and behavioral outcomes, have limitations. Neither one of these studies examined *which* practices were being utilized; rather the studies focused on the number of practices being used.

Despite the limited data supporting transition services, a strong research base has demonstrated that preschool experience itself is important in preparing children for kindergarten. However, preschool programs are vastly different in the standards, regulations, training and curriculum utilized. Therefore, though it is clear that preschool is important for kindergarten, it is not clear which preschool settings work best to prepare students and help them adjust to formal schooling. This is an important variable in the transition process, as the preschool setting could have a significant impact on the child's ability to easily adjust to kindergarten.

Given the differences that exist in preschool settings, it seems likely that those factors will lead to differences in school adjustment among children who attended the

various preschool programs. One preschool program that has been well researched is the state-funded universal prekindergarten programs. This program is more heavily regulated and has more quality control than most community-based preschool settings and the federally funded Head Start preschool program. In addition, UPK is unique in that it is often housed within the public school building, providing easy access to the rest of the elementary school teachers and familiarity with the building that most students do not have when attending preschool.

The uniqueness of this setting may provide easier access to transition services, as collaboration between preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers is more likely to occur if both are in the school building. In addition, parents will probably have had some interaction with the principal, and children will be more familiar with their surroundings and know more familiar faces on the first day of kindergarten if he or she has attended preschool within the building. A preschool experience in a UPK classroom within the school building may lead to a smoother transition process because of these variables.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the relationship between children's preschool experience and their transition to kindergarten, as perceived by their kindergarten teachers and parents. This study seeks to determine if and how the transition to kindergarten differs for children coming from the different backgrounds including a UPK program located within an elementary school, a UPK classroom located in a community setting, a private preschool program, a Head Start classroom located in a community setting, and no preschool experience.

*Research Questions and Hypotheses*

The questions that the present study seeks to answer are the following: Does the type of preschool experience significantly impact the teacher's perceptions of school adjustment? If so, what type of preschool experience most positively impacts teacher perceived school adjustment? Were there differences in the number or type of transition practices used by UPK teachers and other preschool teachers? Did the kindergarten teachers note any differences in participation in transition activities from children and parents with regard to the type of preschool experience that was had?

The hypotheses are as follows:

- 1). Preschool children who attended universal prekindergarten (UPK) within the school building will have the highest positive ratings of adjustment recorded by their kindergarten teacher and their parents, followed by those who attended UPK outside of the school building, followed by those who had other preschool experiences including Head Start, and finally those who had no preschool.
- 2). The universal prekindergarten teachers will have utilized more transition practices than private preschool classrooms.
- 3). Results from a semi-structured interview with the teachers will reveal that having the UPK classroom within the building allowed for greater collaboration and participation in transition services for these children, than for children whose preschool was not at the school or who did not attend preschool.

## Chapter 2: Method

### *Participants*

All kindergarten teachers within a small city school district in western New York were recruited to participate in this project to examine teacher perceived adjustment in kindergarten. Participation was required, as the school administrators were interested in the outcomes of the study from a district wide perspective. The teachers helped recruit parents of children in their classes to participate in the study.

Demographic information regarding district wide characteristics were gathered from the New York State Education Department School Report Card data (New York State Education Department, 2010). In this district of roughly 5,000 students, 37% of the students receive free or reduced lunch, and the district has a 12.5% special education classification rate. It is a generally homogenous population with 80% of students identified as Caucasian, 14% identified as African American or Black, and 6% of students comprising all other ethnic groups. Only 1% of the student population has been identified as having Limited English Proficiency. Race/ethnicity data was not gathered on the individual participants of this study due to the relative homogeneity of the sample population.

Initially, 155 parents provided consent to participate in the study. Of the 341 possible participants in this school district, this is a 45% participation rate. The sample characteristics for the 155 initial participants are provided in Table 1. Of these children, 107 participants were included in the initial analyses, and students who received infant and toddler early intervention services, preschool special education services, or who were

currently receiving services due to a special education classification were analyzed separately. The 48 students who have had in the past or currently receive special education services as part of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) were examined in additional analyses.

Table 2 provides the characteristics for the regular education kindergarten student sample population. The 107 participants included in the initial analyses were dispersed among the preschool groups as follows: 23 participants from universal prekindergarten within the school building, 29 participants from the universal prekindergarten program outside of the school building, 22 participants from a private preschool program, 17 participants who did not attend preschool, and 16 participants who attended Head Start.

Of the 107 participants, the average age of the students was 5.5 years old (mean age = 66 months). There were 47 male participants (44%) and 60 female participants (56%). In addition, 35% of the participants received free or reduced lunch. There were considerable differences in the proportion of students receiving free or reduced lunch in each of the 5 groups, which will be discussed further and accounted for later in this section.

Kindergarten students who have received special education services at any time were analyzed separately, and the characteristics of this population are listed in Table 3. The proportion of participating students who currently have an IEP was consistent with the overall district characteristics. The students were dispersed among the preschool groups as follows: 27 participants from UPK in the school building, 11 participants from UPK outside of school building, 8 participants from a private preschool, and 2

participants from Head Start. There were no special education student participants in the no preschool group, and due to the exceptionally low number of participants from the Head Start group, neither of these groups could be included in the analyses.

Of the 46 special education participants included in the analyses the average age was 5.5 years old (66 months). There were 28 male participants (61%) and 18 female participants (39%). In addition, 46% of the participants received free or reduced lunch. It may be important to note that while there is a higher representation of males and students who receive free or reduced lunch in the special education student sample, this is consistent with typical findings among school classification rates. There is often a somewhat higher incidence of males and students from lower income background who receive special education services.

Participating parents also identified a total of 18 preschool teachers from 11 local area preschools, where parents had sent their child the previous year. One identified preschool teacher had taught a 3 year old class and thus was not included, as transition to kindergarten is not a major emphasis at that time. In addition, one preschool chose not to participate, though since only one student had attended this preschool it was not a significant concern. Of the 16 participating preschool teachers, there were 5 UPK classrooms housed in school, 4 UPK classrooms housed outside of school, 5 private preschool classrooms, and 2 head start classrooms.

In addition, the kindergarten teachers were interviewed individually regarding their thoughts on the transition process to kindergarten. Of the 20 kindergarten teachers in the district, 18 were interviewed in person, one was interviewed over the phone, and one

could not be reached via classroom visit or phone. The average length of time that the teachers had been teaching kindergarten was 9.6 years with an overall range of 1-25 years teaching kindergarten. All of the kindergarten teachers were female. There were 7 elementary school buildings in the district, with 2-4 kindergarten teachers working in each building.

### *Variables*

*School adjustment* was defined as the child's adjustment into the demands of formal schooling as measured by the Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment (TRSSA) (Betts & Rotenburg, 2007; Birch & Ladd, 1997), which was completed by a teacher. *Parent observed school adjustment* was similarly defined as the parent's perception of the child's adjustment to school and was measured using the Parent Report of School Adjustment, which was filled out by a parent. The Parent Report of School Adjustment was developed by Ladd and colleagues and has previously been utilized in unpublished research as parent items in the School Liking & School Avoidance Scale (G.W. Ladd, personal communication, October 8, 2008).

*Universal pre-kindergarten within school building* is a preschool classroom that is designated by the New York State Education Department as meeting the standards set for universal pre-kindergarten, and is located within an elementary school building in the district. *Universal pre-kindergarten outside of school building* is a preschool classroom that also meets the standards set for universal pre-kindergarten, but is located at a separate location that is not connected to the elementary school building. *Private preschool* is any preschool program that is run by a private organization. *No preschool*

includes all children who have not attended a formal preschool, though they may have attended a daycare program. *Head Start* is a preschool program that is federally funded and meets the standards set by the Office of Head Start under the auspices of the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

*Parental attitude toward the school* was measured through a questionnaire developed by the researcher that asked parents to respond to items regarding their own perceptions about schooling. Research by Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2003) has shown that having negative attitudes toward the school significantly impacts the child's achievement in school.

*Socio-economic status* was measured through parent report of the student's participation in free or reduced lunch. Students who come from lower income backgrounds tend to be at risk for having more difficulties in school.

*Disability status* was measured through parent report of whether or not their child currently has, or has had in the past, an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). This variable is included to be certain that there is no confusion of the impact of preschool experience on kindergarten, as students classified as having a disability may have had a more formalized transition plan as well as being more prone to adjustment difficulties in kindergarten.

*Transition Activities* were measured through the Transition Activities Questionnaire for Preschool Teachers (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). The various preschool teachers within the selected school district reported what transition activities they had engaged in, and which activities were found to be most helpful. In addition,

*Transition Activities* from the kindergarten teacher's perspective was examined using a semi-structured interview developed by the researcher.

### *Materials*

*Parent Materials.* Parents were informed of this study and asked for their consent to participate during the second week of the school year (Appendix A). The informed consent paperwork was sent home with all kindergarten students in the participating school district. Parents voluntarily decided whether or not to participate, and were asked to return the signed consent form to their child's school teacher. At this time, the participating students were assigned a random number to keep the identity of the child confidential. The research explanation letter let parents know that by returning the consent form, regardless of whether they decide to participate or not, their child would receive a voucher for a free ice cream at the cafeteria. This was to insure that all children were given the opportunity to receive the ice cream, even if their parents preferred not to participate. In addition, parents who agreed to participate and return the survey instruments were entered into a raffle for one of two local grocery store gift certificates.

Parents who agreed to participate in the study were asked to fill out demographic information about their child and his or her preschool experience, and return this information with the signed consent form during the second week of the school year (Appendix B). Parents were asked to return this information to their child's teacher.

During the fourth week of the school year, parents who agreed to participate were reminded of the purpose and requirements for their participation (Appendix C) and given a brief questionnaire called the Parent Report of School Adjustment, regarding their

perception of the child's adjustment in terms of school liking and school avoidance (Appendix D). This scale was developed by Ladd and colleagues and constituted the parent items in the School Liking & School Avoidance Scale (G.W. Ladd, personal communication, October 8, 2008). However, it has not been examined through published research and suffers from limited psychometric information regarding the scale. This scale was returned to the child's teacher in a sealed envelope.

Parents were also asked about their satisfaction and general attitude toward the school in a brief seven item survey developed by the researcher, the School Satisfaction Survey for Parents (Appendix E). This variable was included in the analysis because research has demonstrated that the parent's level of satisfaction with the school, or their attitude toward the school, can have a considerable impact on their child's school performance (Rimm-Kaufman, et al., 2003). In order to ensure that the differences in school adjustment are due to the preschool experience and not poor levels of parental satisfaction with the school, this variable was briefly examined in the analysis. This scale was also included with the Parental Report of School Adjustment and returned to their child's kindergarten teacher in a sealed envelope.

*Teacher Materials.* The short form of the Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment (TRSSA) (Betts & Rotenburg, 2007; Birch & Ladd, 1997) measured the teacher perceived adjustment for each student who had returned the signed consent form (Appendix F). The original measure was developed by Ladd and colleagues (1997) and had four reliable subscales which included: Cooperative Participation, Independent Participation, School Liking, and School Avoidance. A considerable amount of research

was conducted utilizing this scale with multiple populations (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Ladd, Buhs, & Seid, 2000; Ladd & Burgess, 2001). Recently researchers utilized exploratory factor analysis to shorten the scale and provide additional evidence for validity and reliability (Betts & Rotenburg, 2007). Confirmatory factor analysis provided further evidence for the resulting measure, which now has three reliable subscales. The subscales are as follows: On-Task Classroom Involvement, Maturity, and Positive Orientation. According to a literature review conducted by the developers of the measure, these scales correspond well to factors associated with positive school adjustment, and are consistent with predictions of transition factors, based on theories provided in the literature (Betts & Rotenburg, 2007).

There is acceptable internal consistency for the Short Form TRSSA total score ( $\alpha = .89$ ), and on each of the individual scales in the measure. On-Task Classroom Involvement ( $\alpha = .88$ ) is a six item sub-scale that measures the ability to engage in appropriate classroom tasks. This scale includes items such as, "Follows teacher's directions," and "Is interested in classroom activities." The second sub-scale, Maturity ( $\alpha = .80$ ) is a five item scale that measures social competence or maturity in the classroom. Examples of items on this scale are, "Seeks challenges," and "Is a mature child." Lastly, Positive Orientation ( $\alpha = .80$ ) is a five item scale that measures the teacher's perception of the child's positive attitude toward school. This scale includes items such as, "Laughs or smiles easily," and "Is cheerful at school." Each of the items is

rated on a 3 point scale, *Doesn't apply*, *Applies sometimes*, *Certainly applies* (0, 1, 2 respectively).

The Short Form TRSSA is relatively new, so the initial study that provided the factor analysis is the only published literature that has made use of the Short Form to date (Betts & Rotenburg, 2007). However, the amount of research done with the scale prior to the creation of the Short Form, along with the high correlations between the short form and the long form of the TRSSA, suggest that it would be appropriate to utilize for the purposes of this study.

Each of the kindergarten teachers was also asked to participate in the Semi-Structured Interview for Kindergarten Teachers Regarding Transition (Appendix G) with the researcher during the 8<sup>th</sup> week of the school year. The interview was developed by the researcher, and was used to assess the teachers' perceptions about the transition process and transition practices. It also examined any teacher perceived differences in overall adjustment of students, and asked the teachers to speculate on possible reasons for those differences. The semi-structured interview questions were adapted from previous research studies, and this method has been found to be a viable way to gather information on this topic (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

Parents also identified the preschool their child had previous attended (if any) and the name of their child's preschool teacher. The identified preschool teachers were sent a letter via postal mail inviting them to participate in the study, and the teachers were also provided information regarding the purpose of the research (Appendix H). The preschool teachers were asked to complete a brief questionnaire regarding the transition practices

that their preschool class participated in during the previous year, the Transition Activities Questionnaire for Preschool Teachers (Appendix I). The return of the questionnaire to the researcher, was considered consent to participate in the study. The questionnaire is adapted from one developed by Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003). The surveys were initially sent via the postal service. A follow up phone call was made to 8 of the 18 preschool teachers, after receiving no response when 3 weeks had passed since the initial survey was sent out. After the follow up phone call, only 1 preschool teacher opted not to participate.

### *Procedures*

Each student who participated in the study was assigned a random number in order to maintain confidentiality. The researcher kept all identifying information in a separate file from the research data, and did not share any of the identifying information.

Two weeks after school began, parents were provided the opportunity to give their consent to participate in the study, and return the demographic information. Four weeks after school began, each of the kindergarten teachers filled out the TRSSA for each student in their classroom whose parent had provided consent. The parent questionnaires were sent home with each of the students for the parents to fill out and return also during the fourth week. The teachers were interviewed during the eighth week of the school year using the semi-structured interview developed by the researcher. The preschool teachers were mailed the questionnaire on the transition practices they engaged in during week six of the school year. During the ninth week of the school year, a follow up phone call was made to 8 preschool teachers who had not yet returned the survey.

## Chapter 3: Results

*Kindergarten Adjustment Data*

An initial Chi-Square test determined that the proportion of students who received or are currently receiving special education services under an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), were significantly different among the five preschool groups (UPK in School, UPK out of School, Other Preschool, No Preschool, and Head Start) ( $\chi^2 [5, N = 155] = 23.838, p < .001$ ). The proportion of special education students in each of the groups ranged from 0% (no preschool group) to 54% (UPK in the school). Students who have received special education services likely have different transition needs, in addition to typically receiving special transition services as part of their IEP transition plan. Thus, students who have received an IEP or IFSP at any time were analyzed separately from regular education students to ensure that the differing proportions did not interfere with the overall results. The following results refer only to the regular education student population, while the subsequent section will discuss students who are receiving special education services.

*Regular education student results.*

In order to control for SES, the distribution of participants receiving free or reduced lunch in each of the five groups was examined. Chi-Squares determined that there were significant differences in the distribution of participants from a lower socioeconomic status background in each of the five preschool groups ( $\chi^2 [4, N = 107] = 18.122, p < .01$ ). The proportion of students who received free or reduced lunch ranged from 13% (UPK in school) to 66.7% (Head Start). Therefore, interaction effects regarding SES were examined in the ANOVA's due to the significant differences in

distribution of children from lower SES backgrounds in each of the groups, and will be discussed in greater detail below.

The overall mean results of the teacher ratings on the TRSSA are provided in Table 4, and indicate that the UPK in school group had the highest ratings overall, and the no preschool group had the lowest ratings. The original teacher ratings were recoded from 0, 1, and 2, to 1, 2, and 3 respectively to aid readability of the results. The kindergarten adjustment data was further analyzed via a 2x5 factorial ANOVA. Results are provided in Table 5. Of preschool and socio-economic status, only the type of preschool had a statistically significant effect on the teacher ratings of adjustment. Therefore, the simple main effect for preschool on teacher perceived adjustment was examined, and found to be statistically significant ( $F = 3.494 [4, 102], p \leq .01$ ). Results from this analysis indicated that the UPK in school group had the highest average ratings on teacher ratings of adjustment.

In addition to providing a rating of overall school adjustment, the TRSSA includes three subscales: Maturity, On-Task Involvement, and Positive Orientation. In addition to overall adjustment being statistically significant, a one-way ANOVA examining the TRSSA subscales found that teachers rated Maturity significantly differently among the five preschool groups ( $F = 4.603 [4, 102] p < .01$ ). For this subscale, the UPK in school group had the highest mean ratings. On-Task Involvement and Positive Orientation were not significantly different based on preschool type. Results of these analyses are displayed in Table 6.

Post-hoc testing was conducted to compare subscale scores across groups. Teachers perceived significantly higher levels of overall adjustment for students who attended UPK within the school building than for students who did not attend any preschool. Additionally, Post-hoc testing showed that for students who attended any kind of preschool except Head Start (UPK in the school, UPK outside of school, or private preschool), teachers perceived statistically significant higher levels of maturity, than for children who did not attend any preschool.

Parental satisfaction with the school was also examined to determine if there were significant differences among the five preschool groups. This was done to make certain that parental satisfaction with the school did not have a variable impact on students' school adjustment. For example, if one preschool group's parents had significantly higher levels of satisfaction than the other preschool groups, then those children may adjust better in part because the parents have such a positive attitude regarding the school.

An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test determined that there were not significant differences in the level of parental school satisfaction ratings among each of the five participant groups. A means table for these results is provided in Table 7, and ANOVA results are provided in Table 8. Since there were no significant differences regarding parental satisfaction with the school, no additional analysis with this variable was needed.

Similarly, an ANOVA demonstrated that the effects of SES and preschool did not produce any significant differences on parent ratings of school adjustment for regular education students. Thus, no further analyses were computed with the parent ratings of

school adjustment. The mean results from this measure are provided in Table 9, and the results of the ANOVA are provided in Table 10.

*Special Education Student Results.*

There were no students who received special education services in the no preschool group, and only 2 students who received special education services in the Head Start group. Therefore, these groups could not be included in the following analyses. For students who receive special education services, an ANOVA demonstrated that there were not significant differences among the three preschool groups regarding parental satisfaction with the school ( $F = .818 [2, 40] p = .448$ ). Thus, no further analyses were needed regarding parental satisfaction. The scale means are provided in Table 11.

However, Chi-Square analysis determined that there were significant differences in distribution of participants from a lower socio-economic status background in each of the three preschool groups ( $\chi^2 [2, N = 51] = 7.652, p < .05$ ). Results from this analysis indicated that the proportion of students receiving free or reduced lunch ranged from 10% (private preschool) to 59.3% (UPK in school). Therefore, interaction effects regarding SES were examined due to the significant differences in distribution of children from lower SES backgrounds in each of the groups.

The teacher ratings of kindergarten adjustment data were analyzed via a 2x3 factorial ANOVA. The TRSSA means are provided in Table 12, and the results from the ANOVA are in Table 13. Neither preschool nor SES were found to have a significant impact on teacher perceived adjustment for special education students. Similarly, the effects of SES and preschool were not significantly different on parent ratings of school

adjustment. The means from this analysis are in Table 14, and the ANOVA results are provided in Table 15.

### *Preschool Teacher Reports*

Preschool teachers were also asked to return a brief survey that asked them to indicate what transition practices they utilized during the previous school year. The results of survey data are provided in Table 16. The survey results indicated that the UPK teachers with a classroom in the school building reported utilizing an average of 6-7 transition activities, while the UPK teachers with a classroom outside of the school building reported utilizing an average of 2-3 transition activities, and preschool teachers working in a private preschool reported using an average of 1-2 transition activities. Head Start teachers were also given the scale, and similar to UPK teachers in schools, they reported using an average of 6 transition activities per year. When each of the teachers were asked to rate the usefulness of each activity (1=Not Useful; 2=Somewhat useful; 3=Very useful), all of the preschool teachers rated each activity as being somewhat or very useful.

The activities that each preschool program utilized are provided in Table 17. The most common transition activities used by teachers in the UPK in school programs were the preschool teacher visiting the kindergarten classroom, students participating in school wide activity/assembly, and meeting individually with parents about kindergarten issues. The most common activities that teachers from the UPK outside of school programs and private preschool teachers used were having an individual meeting with parents about kindergarten issues, and sharing written records with the kindergarten teacher. Both of

the Head Start teachers surveyed indicated using the same six transition activities which included the teacher visiting the kindergarten classroom, children and parents attending an orientation about kindergarten, having students participate in a school wide assembly, meeting with parents individually, and sharing written record with kindergarten teachers.

#### *Kindergarten Teacher Interview Data*

Kindergarten teachers were also asked a variety of questions about the transition process to kindergarten, using the semi-structured interview. The questions and most common types of answers are provided in Table 18. Overall, the interview results indicated that the majority of teachers (84%) think that preschool attendance is a significant contributor to success in kindergarten for reasons related to social development, academic skill development, and ability to learn the routine/schedule.

Among other notable findings from the interviews was that kindergarten teachers were much more likely to report collaborating formally and informally with the preschool teachers if the preschool was located in that particular school building. When no preschool classroom was in the school building, teachers reported little to no collaboration with any preschool teachers. In addition, few teachers reported any contact with private preschool program, or UPK teachers outside of the school building. Similarly, when a preschool classroom was located in the school building, teachers consistently reported that the students who attended UPK in that building the previous year seemed to adjust to kindergarten better and more easily. Specifically, the teachers commonly reported that students who attended preschool in the same building were more

at ease in kindergarten, had fewer behavioral problems, knew their way around the building, were comforted by familiar faces, and adjusted well to the routine.

The kindergarten teachers generally did not report considerable differences in participation in the transition activities offered by the kindergarten teachers (kindergarten orientation, visiting school, etc.) based on preschool experience. It was encouraging to learn that the teachers indicated that there was generally a high level of participation from all parents in most orientations, open houses, and parent meetings.

When asked what other characteristics besides preschool and socio-economic status appeared to help children adjust to kindergarten, the most commonly cited responses included family involvement, involvement in other educational activities (being read to, going to the zoo, etc.), and the age or level of maturity in the child.

## Chapter 4: Discussion

There is increasing agreement among early childhood professionals that preschool plays a significant role in preparing students for kindergarten. Kindergarten is the child's first experience with formal schooling, and how the child adjusts to this new experience can have a significant impact on the child's school career. A considerable amount of research has focused on the transition process to kindergarten, and how this process can be effectively utilized to help students succeed in school. Prior research has focused on how the number of transition activities used impacts behavioral and social competencies, as well as academic progress. However, it is still uncertain how different preschool programs influence the transition process and the child's school adjustment. The current study sought to examine the connection between preschool and kindergarten transition, and determined that the preschool experience can have a significant impact on kindergarten adjustment for some students.

One indirect finding from this study is that the results suggest that preschool attendance is becoming much more common, at least in the community where the study was conducted. Of the 155 participants, only 17 students (11%) had not attended preschool at all. It is encouraging to see a community where preschool is viewed as a valuable part of the education system. In addition, it is also important to note the high rates of special education students attending the UPK in school building programs. New York State's UPK program was intended to provide opportunities for inclusion for students with disabilities, and it is clear that in the examined district this model is being used effectively for providing inclusion preschool services to students in the community.

Of the 17 participating students who did not attend preschool, none of these students had been identified as a student with a disability. Thus, it is likely that the examined district has been able to effectively provide some kind of preschool service to nearly all students who have disabilities by the time they go to kindergarten.

*Impact of Preschool for Regular Education Students*

Results from this study indicate that regular education children who attend universal prekindergarten (UPK) in the school building were rated by teachers as having significantly higher levels of overall adjustment than children who did not attend preschool at all. In addition, children who attended any preschool program except Head Start were rated by teachers as having significantly higher levels of maturity, than children who did not attend preschool. This means that there appears to be pronounced differences in adjustment for children who specifically attend UPK within the school building, rather than not attending preschool. Children who attended UPK in the school building also had the highest adjustment ratings overall for all preschool groups.

It should be noted that though students who attended UPK in the school building were only statistically different from students in the no preschool group, the adjustment means in each of the five groups generally followed the direction of the first hypothesis. That is, students who attended UPK in the school building had the highest means, followed by students who attended UPK outside of the school building, students who attended private preschool and who attended Head Start, followed by students who did not attend preschool. This suggests that though statistical significance was not achieved

across all preschool groups in this study, this may be due to the sample size. Thus, it may be valuable to pursue this area of research further in the future with a larger sample size.

Despite the fact that the results from this study do generally follow the direction of the first hypothesis, the ratings among students who attend UPK outside of the school building and students who attend private preschool or Head Start were not as different as initially expected. This suggests that the program requirements for UPK were not as important in producing positive kindergarten adjustment as the location of the classroom. Only students who attended UPK in the school appeared to benefit significantly more than children who did not attend preschool.

In contrast, parent ratings of school adjustment surprisingly indicated no significant differences among the preschool groups. This finding is not consistent with the first hypothesis, which expected to find agreement among teacher and parent ratings of adjustment. This may be due to the fact that the parent rating scale (the PRSSA) primarily focuses on school liking and school avoidance, as parents cannot report on how the child behaves within the classroom. It may also be that early in the school year parents do not see pronounced differences in their perceptions of their child's school liking and school avoidance, despite how adjustment appears to be occurring in the classroom.

#### *Impact of Preschool on Special Education Students*

Kindergarten students who have received special education services at any time were analyzed separately, as research suggests that these students have different transition needs, may have a more difficult time with kindergarten adjustment, and may

also have benefitted from a formalized transition plan. The results from this population indicate no significant differences in parent perceived or teacher perceived adjustment based on preschool experience. There are several reasons why this result may have occurred. First, the sample sizes may have been too small to achieve statistical significance, and the group sizes were uneven with no participants included from the no preschool and the Head Start groups. A second possible reason is that students who have received special education services at any time are not a homogeneous population. Some of these students may have only received a preschool IEP for speech/language services, and some students may have received intensive early intervention, preschool, and kindergarten services for a myriad of difficulties. Unfortunately, due to the already small number of participants who have received any special services, all of these students were grouped together. However, the students within this population likely had very different needs and received very different services which could have a considerable impact on the adjustment ratings.

At this time it does not seem appropriate to assume, based on the findings of this study, that preschool experience has no significant impact on kindergarten adjustment for students who have received special education services. Rather, this study demonstrates the complexity of measuring kindergarten adjustment with this population, and what variables future research might include to illustrate more compelling results for this population. For example, future research might include analyses regarding children who have received different types of special education services or who have different disabilities as distinct groups.

*The Impact of Transition Activities on Kindergarten Adjustment*

As expected, results from the preschool teacher survey data indicate that more transition practices are utilized when the UPK classrooms are housed within the school building. The number of transition practices utilized by the UPK classrooms outside of the school building and by private preschools was nearly the same, and both were considerably lower on average than the UPK in the school building. This suggests that the second hypothesis was partially proven correct, in that the UPK classrooms in the school building did use a higher number of transition activities. However, the UPK classrooms outside of the school building used a very similar number of transition practices to the private preschool programs, so sharing the building appears to make the greatest difference in the number of transition practices utilized. It seems quite likely that the convenience of having a preschool classroom in the school building is what makes it so easy to implement some of these practices, and thus what has a significant impact on kindergarten adjustment.

It is interesting to note that the most common transition activities used by any preschool program were meeting with parents individually about kindergarten issues and sharing written records with the kindergarten teachers. In addition, Head Start classrooms tended to participate in the activities that involved doing orientations, large group activities (school wide assembly), or sharing written records. It seems that most of the activities they were using may be somewhat impersonal, and lack individualization of the transition process. While UPK in school programs were likely to use some similar activities to the Head Start group, several classrooms also engaged in activities such as

having students visit specific kindergarten classrooms, discussing specific students with kindergarten teachers, and having kindergarten teachers visit preschool classrooms.

While this information is qualitative in nature, it is certainly something that should be further examined to determine what activities have the most positive impact on students.

Head Start classrooms also reported using an average of 6 transition activities, similar to the UPK in school building classrooms. This is an important finding for several reasons. First, this result indicates that though it may be considerably easier to use more transition practices when the classroom is located in the school building, preschool and kindergarten classrooms are quite capable of collaborating to achieve similar results when the classroom's location is in a community setting.

Second, despite the fact that the Head Start classrooms used similar numbers of transition practices, the kindergarten teachers still tended to rate these students relatively low on the measures of kindergarten adjustment (second lowest overall mean ratings). Thus in order for successful transitions to occur, more may be needed than simply increasing the number of transition activities used. However, it should also be noted that the Head Start population tends to be associated with risk factors characteristic of a disadvantaged population such as lower levels of parental education, health care, and provision for additional educational experiences (attending a museum, zoo, owning and reading books). Thus, the results may be somewhat confounded by the sample population's differing characteristics.

The kindergarten interviews confirmed the results from the teacher adjustment data. Specifically, the majority of the kindergarten teachers indicated that attending any

type of preschool was most beneficial to kindergarten adjustment. However, about half of the teachers also reported that though any preschool experience is valuable, the students who attended the UPK in the school building seemed to adjust better and more easily than the students who attended other preschool programs.

Another notable finding from the kindergarten interviews was that every kindergarten teacher whose school building also has a UPK classroom, indicated that familiarity with the school building seemed to have a significant impact on the student's adjustment. This result supports the adjustment ratings, again highlighting that only the students who attended UPK within the school building had significantly higher ratings of school adjustment than the no preschool group.

In addition, the interviews generally confirmed that having the UPK classroom in the school building led to greater levels of collaboration among the preschool and kindergarten teachers. This is particularly important, as the kindergarten teachers with no UPK classroom in their school building all reported little to no collaboration among preschool and kindergarten teachers. Although in an ideal situation all preschool classrooms may be housed in the school building, it is clear that this may not be a possibility for many school districts at this time. If moving preschool classrooms into the school building cannot be accomplished, this study demonstrates that increased collaboration between preschool and kindergarten teachers may be an important step in improving school outcomes. It is paramount that even when the convenience of proximity is not available, efforts are made to establish connections among early childhood professionals and kindergarten teachers. This collaboration could be achieved through

meetings where both kindergarten and preschool teachers participate, establishing a person to act as a liaison between schools and preschools, and including preschools in the planning and development of transition activities.

#### *Limitations & Directions for Future Research*

One of the limitations in this study is the sample size, and unequal proportions of special education students and lower income students in each of the five groups.

Unfortunately, the no preschool and Head Start groups were smaller than the other groups in the regular education sample creating somewhat uneven groups. Another effect of the small sample size was the impact on statistical significance. Although some of the results were not statistically significant, nearly all of the results followed the direction of the original hypotheses. For instance, while the UPK in school group had higher overall adjustment means than all preschool groups, it was only significantly different from the no preschool group. If there had been a larger sample size, these mean differences may have reached statistical significance for comparisons with the other preschool groups. Future research in this area may focus on replicating these results with a larger population.

In addition, the unequal and limited numbers of special education students in each of the groups significantly impacts the generalizability of the results with regard to this population. Without any special education students in the no preschool and Head Start groups, these groups were left completely unrepresented in these analyses. Therefore, though these results may be useful in providing a starting point for future research, little

can be conclusively determined with regard to the adjustment of special education students based on the results of this study.

Another limitation of this study is that the entire population of participants in this study comes from a single school district. In some ways this was a benefit, as one may be certain that the population examined in this study was homogeneous. However, focusing on a homogenous population does limit the generalizability of the findings to some degree. Until further research is conducted with a larger heterogeneous population, it is uncertain to what degree these results may be replicated.

This study used teacher perceived ratings of kindergarten adjustment. Though this is a valid way to measure adjustment, future research that measures adjustment in a more direct way (i.e., direct observations of behavior in classrooms) may provide a somewhat different picture than simply relying on teacher perceptions. In addition, the level of adjustment in kindergarten has been linked with achievement, but future research may focus on providing a more direct link between preschool experience, school adjustment, and academic achievement. For example, a study that occurs throughout the course of the school year may be able to examine how the preschool experience initially impacts kindergarten adjustment, and then continue to gather data on how this adjustment affects the students' academic and behavioral progress throughout the year.

Another possible research direction for further study in this area is to examine the long-term impact of preschool on school adjustment throughout the child's school career. This particular study focused on the level of adjustment during the first 4-6 weeks of school. However, it may be interesting to compare these findings with results from the

same measures later in kindergarten and possibly even first and second grade. This might help answer to what extent the preschool experience, and specific factors associated with transition, have a long-term positive or negative impact on kindergarten adjustment and whether there is an equalizing effect as students continue in the later elementary school grades.

Finally, the majority of research conducted to date has focused on how the number of transition activities impacts kindergarten adjustment. It has consistently been suggested that transition activities have a positive impact on school adjustment in general. However, future research may more closely examine which specific activities are most valuable for kindergarten adjustment. The kindergarten teacher interviews conducted for this study suggest that activities which involve visiting the school building and communicating with parents are the most valuable. This qualitative data may provide a good starting place for future, more quantitative data, to more closely examine how specific activities impact school adjustment.

### *Implications*

Overall, results from this study suggest that there is still much to be learned about the transition process to formal schooling. If future research confirms the findings of this study, it may be important for the field of early childhood education to consider the benefits of housing preschool classrooms within the school building. Not only may the children adjust better and have a more positive view of school, but they may be better prepared academically. In addition, the preschool program and kindergarten classrooms will likely benefit from increased opportunities for collaboration. The current disconnect

that frequently occurs between preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers is unfortunate, as both programs could undoubtedly benefit from alignment of curriculum goals, behavioral expectations, and interventions utilized with specific students.

Past research has already indicated that the number of transition practices utilized has a significant impact on behavioral and academic performance in the classroom. This study suggests that preschool classrooms housed within the school building implement a considerably higher number of transition practices than other preschools within a school district, with the exception of Head Start. This is an important finding as the students who attend UPK within the school building are already likely to receive multiple benefits that other students may not be receiving (e.g., familiarity with school building, similar routines, collaboration between preschool and kindergarten).

Thus, in the future it may be invaluable for school districts to move toward a more collaborative relationship with preschools. If schools can help students be well prepared and have a positive early experience in school, then they may prevent some of the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional concerns that some children experience later in school. Though future research is needed in this area to conclusively determine the extent of the relationship between early school experiences and later educational performance, previous research and the current study have suggested that this link does exist. Therefore it seems prudent to utilize this information appropriately in current practices.

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Table 1

*Total Sample Characteristics*

Characteristic	UPK In	UPK Out	Private	None	Head Start	Total
n =	50	40	30	17	18	155
Gender						
Male	52%	42.5%	47%	59%	56%	49.7%
Female	48%	57.5%	53%	41%	44%	50.3%
SES						
F/R Lunch	19%	35%	16.7%	53%	72%	38.7%
Mean Age	65.4	65.6	67.1	64.7	64.7	65.6
Special Ed. <sup>a</sup>						
IFSP	22%	15%	13%	0%	11%	14.8%
Preschool IEP	48%	23%	17%	0%	6%	25.8%
K IEP	26%	5%	7%	0%	6%	12.3%
Total Spec. Ed	54%	27.5%	27%	0%	11%	31%
<b>Total</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Note.* F/R Lunch = Free or reduced lunch; Mean Age = Age in months.

<sup>a</sup>Parents indicated whether their child had received an IFSP, Preschool IEP, or Kindergarten IEP at any time by placing a check mark by each type of special education service plan that had been received. The total number of students from each group who had ever received any of the listed types of services is provided in Total Spec. Ed row.

Table 2

*Regular Education Students Sample Characteristics*

Characteristic	UPK In	UPK Out	Private	None	HeadStart	Total
n=	23	29	22	17	16	107
Gender						
Male	43.5%	34.5%	41%	59%	50%	44%
Female	56.5%	65.5%	59%	41%	50%	56%
SES						
F/R Lunch	13%	35%	18%	53%	69%	35%
Mean Age	65.7	65.6	67	64.7	64.4	65.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Note.* F/R Lunch = Free or reduced lunch; Mean Age = Age in months.

Table 3

*Special Education Students Sample Characteristics*

Characteristic	UPK In	UPK Out	Private	None	HeadStart	Total
n=	27	11	8	0	2 <sup>a</sup>	48
Gender						
Male	59%	64%	62.5%	-	-	61%
Female	41%	36%	37.5%	-	-	39%
SES						
F/R Lunch**	59%	36%	12.5%	-	-	46%
Mean	65.2	65.6	67.4	-	-	65.7
Age***						
<b>Total</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Note. F/R Lunch = Free or reduced lunch; Mean Age = Age in months.

<sup>a</sup> Due to this low number, Head Start students were not included in the analyses

Table 4

*Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment (TRSSA) Regular Education Student Mean Results*

Scale	UPK In	UPK Out	Private	None	HeadStart	Total
Mean (SD)						
Maturity	2.5 (.4)	2.2 (.5)	2.3 (.5)	1.8 (.7)	2.1 (.6)	2.2 (.6)
On-Task	2.7 (.4)	2.6 (.4)	2.6 (.5)	2.3 (.6)	2.5 (.5)	2.6 (.5)
PO	2.8 (.3)	2.6 (.4)	2.7 (.4)	2.5 (.4)	2.7 (.3)	2.6 (.4)
Total	2.7 (.3)	2.5 (.4)	2.5 (.4)	2.2 (.5)	2.4 (.4)	2.5 (.4)

Table 5

*Factorial Analysis of Variance for Teacher Ratings of Adjustment for Regular Education Students*

Source	df	F	p
Between Subjects			
Preschool	4	3.89	.039
Socio-economic status (SES)	1	.313	.577
Preschool*SES	4	.685	.604
Error	97	(14.400)	

Table 6

*One-Way Analysis of Variance for the Maturity, On-Task Classroom Involvement, and Positive Orientation Subscales of Teacher Ratings of Adjustment for Regular Education Students*

Source	df	F	p
Between Subjects			
Preschool - Maturity	4	4.603	.002
Error	102	(28.764)	
Preschool – On-Task	4	1.838	.127
Error	102	(21.337)	
Preschool – Positive	4	1.590	.183
Error	102	(14.935)	

Table 7

*Parental Satisfaction with School – Regular Education Student Means*

Scale	UPK In	UPK Out	Private	None	HeadStart	Total
Mean (SD)						
Total	4.8 (.4)	4.6 (.5)	4.7 (.3)	4.6 (.7)	4.8 (.4)	4.7 (.5)

Table 8

*One-Way Analysis of Variance for Parent Satisfaction with School – Regular Education Students*

Source	df	F	p
Between Subjects			
Satisfaction	4	.523	.719
Error	94	(20.830)	

Table 9

*Parent Rating Scale of School Adjustment (PRSSA) Regular Education Student Mean Results*

Scale	UPK In	UPK Out	Private	None	HeadStart	Total
Mean (SD)						
Total	4.6 (.4)	4.6 (.5)	4.5 (.7)	4.6 (.6)	4.7 (.4)	4.6 (.5)

Table 10

*Factorial Analysis of Variance for Parent Ratings of Adjustment for Regular Education Students*

Source	df	F	p
Between Subjects			
Preschool	4	.706	.590
Socio-economic status (SES)	1	.191	.663
Preschool*SES	4	.633	.640
Error	91	(25.821)	

Table 11

*Parental Satisfaction with School – Special Education Student Means*

Scale	UPK In	UPK Out	Private	None	HeadStart	Total
Mean (SD)						
Total	4.6 (.6)	4.8 (.4)	4.7 (.3)	-	-	4.7 (.5)

Table 12

*Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment (TRSSA) Special Education Student Mean Results*

Scale	UPK In	UPK Out	Private	None	HeadStart	Total
Mean (SD)						
Maturity	1.8 (.5)	2.2 (.5)	2.4 (.5)	-	-	2.0 (.6)
On-Task	2.3 (.6)	2.4 (.5)	2.4 (.5)	-	-	2.3 (.5)
PO	2.4 (.6)	2.6 (.4)	2.5 (.5)	-	-	2.5 (.5)
Total	2.2 (.5)	2.4 (.4)	2.4 (.4)	-	-	2.3 (.4)

Table 13

*Factorial Analysis of Variance for Teacher Ratings of School Adjustment for Special Education Students*

Source	df	F	p
Between Subjects			
Preschool	2	1.364	.267
SES	1	.647	.426
Preschool*SES	2	1.665	.202
Error	40	(6.170)	

Table 14

*Parent Rating Scale of School Adjustment (PRSSA) Special Education Student Mean Results*

Scale	UPK In	UPK Out	Private	None	HeadStart	Total
Mean (SD)						
Total	4.4 (.7)	4.8 (.2)	4.6 (.4)	-	-	4.6 (.6)

Table 15

*Factorial Analysis of Variance for Parent Ratings of School Adjustment for Special Education Students*

Source	df	F	p
Between Subjects			
Preschool	2	2.213	.124
SES	1	.327	.571
Preschool*SES	2	.146	.864
Error	37	(12.144)	

Table 16

*Mean Number of Transition Activities Utilized by Preschools*

Scale	UPK In	UPK Out	Private	HeadStart
n	5	4	5	2
Transition Activities	6.6	2.5	1.4	6
Usefulness	2.67	2.92	3.00	2.33

Table 17

*Preschool Teacher Survey Responses by Survey Item*

Item	UPK In	UPK Out	Private Preschool	Head Start
<b><i>Total Number of Classrooms</i></b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>
1. Preschool children visited K classroom	2	0	0	0
2. Preschool children visited specific K class they will be attending.	2	1	0	0
3. Preschool teacher visited K classroom	5	0	0	2
4. K teacher visited preschool classroom	2	0	0	0
5. Elementary school children visited preschool classroom.	0	1	0	0
6. Preschool children attended spring orientation about K.	3	0	0	2
7. Parents of preschool children attended spring orientation about K.	3	0	0	2
8. Preschool children participated in school wide activity.	5	0	0	2
9. Preschool teacher met with parents individually about K issues.	5	4	4	2
10. Preschool teacher shared written records with K teacher.	2	4	3	2

11. Preschool teachers met with K teachers about curriculum.	0	0	0	0
12. Preschool teacher contacted K teacher about specific children.	3	0	0	0
13. Other	1	0	0	0

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Table 18

*Kindergarten Interview Questions and Responses*

Question	Common Responses
Years Teaching Kindergarten	Average Length: 9.6
Activities that <i>best</i> help kids adjust to kindergarten	Social activities (8/19), learning the routine/schedule (8/19), having opportunities to play (11/19), having a sense of ownership in the classroom (6/19), kindergarten orientation (7/19).
Activities that <i>best</i> help parents adjust to sending their kids to formal schooling.	Communication through letters, newsletters, meetings, phone calls (14/19), letting parents know what the expectations are (10/19), having a kindergarten orientation (7/19), and meeting the teacher prior to school starting (7/19).
Activities that best seem to help teacher's prepare for students.	Wait and see how kids do in kindergarten (7/19), get records from preschool (6/19), utilize behavior modifications (4/19).
Satisfaction with transition activities.	Yes (15/19); No (4/19). Orientation is helpful (6/19); don't know what else could be done (3/19); Not enough time to do more (3/19).

<p>Impact of preschool on participation in transition activities.</p>	<p>Depends on family (8/19); High participation from all families (8/19); Higher participation from kids who attended UPK in same building (3/19).</p>
<p>Level of collaboration with preschool teachers.</p>	<p>Little/no collaboration occurs with preschool teachers (11/11 with no preschool in building); A lot of collaboration occurs with preschool teachers (6/8 with UPK teachers in same building).</p>
<p>Child's overall adjustment based on preschool experience.</p>	<p>Preschool attendance has significant impact (16/19); Specifically UPK program helps kids adjust the best (10/19).</p>
<p>Does familiarity with school building impact school adjustment?</p>	<p>Not sure (no PreK class in school building) (11/11); Yes, students appear to adjust better and faster (PreK class in school building) (8/8).</p>
<p>Other characteristics that seems to help kids adjust to kindergarten.</p>	<p>Family involvement in the child's life (11/19); Other educational experiences (being read to, going to the zoo, etc.) (6/19); age of child entering kindergarten, older students perform better (5/19).</p>

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## Appendix A

### Explanation of Research

My name is Beth Claes and I am a school psychology graduate student from Alfred University. I have recently moved to the Lockport area for my internship requirements, and am also collaborating with Lockport City School District for a research project. You are invited to participate in this study which is designed for children in kindergarten. We hope to learn how to make the transition to school occur as smoothly as possible. You were selected to participate in this study because you have a child in kindergarten at Lockport City School District.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to fill out the attached sheet and return it to your child's kindergarten teachers with the consent form. In addition, you will be asked to fill out another brief survey (sent later) regarding the experiences you and your child have had with the school. The entire survey should take about 10 minutes or less to complete. In addition, your child's preschool teacher (if your child went to preschool) will be asked to fill out a brief survey regarding what preschool activities were used in preparation for kindergarten. If you decide not to participate, please send back the permission slip indicating this decision.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, all information gathered on your child's school experiences will remain confidential. The identity of your child will be protected, as he or she will be identified through a randomly assigned number. All identifying information will be kept in a separate, sealed location from the data utilized in the study. In addition, all gathered data will be analyzed via group data and not by individual students. Your decision whether or not to participate will not impact your relationship with the school district in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time.

Upon our receipt of your signed Permission Slip, your child will be given a voucher for a free ice cream from the school cafeteria, whether or not you have chosen to participate. Those parents who choose to participate will have their names entered into a drawing to receive one of two \$50 dollar gift cards to the local supermarket.

Your completion of the attached permission slip for your child's participation will be considered your informed consent to participate. If you have any questions at any time, please do not hesitate to contact me at: Beth Claes, [bs1@alfred.edu](mailto:bs1@alfred.edu) or (585) 943-3740.

You may also contact my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Nancy Evangelista, Division of School Psychology & Counseling, Alfred University, at 607-871-2649, or the Chair of the Human Subjects Research Committee, Alfred University, Dr. Jana Atlas at 607-871-2212.

Thank you for your help!

Sincerely,  
Beth Claes, M.A.  
Alfred University



Permission Slip for Participation

I have read the explanation of research on Transition to Kindergarten and understand that I am making a decision whether or not to participate. I recognize that if I choose to participate I may withdraw at any time from the study without penalty to myself or my child. I understand that return of this form is necessary for my child to receive the free ice cream.

\_\_\_\_ I choose to participate in this research. I have completed and enclosed the Demographic Questionnaire for Parents.

\_\_\_\_ I choose to NOT participate in this research

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Legal Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Legal Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Child Participating

Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire for Parents

Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please fill out this information and return with the signed consent form if you choose to participate in this study. Once we have received your consent for participation and this information has been returned, a brief survey will be sent home with your child for you to complete.*

1. Did your child go to preschool? (circle one)                      Yes                      No

2. If yes, please provide the name and address of the preschool, and the preschool teacher's name:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Does your child receive a free or reduced lunch at school? (circle one)                      Yes                      No

4. Child's Gender (circle one)                      Male                      Female

5. Child's Birthdate: \_\_\_\_\_

6. Did/does your child have any of the following? (check all that apply)

\_\_\_\_ Early Intervention IFSP

\_\_\_\_ Preschool IFSP/IEP

\_\_\_\_ Kindergarten IEP

Appendix C

Cover Letter for Parent Surveys

Dear Parent(s),

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project conducted by me and in collaboration with Lockport City School District. Please fill out the attached surveys and return them to your child's kindergarten teacher within the next week (date will be included). Do not write your child's name on the survey, as he or she has already been assigned a random number. Upon receipt of these completed surveys, your name(s) will be entered into a drawing to receive one of two \$50 gift cards to the local supermarket.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me: Beth Claes, [bs1@alfred.edu](mailto:bs1@alfred.edu) or (585) 943-3740.

Thank you!

Beth Claes, M.A.  
Alfred University

## Appendix D

Parent Report of School Adjustment

Child's ID: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please consider the descriptions contained in each of the following items below and rate the extent to which each of these descriptions applies to your child. For example, circle 5 if the statement almost always applies to your child, circle 4 if it applies often to your child, circle 3 if the statement applies to your child sometimes, 2 if it applies not much, and 1 if it applies almost never. Please circle only one response per item.*

		Almost Never	Not Much	Some- times	Often	Almost Always
<u>My Child:</u>						
1.	Enjoys school activities or events.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	Makes up reasons to stay home from school.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Seems to dread going to school.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Tells me about good things that have happened at school.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Becomes upset when it's time to go to school in the morning.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	Looks forward to going to school	1	2	3	4	5
7.	Talks about school in a negative way	1	2	3	4	5
8.	Asks to stay home from school.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Tells me about school events that s/he thinks are funny or humorous	1	2	3	4	5
10.	Complains about going to school.	1	2	3	4	5

## Appendix E

School Satisfaction Survey for Parents

Child's ID: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please read each of the statements in each of the following items below and rate the extent to which you agree with each of these statements. For example, circle 5 if you strongly agree with the statement, circle 4 if you somewhat agree with the statement, circle 3 if you are neutral toward the statement, 2 if you somewhat disagree, and 1 if you strongly disagree with the statement. Please circle only one response per item.*

Key: 1=Strongly disagree; 2=Somewhat disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Somewhat agree, 5=Strongly agree

- |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | I am happy with my child's teacher.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. | My child feels welcome at school.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. | I feel welcome at school.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. | I am satisfied with the communication I get from my child's teacher and school. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. | I understand what the teachers and school expect of my child.                   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. | I am satisfied with what my child is learning at the school.                    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. | I am satisfied with my child's school overall.                                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Appendix F

Teacher Rating of School Adjustment

Child's ID \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
 Rated by (teacher) \_\_\_\_\_ School \_\_\_\_\_

**Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment**

Please consider the descriptions contained in each of the following items below and rate the extent to which each of these descriptions applies to the child. For example, Circle 2—“Certainly applies” if the child often displays the behavior described in the statement, circle 1—“Applies sometimes” if the child occasionally displays the behavior, and circle 0—“Doesn't apply” if the child seldom displays the behavior. Please circle only one response per item.

0 = Doesn't apply                      1 = Applies sometimes                      2 = Certainly applies

1. Follows teacher's directions.	0	1	2	11. If child's activity is interrupted he/she goes back to the activity.	0	1	2
2. Uses classroom materials responsibly.	0	1	2	12. Laughs or smiles easily.	0	1	2
3. Listens carefully to teacher's instructions and directions.	0	1	2	13. Is comfortable approaching the teacher.	0	1	2
4. Is interested in classroom activities.	0	1	2	14. Is a mature child.	0	1	2
5. Responds promptly to teacher's requests.	0	1	2	15. Enjoys "playing school," imitates teacher.	0	1	2
6. Is cheerful at school.	0	1	2	16. Interested in teacher as a person.	0	1	2
7. Approaches new activities with enthusiasm.	0	1	2				
8. Is slow to warm up to teacher.	0	1	2				
9. Notices when other kids are absent.	0	1	2				
10. Seeks challenges.	0	1	2				

## Appendix G

### Semi-Structured Interview for Kindergarten Teachers

#### Regarding Transition Experience

1. How long have you been teaching kindergarten?
2. What activities at the beginning of the year seem to help students adjust to kindergarten?
3. From your perspective, what activities seemed to *best* enhance the adjustment for the students? For the parents? For you?
4. Are you satisfied with the transition activities you have engaged in this year?  
Why or why not?
5. Children come from a variety of backgrounds: UPK within and outside of the school building, private preschools, and no preschool at all. Did you notice any differences in transition process for these different groups of children?
  - In attendance to transition activities or types of activities that the students or families participated in?
  - In collaboration with the preschool teacher (if there was one), or parents?
  - In the child's general ability to adjust to a formal schooling environment?
6. Do you think that familiarity with the school building increases the likeliness of having a positive transition experience?
7. Outside of the child's socio-economic status and preschool experience, what characteristics of the child, family, or school seem to lend him or herself to a positive transition experience?

Appendix H

Cover Letter for Preschool Teacher Participation

Dear Preschool Teacher,

My name is Beth Claes and I am a graduate student in the school psychology program at Alfred University. I am collaborating with Lockport City School District to conduct research for my dissertation on the transition process from preschool to kindergarten. I have collected information from kindergarten teachers and parents regarding various aspects of this process, and am hoping that you also will take a minute to fill out the attached brief questionnaire and return it at your earliest convenience in the postage-paid return envelope provided.

The information gathered from this questionnaire will not have any impact on you or your relationship with the school district. The information will be analyzed through group comparisons of various preschool programs. A copy of the results of this research will be provided upon your request.

Your return of the questionnaire will be considered your informed consent to participate in this study. If you have any questions at any time, please do not hesitate to contact me at: Beth Claes, [bs1@alfred.edu](mailto:bs1@alfred.edu) or (585) 943-3740.

You may also contact my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Nancy Evangelista, Division of School Psychology & Counseling, Alfred University, at 607-871-2649, or the Chair of the Human Subjects Research Committee, Alfred University, Dr. Jana Atlas at 607-871-2212.

Thank you for your help!

Sincerely,  
Beth Claes, M.A.  
Alfred University

## Appendix I

Transition Activities Questionnaire for Preschool Teachers

Name of Preschool: \_\_\_\_\_

The following activities relate to helping children make the transition to kindergarten. For each activity please indicate whether you participated in the activity during the *last school year* with preschool children, by circling Y for “yes” and N for “no.” If you participated, please indicate whether you found the activity to be very useful for children and families, somewhat useful, or not useful, by checking the appropriate box.

<b><u>Transition Activity</u></b>	<b><i>Participated?</i></b>	<b><i>Very Useful</i></b>	<b><i>Somewhat Useful</i></b>	<b><i>Not Useful</i></b>
1. Preschool children visited kindergarten classroom.	Y N			
2. Preschool children visited the specific kindergarten class they are anticipated to attend next year.	Y N			
3. I visited the kindergarten classroom.	Y N			
4. A kindergarten teacher visited my preschool classroom.	Y N			
5. Elementary school children visited my preschool classroom.	Y N			
6. Preschool children attended a spring orientation about kindergarten.	Y N			
7. Parents of preschool children attended a spring orientation about kindergarten.	Y N			
8. Preschool children participated in an elementary schoolwide activity (e.g., assemblies, spring programs).	Y N			
9. I had an individual meeting with parent(s) of a preschool child about kindergarten issues.	Y N			
10. I shared written records of children’s preschool experience and status with elementary school personnel.	Y N			
11. I met with kindergarten teachers about the curriculum.	Y N			
12. I contacted kindergarten teachers about specific children.	Y N			
13. Other activities: (please specify)	Y N			

*Successful Kindergarten Transition: Your Guide to Connecting Children, Families, and Schools* by Robert C. Pianta, and Marcia Kraft-Sayre, (2003) Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Inc.