

THE TRANSITION FROM EARLY INTERVENTION TO KINDERGARTEN

**The Priorities and Perceptions of Families of Preschool Age Children with Complex Special Needs
Throughout the Transition to Kindergarten Process.**

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Department of Education

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Dedication

To my late grandmothers, Nellie Elizabeth Rolla Lohr and Verna Alice Smith Poole, two very strong-willed, hard-working, and intelligent women, who raised large families on farms in western Pennsylvania during a time when women did not have the opportunities to achieve their own dreams and aspirations as they do today. Though I miss them dearly, I know that they are with me in this accomplishment.

To my parents, Roger and Doris, thank you for providing me with examples of love, hard work, faith, optimism, perseverance, and commitment. All three of your children have dedicated their careers to helping others, which is a testament to the strong values of service and sacrifice that you instilled in each of us. I would not be where I am today without your support and encouragement. I love you both.

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Abstract

Each year, early intervention programs across Pennsylvania support the transition of thousands of children with special needs into school-age programming through collaborative efforts with school districts. While special education leaders may understand the legal requirements associated with the transition from early intervention into kindergarten, very little is definitively known about the perceptions and priorities of the parents of children with complex special needs during this time. This study utilized a mixed methods approach to examine the priorities of parents of children, who were age-eligible to transition to kindergarten in the fall of 2023 and who were receiving more than one service from the early intervention program in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. Data was collected through the administration of the Family Experiences and Involvement in Transition (FEIT) – Modified survey and the Special Education Leader Transition Survey – Kindergarten (SELTS-K) as well as semi-structured interviews. A significant difference between how concerned parents are about their child’s behavior during kindergarten transition and how school leaders perceived parental concern in this area was discovered. Significant differences between participant groups were found in the importance of the following supports: having the early intervention program host a meeting to prepare parents for the child’s transition meeting with the school district, receiving monthly contact from the child’s early intervention teacher, and receiving a home visit from the child’s kindergarten teacher. Notable differences on the topic of kindergarten readiness in children were also detected between participant groups.

Keywords: transition to kindergarten, transition planning, early childhood special education, early intervention, parent concerns, parent involvement

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Background

Act 212 of 1990, also known as the Early Intervention Systems Act, outlines the provisions and requirements for early intervention programs to provide services to preschool children with disabilities in Pennsylvania. One major responsibility of preschool early intervention programs in the Commonwealth is to support the transition of young children with disabilities from preschool services into school-age programming. Without interruption in services and with procedural compliance, preschool early intervention programs support the transition of thousands of children with special needs into kindergarten across Pennsylvania each year.

Each preschool early intervention program devises its own processes and procedures to complete the process. The Westmoreland Intermediate Unit (WIU) Early Intervention program coordinates with the 17 school districts in Westmoreland County to hold hundreds of transition to kindergarten meetings each year with families and staff. These transition meetings primarily take place during the month of February each school year. Many of the children eligible to transition to kindergarten have complex special needs that require the provision of multiple supports and services.

Capstone Focus

Though compliance with state and federal regulations is paramount in the planning and execution of the transition to kindergarten process by the educational leaders of preschool and school-age special education programs across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, very little is understood about what is most important to

parents as they approach and navigate the process for their children. In addition, rarely do the leaders of preschool early intervention and school-age special education programs pause and reflect with each other about what they believe are the priorities of parents as their children transition into kindergarten.

Such a void of understanding about what is most important to parents of children with complex special needs as enrollment in kindergarten approaches prevents early intervention and school-age programs from tailoring practices and procedures that best support students and their parents from a quality perspective. When parents feel uneasy about the transition process, it could delay enrollment of the child in kindergarten, which can have a negative effect on team planning, collaboration, and the overall success of the child. Delayed kindergarten enrollment also has a detrimental fiscal impact on the preschool early intervention program.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that parents be included in special education processes and decision making for their children. Research and practice inform us that cultivating and supporting close and collaborative relationships between parents and special education leaders can lead to increased trustful encounters and greater long-term educational benefits for the eligible child (Wellner, 2010). When parents and school entities trust one another, problems and challenges are more likely to be solved earlier and more quickly, with a decreased likelihood of litigation.

A major component of relationship building is for each member of a dyad to understand the priorities of the other. Parents of children with complex special education needs have a variety of priorities and worries (Spann et al., 2003). It is important and

relevant that school leaders are aware of such priorities and concerns as early as possible in the transition to kindergarten process. School leaders should also pause to consider what they believe is important to parents throughout the transition to kindergarten process and compare those answers with the feedback received by parents. This exercise in exploration, comparison, and reflection will examine long-held and commonplace beliefs of special education leaders about what parents need and want for their children with complex special education needs as they move from preschool early intervention to school-age programming.

Research Questions

The following questions will examine the priorities of parents of children with complex needs throughout the transition to kindergarten process:

1. What are the priorities of parents of children with complex special education needs throughout their child's transition from preschool early intervention to kindergarten?
2. What do preschool early intervention and school district special education leaders consider to be the concerns and priorities of parents of children with complex special needs as their children transition from preschool early intervention to kindergarten?
3. How are the reported priorities of parents of children with complex special education needs reflected in the transition to kindergarten practices of the WIU Early Intervention program and school districts in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania?

Expected Outcomes

Special education leaders in early intervention and school-age programs are tasked with creating the transition to kindergarten processes that are compliant with federal and state regulations, though little is known about what matters most to parents throughout the process. Results obtained from this study can be used to create transition practices specifically designed to address the reported priorities of parents and to maximally support the complex special education needs of the eligible young child as entry to kindergarten approaches. When parents feel more at ease with the process, it is expected that a child's transition from preschool early intervention and into school-age programming will have a greater likelihood of success, which will set the child up for success in the next educational environment and beyond.

Fiscal Implications

In Pennsylvania, parents have the option of electing for their child to remain in early intervention for an additional year even when the child is age-eligible to attend kindergarten in their school district of residence. When children remain in early intervention for an additional year beyond the fall of the year that they are first eligible to attend kindergarten, a financial burden is borne by the early intervention program. Before children reach the age of eligibility to attend kindergarten in their home school district, the WIU Early Intervention program receives a subsidy of \$5133 per child from Pennsylvania's Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL), regardless of the child's level of need or educational placement in the early intervention program. When students remain in early intervention for the additional year, they are formally known as "Act 30" students and colloquially known as "K5" students. The WIU Early

Intervention program does not receive any funding from OCDEL for the provision of services to Act 30/K5 students, which creates financial hardship for the program.

In an attempt to recoup some of the monies not received by the state for the provision of services to Act 30/K5 students, the WIU invoices the school districts for the services to these children; however, it is not to the extent of what the early intervention program would receive for the child from OCDEL in most cases. When billing districts for services provided to Act 30/K5 students, two groups of students are considered: those who attend an early childhood special education (ECSE) classroom and those who receive only itinerant services. Students who attend ECSE classrooms exclusively are in greater need of support and services than those who receive only itinerant services. School districts are billed the entire \$5133 for a student attending an ECSE classroom across all four quarters of the school year. If a student attending an ECSE classroom attends for fewer than all four school quarters, the district is billed on a per-quarter basis (\$1283) for the Act 30/K5 student's membership in the early intervention program. When students receive itinerant services only, school districts are billed an hourly rate of \$70, which is the blended average of the early intervention program's speech-language pathologists' salaries and benefits. If an Act 30/K5 student receives 30 minutes of speech-language services per week, that child would accrue approximately 750 minutes, or 12.5 hours, of service throughout an entire year (provided all sessions were attended). The early intervention program would invoice that child's school district for \$875, which is well below the OCDEL reimbursement rate of \$5133. It should be noted that the early intervention program does not invoice school districts for itinerant sessions not attended by the child. In some cases, the itinerant teacher or therapist has prepared a lesson and

traveled to the child's home or preschool, only to find the family unresponsive or the child absent. In those cases, the district is not billed for the session. Delayed entry to kindergarten for children with special needs has a negative fiscal impact on the early intervention program. If the priorities of parents of children with complex special needs were better understood, it is hypothesized that the WIU Early Intervention program would experience a decrease in the number of Act 30/K5 students yearly.

Summary

Chapter I provided an overview of why studying the priorities of parents of children with special needs is integral to developing transition to kindergarten practices that are highly supportive to parents and children. Chapter II will contain a review of the literature relevant to the topic and necessary to guide practice. Chapter III will explain the methodology used to study the priorities and perceptions of parents of children with complex needs throughout the transition to kindergarten process. Chapter IV will contain a description of the results based on an analysis of the data. Chapter V will present the conclusions and a description of how the findings of this study can be applied to practice.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

It has been said that life is a series of transitions. Transitions make up the human experience and begin at the time we are born and end at the time of our deaths. Life's transitions take humans through paths of change and varied circumstances that are sometimes planned and expected, yet also abrupt and unforeseen. Transitions are key points in developmental trajectories across the human lifespan (Elder, 1998). Although transitions present new opportunities for learning and growth, they are stressful and challenging for many who experience them (Hanson et al., 2000; Rosenkoetter et al., 1994).

Early Educational Transitions

Several of the most formative transitions occur within the first few years of a person's life and shape and influence future experiences and opportunities. When children are born, they transition from the hospital to home. The move from the care and nurture of one's family in the home setting throughout infancy and toddlerhood and into preschool marks one of the first significant educational transitions for a child. Later, when the preschooler moves from an early childhood instructional setting and into formal school-age programming, another crucial transition occurs.

In addition to these typical transitions, children with disabilities and their families also experience moves into and out of early intervention programs (Wolery, 1989). Early intervention transitions can occur between birth and age three when the child begins to receive infant-toddler services, at age three when the child transitions into preschool early intervention services, and at age five when the child leaves preschool early intervention

and enters kindergarten. Through practice and research, early interventionists know that when parent concerns and priorities are honored and when parents contribute to the creation of their child's special education plan, the family is more involved in supporting the child's skill development across the day (Fox et al., 2002).

Early educational transitions present opportunities for programs to share information about children as well as for families to express priorities, concerns, and perspectives to teachers and administrative leaders. Throughout the last fifty years, considerable research has been conducted to better understand these early educational transitions for young children and their families, which is important since these types of transitions involve the child and the family as well as the sending and receiving programs. Educational transitions merit study to support families of children with special needs and to promote collaboration between organizations (Flynn & McCollum, 1989) to enhance a child's ability to adjust to a new setting or placement (Rosenkoetter et al., 1994), and to comply with legislative mandates related to the transition of children with special needs from one program to another (Wolery, 1989). Educational transitions are important to understand because they prepare the child for successful entry and functioning into the next school setting, and they provide an opportunity for educational programs to share information about the child and to gather input from the family.

The Importance of Kindergarten Transition

There are few transitions as important as the one that children and families experience as a child moves from preschool into kindergarten. The transition from preschool to kindergarten marks a pivotal point in a child's life trajectory. Kindergarten is remarkably important for many reasons. The success of a child's entry into kindergarten

can impact later school achievement for some children (Rimm-Kaufmann et al., 2000) and offers considerable opportunity for parents, teachers, and school leaders to shape a child's immediate and long-term success and well-being (Duncan et al., 2007; Entwisle & Alexander, 1993). Hair et al. (2006) found that the fall of kindergarten student readiness profiles were significantly associated with first-grade reading, math, and social-emotional outcomes, which further highlights the importance of early school success for children. Transition practices of preschool and school-age programs have the potential to positively or negatively impact the child's early and later school success.

If the primary goal of one educational setting is to prepare the child for successful entry and functioning into the next, it is incumbent upon school leaders, practitioners, and parents to understand how to transitions work and how to make them as successful as possible for the benefit of the child. Educational transitions are impacted by the dynamic relationships that are formed between the child, family, peers, teachers, school, and community over time, which enable them to be conceptualized as a process rather than a singular moment in time (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). When viewed through the process lens, educational transitions possess enormous potential to influence the trajectory of a child's success in the next setting and in life, both positively and negatively. The development of early childhood learning opportunities for young children has evolved in the United States.

The History of Kindergarten

To fully understand early educational transitions for all children, including the transition supports mandated for children with special needs, one must start by studying the origins of early childhood education. Today in the United States, kindergarten is the

entry point to formal schooling for the vast majority of young children, with thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia requiring school districts to offer half or full-day kindergarten (Education Commission of the States, 2020). Kindergarten was initially established to help prepare children for successful participation in formal schooling. The first kindergarten in the world was established in Germany in 1837 by Friedrich Froebel, who believed in the importance of early learning opportunities for children that involved play, songs, nature exploration, and stories (Curtis, 2022; MacKenzie, n.d.). Froebel's ideas about early learning were brought to the United States by Margarethe Schurz. Ms. Schurz opened a German-speaking kindergarten in Watertown, Wisconsin in 1857, the first of its kind in the United States and situated in a German immigrant community ("Margarethe Schurz," n.d.). Several years later, the first US English-speaking kindergarten was established in Boston in 1860 by Elizabeth Peabody, who had been influenced by the work of Margarethe Schurz (Eschner, 2017). In the years that followed, kindergartens began to appear in most major American cities, largely the result of private donations and charities. These early kindergartens enrolled children from working-class, immigrant families and sought to teach the whole child without a specific focus on academic skills like reading and mathematics. Susan Blow helped establish the first public school kindergarten in 1873 in St. Louis, and after 1890, public schools began including kindergarten, oftentimes taking over programs that had once been privately funded. By 1900, roughly 6% of children of kindergarten age attended kindergarten. That number continued to rise, and by 1920, about 11% of age-eligible children were attending kindergarten, with public school kindergarten students outnumbering private ones by nineteen to one.

As kindergarten became more engrained into the American educational culture, some educators like John Dewey and Maria Montessori began to emphasize the key role of the teacher as a facilitator in children's self-directed learning experiences (Lillard, 2016). Though kindergarten enrollment fell in the 1930s due to economic constraints, by 1940, enrollment again started to increase (Berg, 2008). By 1954, 1.5 million children were enrolled in kindergarten in the United States (Berg, 2008). During this time, many states passed laws to lower kindergarten class sizes (Berg, 2008).

The History of Early Childhood Special Education

Although opportunities for early childhood learning experiences continued to expand since the establishment of the first kindergarten in the late 19th century in the United States, educational opportunities for children with special needs did not receive equal attention during the first half of the 20th century. Instead, most public schools denied enrollment of children with special needs, which left parents alone to care for their child with a disability at home or, worse yet, to fight to keep their child out of an institutional placement (Reichow et al., 2016). As parents assumed much of the responsibility for the care, education, and well-being of their child with special needs, advocacy groups began to grow in prominence, usually formed by the parents themselves. In 1922, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) was formed as a meeting group for those interested in children with special needs and eventually established professional teaching standards (Kode, 2017).

By 1965, over 2 million children in the United States were enrolled in kindergarten. In that same year, President Johnson declared the War on Poverty, which spawned the creation of Head Start (Berg, 2008; Reichow et al., 2016). The growing

prevalence of kindergarten and the development of Head Start reflected a growing interest in enriching children's educational experiences by educators, policymakers, and politicians. Greater focus was placed not only on improving the lives of impoverished children but also those with disabilities through federal policy initiatives. In 1968, The Handicapped Children's Early Education Assistance Act of 1968 (Public Law 90-538) was passed, which established the Handicapped Children's Early Education Program (HCEEP). The HCEEP was the first federal initiative to focus on young children with disabilities (Reichow et al., 2016). Passage of PL 90-538 heralded the formation of model education programs aimed at providing services for children with disabilities. By 1975, 20,000 children and their families were served directly or through consultation by an HCEEP, which could be found in all fifty states (Reichow et al., 2016). The HCEEP projects produced notable results. Child advocacy groups were formed, better practices aimed at educating young children with disabilities were realized, and certification programs for early childhood special education teachers were established at colleges and universities.

Though much progress was made through HCEEP initiatives, there was still much work yet to be done. By the mid-1970s, it was estimated that out of 7 million children in the United States with disabilities, one million were not receiving any educational services, and only 40% of children with disabilities were receiving the services they needed (Weintraub & Abeson, 1976). Compulsory attendance laws were used to keep children with disabilities out of school when attendance was not recommended due to the limitations and needs of the children. When viewed in light of the 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, which established that segregationist practices

violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, preventing children with disabilities from attending school seemed inherently unlawful and immoral to many.

When the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Public Law 94-142) was passed, it was mandated that all children with disabilities from age three through age twenty-one receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) through an individualized education plan (IEP). A decade later, the Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1986 was passed (Public Law 99-457), which established Parts B, Section 619 for preschool children with disabilities and Part H (later Part C) for children in infancy through age two to receive early intervention services. Previous to P. L. 99-457, services for children under three years of age were not available. After years of exploration and study of how to best educate children with disabilities, one key point emerged: intervening early improved educational outcomes for children while also proving economically advantageous (Silverstein, 1989).

The Role of the Family in Early Intervention

Robert Silverstein, a Congressional staff member who helped write P.L. 99-457, gave a speech in 1989 that described how P. L. 99-457 came into existence. He explained how lawmakers worked across the aisle to include language grounded in early childhood and early childhood special education research within the law and to include families as an integral component of the provision of early intervention services. Silverstein (1989) asserted that “The word ‘family’ must appear ten or fifteen times throughout the legislation; this was intentional. Congress was trying to say, ‘Do not have professionals

come into a family situation and assume that the mom and dad don't know anything. Respect the family” (Silverstein, 1989, p. 2). Honoring the family’s strengths, needs, and priorities was evident in 1986 when the first federal law was enacted to mandate the provision of early intervention services. Even today, the importance of the family’s participation in the development of the child’s special education program is still emphasized and promoted.

Act 212 in Pennsylvania

The Pennsylvania General Assembly passed the Early Intervention Services Systems Act, also known as Act 212, in 1990. Act 212 established a statewide system for providing early intervention services to infants, toddlers, and young children in the Commonwealth (Early Intervention Services Systems Act, 1990). The Pennsylvania General Assembly, through Act 212, recognized the need to increase opportunities for young children with special needs, decrease the possibility for developmental delays, and minimize potential future special education services needed by the child by the time the child would reach the “age of beginners.” The “age of beginners” is defined by Pennsylvania law (22 Pa. Code 14 §14.101) as the “minimum age established by each school district’s board of directors for admission to the school district’s first grade” (Public School Code, 1949b). Act 212 was intended, in part, to minimize the need for special education services when the child entered school-age programming.

Act 212 set forth requirements for the timely evaluation and identification of children in need of early intervention services, the development of an individualized education plan to meet the child's needs in the least restrictive environment (LRE) possible, exit criteria for children who may no longer need early intervention services,

and legislative guidance on the formation of a state and local interagency coordinating councils to support early intervention mandates and initiatives (Early Intervention Services Systems Act, 1990). With the passage of Act 212, a network of support and services for children from birth up to the age of beginners was finally realized in Pennsylvania.

The Academicization of Kindergarten

The passage of Act 212 in Pennsylvania and other laws like it across the United States roughly coincided with a shift that was simultaneously occurring in kindergarten programming. Up until the 1980s, the focus of kindergarten had been on a child-centered approach to learning through play and opportunities to socialize with peers, reflecting the contributions of Froebel, Dewey, and Montessori. Kindergarten became more universal in the United States by the early 1980s, with about 30% of students attending a full-day program and instruction becoming more academically focused (Sassower, 1982).

Kindergarten continued to maintain an academic focus into the latter part of the 20th century, a noteworthy reality that manifested itself in the opinions and beliefs of teachers several years later. According to Bassok et al. (2016), the percentage of kindergarten teachers who reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that children should learn to read in kindergarten increased sharply from 31% to 80% from 1998 to 2010. Bassok et al. (2016) also noted striking increases in the percentage of teachers who rated other academic skills (i.e., alphabet knowledge, color and shape identification, and counting skills) as important for school readiness for the same periods. Despite increases in the percentage of teachers who viewed academic skills as critical for school readiness, self-

regulation, and social interaction skills were still rated by teachers to be among the most important for children to possess upon kindergarten entry (Bassok et al., 2016).

Due to the increased academicization of kindergarten and the importance of children's early learning experiences to future success, educational leaders and practitioners began to realize the need for effective transition practices to support successful school entry for all students. Several transition models have been developed over many decades to support the successful entry of children into kindergarten.

The Child Effects Model of Transition

Just as the American educational system has evolved, so have the various models of kindergarten transition emerged across the past several decades. The Child Effects Model of Transition is a longstanding, maturational, and readiness model that considers a child's skills and characteristics when trying to determine how successful the child might be throughout the transition into kindergarten. Proponents of the Child Effects Model of Transition believe that without certain characteristics or skills, a child might not be equipped, or "ready," to meet the demands of the kindergarten learning environment. The importance of a child being "ready" for kindergarten was amplified in 1990 when President Bush and the Nation's Governors adopted six National Education Goals to be achieved by the year 2000. The first National Education Goal established in 1990 targeted school readiness: "All children in America will start school ready to learn." (National Education Goals, 1991; Stedman & Riddle, 1992). The use of school readiness screenings and assessments continues to be commonplace in elementary schools as children approach kindergarten entry, and these measures are often used to prepare

individualized instruction for a child and to identify children who might need additional testing or support (Little et al., 2016).

In 1995, a few years after the announcement of the National Education Goals, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) pushed back on the adoption of a child readiness-only model for kindergarten transition by stating that “The traditional construct of readiness unduly places the burden of proof on the child” and that “it is the responsibility of the schools to meet the needs of children as they enter school” (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 1995). NAEYC advocated for consideration of each child’s diverse and unequal life experiences, varied opportunities for learning and growth, and the extent to which school expectations are reasonable, supportive, and appropriate (NAEYC, 1995).

Nevertheless, a child’s socioeconomic status, language abilities, and adaptive skills may contribute to school entry success (Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000), and many parents worry about their child’s readiness to attend kindergarten if certain skills are not yet developed in the child. Parent and teacher concerns about a child’s readiness to attend kindergarten might contribute to efforts to delay kindergarten entry for some children who are age-eligible to attend, including children with special needs. Each year, up to 10% of children are “red-shirted”, with parents delaying entrance to kindergarten until the child is socially mature and academically ready (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Greenburg & Winsler, 2020).

The Child Effects Model of Transition placed the child as the central and most prominent player in the kindergarten transition process and overlooked the impact of other components of a child’s social network (Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000). The

Child Effects Model of Transition placed responsibility for successful kindergarten entry solely on the child and what skills the child brought to the process rather than also considering the impact that schools could have on the kindergarten transition process.

The “Ready Schools” Movement

About a decade after child maturational models for kindergarten transition had soared in popularity and in practice, the “Ready Schools Movement” began, which shifted more attention to the school’s ability to be ready for all children to enter its classrooms (Pianta et al., 1999). It was the first time that consideration had been given to making adaptations to the school environment to meet the special and unique needs of the child and to promote successful entry into kindergarten. According to Pianta et al. (1999), “ready schools” reach out to families before the start of kindergarten as well as build connections between families, preschools, and the school community. The concept of school readiness is reflected in the beliefs and attitudes of parents, especially those with children who have special needs. Parents of children with special needs recognize the importance of their children possessing a certain set of school readiness skills, though they also feel the school must make adjustments and be ready to meet the individual needs of the child. In a study by Larcombe et al. (2019), a majority of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) believed their child needed to be “ready” for school but also felt that the school bore some responsibility in being ready to meet the needs of their children. These parents believed that school readiness looked different due to their child’s diagnosis of ASD and reported that their child’s level of social and communication skills was the “most important indicator of school readiness” (Greenburg & Winsler, 2020). Challenges in social communication, sensory demands, the time

required to adjust to a new setting or activity, difficulties in understanding the expectations of the environment as well as in completing self-care tasks like toileting were all noted by parents as contributing to their child's readiness to start kindergarten (Larcombe et al., 2019). Parents also identified the kindergarten teacher's willingness and open attitude to individualize support for their child's needs in the classroom as a significant marker of school readiness, which is a reflection of the belief that schools need to be ready and willing to accommodate the needs of new students (Larcombe et al., 2019).

The Direct Effects Model of Transition

Beyond child and school readiness frameworks for kindergarten entry, the Direct Effects Model of Transition also acknowledges the direct effects of other contexts beyond the child and the school (i.e., family, peers, school, and neighborhood, community) on the child's ability to adjust to kindergarten (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). The quality of contexts surrounding a child impacts a child's readiness for school. Through research, proof of the impact of quality early childhood experiences (Howe, 1988), family characteristics (Moore et al., 2020), caregiver interaction styles (Sheridan et al., 2010), the volume of words spoken to the child (Hart & Risley, 1995), opportunities for the child to interact with peers and make friends (Ladd, 1990), and neighborhood characteristics on the child's readiness for school (Lapointe et al., 2007; Moore et al., 2020) has been firmly established. Though the Direct Effects Model of Transition broadens the Child Readiness Model by taking into account the effects of the contexts surrounding the child, each context is considered to have an individual, unidirectional

effect on the child's competence (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) and the interactions between the contexts are not addressed.

The Indirect Effects Model of Transition

The Indirect Effects Model of transition considers a bidirectional relationship that exists between the child and the various social networks and environments in which the child lives and functions (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). The Indirect Effects Model of Transition acknowledges the effect of family, peers, school, neighborhood, and community on the child as well as the effects of the child on the same in return. The impact of the interconnectedness of several factors on a child's development and learning competence has been well studied. Research on academic disparities among children revealed that parents' talkativeness toward their children and cultural beliefs about communication styles were correlated to socioeconomic status and predictive of future linguistic and academic success (Hart & Risley, 1995). Research has revealed that positive family-school partnerships can improve student on-task classroom behavior (Fefer et al., 2020); however, families of lower socioeconomic backgrounds face greater challenges and barriers when it comes to participating in their children's schooling (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Sengonul, 2022). These studies and others like them affirm an interconnectedness and indirect influence that factors like socioeconomic status, parent involvement, vocabulary development, and communication styles can have on a child's capacity for learning. Though the Indirect Effects Model of Transition considers the more elaborate and complex impact of various contexts, it still focuses on the static nature of each and does not consider the dynamic effect of the relationships among them (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

The Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition

According to Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000), the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition takes into account the child, direct, indirect, and dynamic impacts of contexts on a child's transition into kindergarten. This model eliminates the notion that only in-child variables are responsible for the success or failure of a child's transition to kindergarten (Welchons & McIntyre, 2017). Instead, the child interacts with family, peers, school, neighborhood, and community over time, and as patterns develop, relationships are formed that shape the development of the child and produce outcomes related to the child's school readiness and performance. The Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition elevates the notion that when children transition to school, they do so in an environment in which several contextual interactions have formed patterns that will ultimately impact the move from preschool into kindergarten. For example, a parent may not provide opportunities for their child to interact with other children regularly due to economic or time constraints. Over time, this pattern may limit the child's ability to form social bonds and make friends in kindergarten, which can hurt the child's perceptions about school as well as academic performance (Ladd, 1990). In another example, a kindergarten teacher may have experienced success in working with children who have special and unique learning needs. Over time, the cumulative effect of those positive experiences will most likely contribute to the teacher's high confidence level and increased capacity for supporting students with disabilities and their families. Students with special needs, who require modifications and accommodations to their learning plan, may benefit more from that particular teacher's instructional style than they might from another instructor without the same set of experiences. The relationships between

contexts form patterns over time that either challenge or support the transition to kindergarten for all children. It is important for school leaders, educators, and parents to understand the inner workings of these contextual networks and to adopt transition practices that will support the child's success in kindergarten.

Kindergarten Transition as a Process

A unique feature of the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition includes the establishment, over time, of unique and complex relationships between the child, family, peers, school, neighborhood, and community. Since these relationships evolve gradually, practitioners and parents should view transitions as dynamic processes and not merely as static events (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Hanson et al. (2000) identified several factors that facilitated the transition process for parents of children with special needs and their teachers, which included consideration of the child's transition into kindergarten as a process that should be started early as well as information exchange that occurs in advance of the transition meeting. High-intensity practices, or strategies inclined to optimize the transition process, should be adopted to maximize collaboration between early childhood and special education programs and families (Rous et al., 2007). Despite this conceptualization of transitions unfolding as a process, many parents of children with special needs and their service providers still report experiencing the child's educational transitions as a singular event (Hanson et al., 2000). A potential cause for this reported experience from parents and service providers may be found in examining the differences that exist between preschool and kindergarten.

The Move from Preschool to Kindergarten

When children move from preschool into kindergarten, there is typically a change in location, staff, instructional focus, legislative mandates, program goals and mission, and eligibility requirements for special education services. The shift from preschool to kindergarten is particularly noteworthy due to distinct differences between the two educational settings that may pose challenges for some children, especially those with special needs. Lack of alignment between children's preschool experiences and their experiences in the kindergarten classroom could be a potential cause for the high prevalence of transition difficulties (Jiang et al., 2021). Kindergarten classrooms are typically replete of free choice play centers often found in preschool classrooms that promote child-initiated, routines-based learning (Early et al., 2010). Students in kindergarten spend considerably more time engaging in academic, teacher-structured learning activities, particularly in the areas of literacy and mathematics, than they do in preschool (Early et al., 2010; Rimm-Kaufmann et al., 2000; Vitiello et al., 2020). Class size is also larger in kindergarten than in preschool (Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000; Vitiello et al., 2020), which impacts the time a teacher can spend in support of students who need it. Class size differences could contribute to the quality of teacher-child interactions when formal schooling begins. According to the Vitiello et al. (2020) study, teacher-child interactions in the Emotional Support and Instructional Support domains were rated lower in kindergarten as compared to preschool.

The transition from preschool to kindergarten also heralds changes in the ways that parents and teachers communicate, which reflects the impact that transitions have on families. Preschool communications are typically parent-initiated and focused on

supporting the family and child's needs, whereas, in kindergarten, teachers typically initiate communication with parents to discuss a problem that the child is having (Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 1998). Such differences between preschool and kindergarten can set the stage for transition challenges for many children and families.

Aside from the differences between preschool and kindergarten, there are also several key differences between early intervention and school-age support for students with special needs. Early intervention service providers support and empower families and preschool teachers to promote the child's successful participation in everyday routines and activities through the utilization of embedded instruction that is primarily delivered through a practice-based coaching model (Inbar-Furst et al., 2020). The service delivery and instructional approaches are appropriate since children of preschool age are typically functioning in their homes or early childhood learning environments (Fox et al., 2002). Early intervention service providers intentionally recognize the family's priorities, strengths, and concerns while coaching and teaching target skills in the settings and during the routines in which the child needs them to function successfully (Inbar-Furst et al., 2020). On the other hand, school-age special education services are typically classroom-based and can be delivered in a regular classroom or a resource room setting. Although home support and family engagement are still essential elements of a child's education plan in school-age programming, many parents feel frustrated by what they perceive as a lack of communication about their child's progress and behavioral difficulties after kindergarten begins (Malsch et al., 2011). As children with special needs transition into kindergarten, interventions shift from routines-based, naturalistic strategies in preschool early intervention to more academically focused programs in kindergarten

where learning materials and content are modified to meet the child's individual learning needs in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to the greatest extent appropriate.

Incongruence between preschool early interventions and school-age special education delivery can also be a source of challenge for children with special needs during the transition into elementary school.

Transition Challenges for Children with Special Needs

A major goal of early childhood special education programs is to promote the successful entry of the young child with disabilities into kindergarten and for the child to be included in the least restrictive environment to the greatest extent possible once formal schooling begins (Conn-Powers et al., 1990). While all children experience transitions differently, many are at risk for transition difficulties, especially children with special needs (Hair et al., 2006; Jiang et al., 2021; Justice et al., 2009; McIntyre et al., 2007; McIntyre et al., 2010; Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000).

Jiang et al. (2021) studied kindergarten entry for 801 students during the 2017-2018 school year. Teachers reported that 688 of the 801 students (86%) experienced the transition to kindergarten difficulty. Children with individualized education plans (IEPs) receiving special education services were at "substantially increased odds of having some or extensive transition difficulties." A child's gender (male) and home language were also associated with a greater risk of kindergarten transition challenges. Jiang and colleagues also determined that transition difficulties were "interrelated," meaning that if a child exhibited difficulty in one area, the child would likely exhibit difficulty across several areas of performance.

Perry and Weinstein (1998) suggested that successful school transitions span three areas: academic, behavioral, and social functioning. Children with disabilities exhibit difficulty in all three areas, which puts them at risk for transition difficulties. Jiang et al. (2021) examined children's ability to meet academic demands, make friends and work in groups (social functioning) as well as follow schedules and organize (behavioral functioning). Results indicated that 30% of all children exhibit difficulty in all five areas and that 74% of all children experienced transition difficulty in at least one area of study, with meeting academic demands and being organized as the two areas of greatest difficulty for children upon kindergarten entry (Jiang et al., 2021). A child's gender and IEP status were consistent predictors of transition difficulty, with boys struggling more than girls and children with IEPs experiencing more difficulty than those without (Hair et al., 2006; Jiang et al., 2021).

We know a great deal about the characteristics of children with special needs and what puts them at risk for transition difficulties. Although having friends at school positively impacts academic performance and perceptions about school (Ladd, 1990), children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) oftentimes struggle with change, are less centrally connected to the social structure of the classroom and spend less time with friends while at school (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Larcombe et al., 2019). Children with special needs typically have language learning deficits, which impact socialization and academic performance (Jiang et al., 2021). The presence of receptive and expressive language difficulties just before school entry is a significant predictor of kindergarten outcomes, and the presence of receptive language abilities is strongly predictive of later

reading outcomes and the ability of the child to process language and follow directions (Justice et al., 2009; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2002).

Many children with disabilities tend to form smaller social networks than typically developing peers and have difficulty regulating social-emotional responses to situational demands (Chen et al., 2017). Social-emotional regulation is often challenging for children with special needs, though it is essential for children's success in adjusting to kindergarten: Children who are better able to self-regulate their emotions and behaviors at kindergarten entry are better able to engage in content-area learning (Blair & Razza, 2007). Children's adaptive behavior upon kindergarten entry was directly related to teacher reports of behavioral self-control, cognitive self-control, and work habits in the spring of the kindergarten year (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2009). The presence of competent adaptive behaviors and few problem behaviors in preschool was a significant predictor of positive kindergarten transition outcomes in children with and without disabilities, strongly suggesting that adaptive behavior is a predictor of early school outcomes (Welchons & McIntyre, 2017). The reason for a child's behavioral difficulties can be quite complex as reported by parents of children with autism spectrum disorder, who cite that communication difficulties are often the source of the child's frustration over not being understood (Larcombe et al., 2019). Children's needs are unique, varied, and complex, yet they are generally very well understood by the child's family. When schools adopt transition practices that promote collaboration among parents, preschool special education teachers, and kindergarten teachers to promote the successful transition of a child with special needs into school, parents, and practitioners report a high degree of satisfaction with the process (Conn-Powers et al., 1990). Research also suggests that

high-quality transition practices may mitigate the challenges that children with disabilities face when entering kindergarten (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). Early intervention programs and school entities are legally mandated to support children with disabilities through transitions, including the transition from preschool early intervention into kindergarten programming. Special education law mandates transition supports for children experiencing life changes, including the move from preschool early intervention into kindergarten.

Federal and State Mandates

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 was first established in 1975 as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. In 1983 amendments were added to the Act, and in 1990 the Act was reauthorized and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) by Congress. In 2004, the law was again reauthorized and then renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA). The IDEIA is a federal law that sets forth requirements for educating students with disabilities in the United States. Though the law has undergone several changes since its inception in 1975, the basic tenets of the law have remained. Under this federal law, students with disabilities are guaranteed access to a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to the maximum extent appropriate to promote inclusion with non-disabled peers. An individualized education program (IEP) is developed by a team of individuals (including the child's parents) to ensure access to FAPE for the child with special needs, and IEP teams are mandated to monitor a child's progress toward goals. Part B of the IDEIA sets forth principles related to the education of children with disabilities from ages 3 through

21 inclusive, and states receive preschool formula grants in accordance with 20 U.S.C. §1419 of the IDEIA to fund services for children ages 3-5 with special needs.

Furthermore, Chapter 14 of Pennsylvania's Public School Code of 1949 outlines the provisions for the education of students ages 3-21, inclusive, who are suspected or identified as having exceptional needs and who require specially designed instruction to access FAPE.

Early Intervention to School-Age Transition in Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania's Bureau of Special Education (BSE), in coordination with Pennsylvania's Bureau of Early Intervention Services (BEIS), has set forth requirements for a smooth transition for children with special needs as they move from preschool early intervention services into school-age programming (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2003). In Pennsylvania, "for children who are within one year of transition to a program for school-age students, the IEP must contain goals and objectives which address the transition process" (Public School Code, 1949c). Furthermore, in February of the calendar year in which the young child is eligible to attend kindergarten, the Preschool Early Intervention program is obligated to convene a transition meeting with the child's parents and the child's school district of residence and sends each family an invitation to a meeting for their child (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2022a). During the meeting, the Preschool Early Intervention program must review with the family and present an *Intent to Register* form, which enables parents to indicate whether they intend to send the child to kindergarten in the fall (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2022b; Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2022c). In Pennsylvania, parents have the option of requesting that their child with special needs remain in the

Preschool Early Intervention program for one additional year rather than transitioning into school-age programming. At the conclusion of the additional year of preschool early intervention, the child must transition out of the early intervention program.

Emphasis on the early establishment of kindergarten transition goals in the IEP for a child with special needs, facilitation of a kindergarten transition meeting between the Preschool Early Intervention program, parents, and the child's school district several months in advance of the start of school, reflects the importance of considering kindergarten transition as a process (as opposed to a single event in time). Parents of children with special needs in Pennsylvania have the option of requesting their child remain in early intervention for an additional year, which reflects a commitment to consider families integral and valued decision-makers for their children. Although federal and state laws mandate a set of requirements for Preschool Early Intervention programs and school districts to follow for a child's transition into kindergarten, these laws do not provide information to practitioners about how to execute the process from a quality perspective. Kindergarten transition practices are important for educational leaders to study and to understand so that children with special needs and their families can be maximally supported throughout the process of a child's entry into school.

Kindergarten Transition Practices

Kindergarten transition policies and practices have a modest positive effect on students' academic achievement and parent-initiated involvement during the kindergarten year (Schulting et al., 2005). Pianta et al. (1999) surveyed 3,895 kindergarten teachers on their use of and opinions about 21 transition practices and 15 possible barriers to implementing them during the 1997-1998 school year. In the Pianta et al. (1999) study,

48% of teachers felt that all of the transition practices held merit. The most commonly used transition practices were of lower intensity, non-individualized, most often endorsed by teachers, and included talking to the parent after school started and holding an open house. Practices that were of higher intensity, more individualized to the child, and included activities that occurred before school started, involved personal contact (e.g., home visit, letter to the family and child before school began, a visit by the kindergarten teacher to the child's preschool), yet were most often associated with barriers for implementation (Pianta et al., 1999). Reported barriers to implementing high-intensity, individualized practices were that class lists are generated too late in the summer to reach out to incoming students and families, the requirement of summer work for no pay, the lack of a transition plan in the school district, home visits take too much time and could be dangerous, disinterest by parents and preschool teachers, lack of administrative support (Pianta et al., 1999). Results of the Pianta et al. (1999) study revealed that the most endorsed practices by teachers were those that least aligned to a "ready schools" framework that focuses on what schools can do to be ready for the child.

LaParo et al. (2000) examined data from a national sampling of kindergarten teachers to find out what kind of transition practices were being used for children with special needs. The researchers studied two groups of kindergarten teachers: one group of teachers had no children with special needs in their class, and the other group consisted of teachers with at least one child with special needs in their class (LaParo et al., 2000). Results indicated that although significantly more teachers with at least one child receiving special education services reported using transition practices that reached back before school began and consisted of activities like talking to parents or sending a letter

to parents before schools started, holding an open house before school started, and participating in kindergarten registration, few differences existed in the reported use of transition activities for teachers with and without students with special needs (LaParo et al., 2000). Teachers of students with special needs reported reading records and talking with the child's kindergarten teacher as the two most commonly used transition practices (LaParo et al., 2000). Results of the LaParo et al. (2000) study supported the findings of Pianta et al. (1999), which indicated that kindergarten transition practices for children consisted of non-individualized activities that occurred after the start of school. Although children with disabilities were beginning to receive some transition practices that were unique from those received by typically developing peers, there were still very minimal differences between the two groups of students (LaParo et al., 2000).

The overall use of transition activities increased between the school year 1998-1989 and the school year 2000-2011 with the most frequently used transition activities becoming more customary and least frequently used transition activities becoming less prevalent (Little et al., 2016). For example, between the two school years a decade apart from each other, there was a significant increase (from 76% to 87%) in the reported usage of visitation programs where children and families were supported in visiting the elementary school in advance of the start of the school year (Little et al., 2016). Sending information home about kindergarten also increased significantly (from 86% to 95%) between the two school years as well (Little et al., 2016).

Daley et al. (2011) examined the supports children with special needs received as they entered kindergarten under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as well as how child, family, school, and district relationships predict the supports that

children with special needs receive upon kindergarten entry. Since LaParo et al. (2000), there has been little research into the kinds of kindergarten transition practices offered to children with disabilities and their families. Results of the Daley et al. (2011) study indicated that the most frequently reported transition practices were of low intensity and consisted of receiving the child's preschool records, parents being encouraged to meet with school staff, classroom visits by the child and family, and providing information to the family about the transition. Aside from the implementation of one high-intensity practice (i.e., developing preparatory strategies for the child's kindergarten entry), the severity of the child's disability was not associated with the use of either low or high-intensity practices, and in fact, the more severe the child's disability, the less often parents participated in the kindergarten transition process (Daley et al., 2011).

Parent Involvement in Kindergarten Transition

When parents participate in their children's education, the children are more likely to experience academic success, exhibit appropriate behaviors, and advance socially, and the transition to kindergarten process is an opportune time to engage parents in their child's plan to assist the child in reaching their full potential in school and in life (Epstein et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020; Jeynes, 2012). In fact, parent participation may help to partially moderate the effects of transition practices on a child's academic performance in kindergarten (Schulting et al., 2005).

Historically, parent involvement has been considered in terms of a parent or caregiver's attendance at school-sponsored events or meetings, yet the perception of what it means for parents to be engaged in their child's education is broadening to include when parents establish home support for learning, communicate with the school about the

child's progress and needs, volunteer at school, participate in decision making for their child, and collaborate with the community for the betterment of the school system (Epstein et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020).

Obtaining parent involvement in transition planning is challenging for some school teams, yet it is a requirement under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for families of children with disabilities. The IDEA contains provisions for the inclusion of parent's active participation in the development of the evaluation of the child by adding information regarding strengths, needs, and priorities as well as actively participating in the development of the child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) as well as requirements for parent participation during transition planning. Although IDEA and other state laws require schools to get parents of children with special needs involved in the special education process, including transition planning for the child, those laws do not guide school teams on exactly how to do it. Research on parent engagement indicates that when schools are intentional about getting parents involved through the support of a key team member (e.g., a service coordinator, school psychologist, or educational leader), results are greater than when schools merely ask parents to volunteer time to become involved (Hanson et al., 2000; Jeynes, 2012). Hoffman et al. (2020) examined the use of the Kids in Transition to School (KITS) Program, which provides parents with support for learning at home, opportunities for parents and schools to partner with one another, and gives families a voice in the decision-making process for their child. Results indicated a significant difference between the control and the experimental group of parents in the quality of teacher-parent relationships, parents' perceptions of the school, and the parent's ability to support their

child's learning at home with the KITS program producing positive results between families and schools (Hoffman et al., 2020). Overall, the KITS program supported the development of positive relationships between parents, teachers, and the school. Aside from supportive strategies intended to engage families in the educational process, administrative support for those functions is essential to increasing consequential and impactful parent engagement, and school leadership can facilitate the establishment of a school climate that is supportive of family-school partnerships built on trustful relationships and inclusive viewpoints (Christenson et al., 2003).

Parent Concerns

Most parents of typically developing children report few concerns about their child's transition into kindergarten, aside from some worries about socio-behavioral skills like following directions and separating from parents (Wildinger & McIntyre, 2011). In the Wildinger and McIntyre (2011) study, a large majority of parents of typically developing children had no concerns about toileting, their child's ability to communicate with others, or their child's ability to form relationships with others. Conversely, parents of children with special needs experience a range of emotions as their children move from one educational setting to another. Parents of children with special needs report feeling guilt and judgment around the time their child transitions to kindergarten (Fontil et al., 2020). They also report to teachers concerns about safety issues, their child's acceptance by other children, their child's ability to make friends, the educational placement of the child, and overall feelings of grief over the loss of normalcy (Jewett et al., 1998). Parents of children with special needs have a separate set of worries and priorities compared to parents with typically developing children. Parents of special

needs children rank toileting skills as the most important self-care skill upon entry to kindergarten, and they rank pre-academic and motor skills as the least important for school readiness (Larcombe et al., 2019). In contrast to parents of typically developing children, parents of children with special needs worry about their child's ability to communicate effectively with others in school, their child's ability to adjust to school, behavior problems, following directions, the child being shy or timid, making friends, being distracted and toileting concerns (Haciibrahimoglu, 2022; Larcombe et al., 2019). A majority of parents in the Larcombe et al. (2019) study reported that kindergarten transition was different for their child with special needs as compared to their typical, same-age peers because of communication challenges, difficulty adjusting to a new setting, challenges in understanding spoken language and verbal directions, and difficulty understanding expectations. Parents of children with special needs also expressed concerns about their child receiving the appropriate amount of support to overcome sensory difficulties and their child's need for explicit teaching of self-care skills, like toileting, through social stories and other visual supports as kindergarten began (Larcombe et al., 2019). Parents of children with autism spectrum disorder report feeling as though they must advocate for their children to break the stigma surrounding the disorder and to always fight to have their child included, which are challenges that parents of typically developing children rarely encounter (Larcombe et al., 2019).

The severity of a child's disability is inversely related to the level of parent participation in the kindergarten transition process (Daley et al., 2011). The greater the severity of the child's disability, the less involved parents are throughout the child's transition to kindergarten. One reason that parents may not be involved in the child's

school transition is that many parents do not feel included in the placement decisions for their child (Hanson et al., 2000). It is important for school leaders to acknowledge the significant amount of anxiety, fear, and confusion that parents of children with special needs often experience when their child moves from one known and familiar educational environment where relationships have been formed with a set of early intervention service providers and into an unknown environment with new teachers and staff in kindergarten. The uncertainty about the process oftentimes contributes to a range of feelings and emotions for parents, which can challenge the transition process. If schools want to form collaborative partnerships with parents of children with special needs to facilitate smooth and successful school transitions, schools need to convey a spirit of commitment to the child and family as well as devote time and energy to open conversations with the family about how to best support the child. Practitioners, researchers, and school leaders should also endeavor to find out what parents of children with disabilities want and need during the transition to kindergarten process.

Parent Needs and Preferences

Parents of children receiving special education want schools and teachers to understand their child's specific needs and be willing to modify the learning environment as well as to provide individualized instructional supports to maximize the child's school experience (Larcombe et al., 2019). Parents want schools to be open and welcoming to their children with special needs, to see the child as capable, and to display a willingness and a commitment to providing the child with inclusive learning and social experiences (Larcombe et al., 2019). Still, parents of children with autism spectrum disorder report feeling unsure whether the teacher is making accommodations for their child in the

classroom as agreed upon during the child's entry to kindergarten (Larcombe et al., 2019).

Parents of children with special needs do not want schools to suggest delaying the child's entry to school, which parents find offensive (Larcombe et al., 2019). Parents of children with special needs want schools to have high expectations for their children despite how parents of children with autism spectrum disorder report lower academic expectations from teachers toward their children (Larcombe et al., 2019). When parents feel as though the school is meeting their child's needs, they report feeling less pressure to advocate for their child (Larcombe et al., 2019). Parents of children with autism spectrum disorder report that high-intensity transition practices that extend back before school starts (i.e., visiting the school before kindergarten starts, visualizing the learning environment, and meeting the teacher before school begins) as being helpful in supporting their child's ability to adjust to the new school setting (Larcombe et al., 2019). When the opinions of the parents of children with special needs were examined, the item 'What caregiver can do to prepare for transition' was the most requested kind of information, which suggests that families are willing to do whatever is necessary to support their child's successful entry into kindergarten (Haciibrahimoglu, 2022). If school systems are able to better understand the perspectives and concerns of parents of children with complex special needs as the child's entry to kindergarten approaches, Preschool Early Intervention programs and school districts will be at a greater advantage to engage parents in the process.

Summary

Transitions are experienced by all people across their lifespans. Early educational transitions, such as the move from preschool to kindergarten, are some of the most crucial ones for young children and their families to navigate. A child's success in kindergarten is an incredibly important predictor of a child's success in later school years, but many children, including those with special needs, are at risk for transition to kindergarten difficulty. School leaders are faced with the challenge of implementing transition to kindergarten practices that are compliant with federal and state laws, supportive of children with special needs, and considerate of parent concerns and perspectives. Though parents of children with special needs believe that the child should possess some readiness skills in advance of kindergarten entry, they also believe the school environment should be ready to accommodate the child's individual needs. Though parents of children with complex special needs tend to be involved less in the kindergarten transition process, they also report wanting to know how to best support their child through transition. Understanding the perspectives and concerns of parents of children with complex special needs as kindergarten entry approaches will enhance the ability of school leaders to develop supportive transition practices to increase a child's likelihood of success in kindergarten and beyond.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

A comprehensive literature review revealed the important role that kindergarten plays in the future academic success of children (Rimm-Kaufmann et al., 2000). A child's transition into kindergarten marks an opportunity for parents, teachers, and school leaders to work together to shape a child's immediate and long-term school success (Duncan et al., 2007; Entwisle & Alexander, 1993). Children with special needs are at particular risk for kindergarten transition difficulties due to a variety of factors, including challenges with academic, behavioral, and social functioning (Hair et al., 2006; Jiang et al., 2021; Justice et al., 2009; McIntyre et al., 2007; McIntyre et al., 2010; Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000). Notable differences between preschool and kindergarten instructional models may also contribute to the transition vulnerability that children with special needs face when entering school-age programming. Preschool early interventionists use embedded instruction and rely on practice-based coaching techniques to empower a child's caregivers to target skill development within the context of a child's daily routines and activities (Inbar-Furst et al., 2020). By comparison, academic achievement, particularly in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics, becomes a primary focus when children reach kindergarten.

While some parents of children with special needs believe that their children should have a certain set of school-readiness skills before entry into kindergarten, a majority of parents want to be assured that the school will be ready to educate their child through the provision of adaptations and accommodations designed specifically to meet the individual and unique needs of their child (Larcombe et al., 2019). Including parents

in the transition process is crucial to building trust and collaboration between the family and the school district.

Federal and state mandates like the IDEIA and Act 212 in Pennsylvania require schools to involve parents of children with special needs at many crucial points across the special education trajectory: during evaluation processes, throughout the development of a child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and at times of transition, including the transition out of preschool early intervention and into kindergarten. Although these laws outline "what" should happen at these crucial points, these laws do not provide specific guidance on "how" to best execute these requirements from a quality perspective.

Understanding the concerns and priorities of families of children with complex special needs throughout the transition from preschool to kindergarten will help school leaders develop transition practices designed to maximally support the child and build trustful and collaborative relationships with families. Educational transitions, like the one from preschool early intervention to school-age special education programming, hold enormous potential to shape a child's future success in school and throughout life.

Purpose

This study examined the perceptions and priorities of parents of children with complex special needs as their children transition from preschool early intervention into kindergarten, the level of understanding by special education leaders of parent concerns, and the extent to which the transition to kindergarten practices of the early intervention program and school districts in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania align with what parents need and want. This field of study is especially important since a child's successful entry into kindergarten can impact future school success and also because

children with complex special education needs are at risk for transition difficulties.

Understanding parent priorities is the first step in supporting special education leaders' ability to design practices to promote collaboration and build trust. When parents feel as though they are being understood and believe their child's needs are being met, parents feel less pressure to advocate for their children (Larcombe et al., 2019).

This study also has financial implications for the preschool early intervention program as well as for school districts. In Pennsylvania, parents have the option of electing their child to remain in early intervention for one additional year beyond the first year of eligibility to attend kindergarten. Neither the preschool early intervention program nor the child's school district receives funding for these children, referred to colloquially as "K5" or "Act 30" students by school leaders. Encouraging the timely transition of children out of early intervention and into kindergarten not only benefits the child by getting them into a program that offers more instructional days per year with a longer daily schedule than a typical preschool schedule permits, but it also alleviates a financial burden for the preschool early intervention program and school districts. The timely transition of children out of preschool early intervention and into kindergarten also aligns with the Office of Child Development and Early Learning's (OCDEL) guidance:

While parents have the option of having their child remain in Early Intervention when their child is eligible for kindergarten, it is incumbent on the IEP team to fully inform the parents of the advantages of transitioning to school-age programming with same-age peers (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2003).

This study utilized a mixed-methods research design to explore the perceptions and priorities of parents and special education leaders as well as to investigate the alignment of parent needs and concerns with the transition practices of the preschool early intervention program and the school districts across Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. Participants included parents and special education leaders, who completed a survey, which enabled the collection of quantitative data. Some survey participants from both the parent and special education leader groups consented to complete a semi-structured interview with the researcher, which provided qualitative data for the study. Data collection and analysis addressed three research questions.

Research Questions:

1. What are the priorities of parents of children with complex special education needs throughout their child's transition from preschool early intervention to kindergarten?
2. What do preschool early intervention and school district special education leaders consider to be the concerns and priorities of parents of children with complex special needs as their children transition from preschool early intervention to kindergarten?
3. How are the reported priorities of parents of children with complex special education needs reflected in the transition to kindergarten practices of the WIU Early Intervention program and school districts in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania?

The first research question specifically aimed to understand what is most important to parents of children with complex special needs as their child transitions out

of preschool early intervention and into kindergarten. The second question enabled the researcher to explore what school leaders perceive to be most important to the parents of children with complex special needs as they prepare for their child's move into leaders' respective school districts. The third question enabled a comparison of parents' reported perceptions and priorities to the current transition to kindergarten practices of the early intervention program and school districts to find out how well those practices aligned with what parents reported to be important to them.

Setting

This study included parents of preschool children with special needs who were receiving early intervention services through the WIU preschool early intervention program and who were eligible to enter kindergarten in the fall of 2023. The second participant group was comprised of special education leaders from school districts and the intermediate unit in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. Westmoreland County is situated in southwestern Pennsylvania and is primarily comprised of suburban and rural areas, with the City of Greensburg located roughly in the center of the county. The land area in square mileage in Westmoreland County is 1071.71, and the population per square mile is 345.1 (U.S. Census, n.d.). In 2020, the population of Westmoreland County was 354,663, and the population in the City of Greensburg was 14,976 (U.S. Census, n.d.). Age statistics from the U.S. Census indicate that 18.2% of the population in Westmoreland County is comprised of children under the age of 18, with 4.3% of the population being under the age of five. Residents of Westmoreland County over age 65 comprise 23.7% of the population, which indicates that approximately 58.1% of the population in the county is between the ages of 19-64 (U.S. Census, n.d.). Statistics on

race indicate that 94.3% of the population of Westmoreland County are White, 2.8% Black or African American, 1.4% Hispanic or Latino, 1.0% Asian, and 0.2% American Indian (U.S. Census, n.d.).

Housing, family, and living arrangement data from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that there were 168,321 housing units in Westmoreland County in 2021, with 77.9% of occupants owning the home in which they lived (U.S. Census, n.d.). The median value of a home owned by its occupants during 2017-2021 was \$162,300, and the average number of occupants per household was 2.8 (U.S. Census, n.d.). During 2017-2021, 91.6% of the population had been living in the same home for at least one year. These data indicate that over a majority of residents own their homes and that housing permanence is relatively stable in Westmoreland County.

U.S. Census data from 2020 also reveal that 94.4% of residents 25 years and older had earned a high school diploma and that 30.8% of the population had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Sixty-one percent of residents 16 years of age and older comprise the civilian workforce in Westmoreland County, and the median household income in 2021 was \$64,708 (U.S. Census, n.d.). In 2021, persons living in poverty in Westmoreland County comprised 11.2% of the population (U.S. Census, n.d.).

Westmoreland County is comprised of 17 school districts, which vary greatly in size from one another. The Hempfield Area School District ranks as the largest school district in Westmoreland County with 5,279, and the Norwin School District places closely behind with 5,078 students as of December 1, 2021 (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2023). Mid-size districts in Westmoreland County are Belle Vernon, Franklin-Regional, Greater Latrobe, Greensburg-Salem, Kiski Area, New Kensington-Arnold, and

Penn-Trafford have a student population range of 2,000-4,000 students (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2023). Smaller school districts with fewer than 2,000 students are Burrell, Derry, Jeannette City, Ligonier, Monessen City, Mount Pleasant, Southmoreland, and Yough (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2023). As of December 1, 2021, there were 43,693 students enrolled in Westmoreland County's school districts, and 7,467 of them, or 17%, were receiving special education services (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2023).

The preschool early intervention program in Westmoreland County provides special education services to children, ages three to five, who exhibit a 25% delay or greater in one or more areas of development. The preschool early intervention program in Westmoreland County is operated by the Westmoreland Intermediate Unit (WIU). The WIU is one of 29 intermediate units across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that were established in 1970 by the Pennsylvania General Assembly to function as regional education service agencies (Public School Code, 1949a). During the 2021-2022 school year, the WIU preschool early intervention program served an aggregate of 1,498 children, ages three to five, with identified special needs (Office of Child Development and Early Learning [OCDEL], 2022). The WIU early intervention program coordinated transition to kindergarten meetings for 472 preschool children and their families in February 2023. Of those 472 children, 72 of them were considered "K5" or Act 80 students, which means that they were actually eligible to transition to kindergarten in the fall of 2022, yet their parents elected for them to remain in early intervention for the 2022-2023 school year. The "K5" group represented 15.3% of all kindergarten transition meetings in February 2023 in Westmoreland County.

The 472 children for whom the WIU early intervention program facilitated a kindergarten transition meeting in February 2023, represented a range of disability categories: Autism (62), Developmental Delay (112), Hearing Impairment, including Deafness (8), Multiple Disabilities (5), Orthopedic Impairment (2), Other Health Impairment (4), Speech-Language Impairment (274), Visual Impairment, including Blindness (4), and Traumatic Brain Injury (1). In Pennsylvania, the Developmental Disability category is only applicable during the preschool years and is not a recognized disability category once children transition into school-age programming. Hempfield Area School District had the most transition to kindergarten meetings in February 2023, with 57, and the Monessen City School District had the fewest with ten.

Participants

The participants in this study were comprised of two groups: parents of preschool-age children with complex special education needs and special education leaders from the school districts in Westmoreland County as well as from the WIU preschool early intervention program. For the purposes of this study, a child with “complex special education needs” was operationally defined as any child, regardless of disability category, who was receiving two or more early intervention services (i.e., specialized instruction, speech-language, occupational therapy, physical therapy, vision support, and/or hearing services). A review of early intervention records in October 2022 by the researcher revealed that there were 167 children in the preschool early intervention program receiving two or more services as outlined in their Individual Education Plans (IEP) who were eligible to attend kindergarten in the fall of 2023. The researcher sent the Parent Email/Consent to Participate Form – FEIT (Modified) Survey to the parents of all

167 children (Appendix A). The Form contained a link to the Family Experiences and Involvement in Transition (FEIT) Survey – Modified, which was used with written permission from Dr. Laura Lee of the University of Oregon (Appendix B) and administered through Google Forms (Appendix C). Parents who completed the survey were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview with the researcher. All parent participants who agreed to be interviewed completed the Parent Consent to Participate – Semi-Structured Interview Form (Appendix D) and answered questions posed by the researcher (Appendix E).

Leaders of special education programs in Pennsylvania public schools are required to be appropriately credentialed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The Pennsylvania Department of Education awards Supervisory Certificates to individuals who have completed at least five years of satisfactory certified experience in the area in which the Supervisory Certificate is sought, have completed an approved graduate program, and who have presented evidence of satisfactory achievement on prescribed assessments (Public School Code, 1949d). An educator in Pennsylvania possessing a Supervisor of Special Education certification is qualified to manage and monitor special education systems and to serve as a liaison between school district administration and the certified special education staff (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2023b). The Pennsylvania Department of Education (2023b) outlines that Supervisors of Special Education should enhance the attainment of the district's expectations and goals by authorizing activities using judgment not equally shared by all professionally special education certified staff and provide direct input to administrators, which affects the employment, assignment, transfer, promotion, layoff, discharge, or

other similar personnel actions of other professional level employees certified in special education.

Supervisors of Special Education in Pennsylvania are qualified to provide supervisory duties only in the area of special education, though educators in Pennsylvania holding a Principal PK-12 certificate are also qualified to direct and supervise special education staff at a building or district level (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2023b).

The researcher sent the Special Education Leader Email/Consent to Participate Form – Special Education Leader Transition Survey - Kindergarten (SELTS-K) to 22 special education leaders representing all 17 school districts as well as the preschool early intervention program in Westmoreland County (Appendix F). All leaders were employed by their respective school districts or intermediate unit to manage special education programming. The Special Education Leader Email/Consent to Participate Form shared with the special education leaders contained a link to the Special Education Leader Transition Survey - Kindergarten (SELTS-K), which was administered through Google Forms (Appendix G). The SELTS-K was developed by the researcher and designed to mirror much of the content represented in the FEIT Survey-Modified, which was administered to parents in the study. Special education leaders who completed the SELTS-K were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview with the researcher. All special education leader participants who volunteered to be interviewed completed the Special Education Leader Consent to Participate Form - Semi-Structured Interview (Appendix G) and answered questions administered by the researcher (Appendix I).

Research Plan

The research plan for this action research project is based on several noteworthy findings that were presented throughout the literature review. Children with disabilities experience more transitions than their non-disabled peers, including moves into and out of early intervention and special education environments – oftentimes from birth - which can be stressful for the child and family (Wolery, 1989). The move from preschool to kindergarten can be challenging for any child, but children with disabilities are at particular risk for transition difficulties (Hair et al., 2006; Jiang et al., 2021; Justice et al., 2009; McIntyre et al., 2007; McIntyre et al., 2010; Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000). Parents are important decision-makers for their children. When the opinions of parents of children with special needs are examined, they most request information related to what they can do to prepare for their child’s transition, which suggests a willingness and desire to support the process (Haciibrahimoglu, 2022).

Pennsylvania’s Bureau of Special Education (BSE), in coordination with Pennsylvania’s Bureau of Early Intervention Services (BEIS), has set forth requirements for a smooth transition for children with special needs as they move from preschool early intervention services into school-age programming (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2003). Each February, early intervention programs in Pennsylvania schedule and convene transition meetings with school districts and the parents of children with special needs who are eligible to attend kindergarten later in the fall. In Pennsylvania, parents have the option of electing their child to remain in the preschool early intervention program for one additional year, thus delaying the transition into kindergarten. However, early intervention programs are guided by OCDEL to inform

families of the advantages of transitioning their child to school-age programming on time and with their same-age peers (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2003). A review of transition data from the WIU preschool early intervention program reveals that approximately 15% of children eligible to go to kindergarten in the fall of 2022 (i.e., roughly 70 students) remained in early intervention for the 2022-2023 school year. Delaying kindergarten entry for children with special needs not only runs contrary to the guidance from OCDEL, but it also has deleterious fiscal implications for school districts as well as for the early intervention program, as neither the preschool early intervention program nor the school district receives funding for these children.

Parents of children with special needs have a unique set of worries and priorities compared to parents with typically developing children. Parents of children with special needs report feeling guilt and judgment around the time their child transitions to kindergarten (Fontil et al., 2020). They also report to teachers concerns about safety issues, their child's acceptance by other children, their child's ability to make friends, the educational placement of the child, and overall feelings of grief over the loss of normalcy (Jewett et al., 1998). Understanding the priorities, needs, and concerns of this parent group during their child's transition out of preschool early intervention and into school-age programming will enable special education leaders to shape practices and to develop processes intended to maximally support the child's special needs and to build collaborative and trustful partnerships with families. If families feel well supported and assured of their child's well-being throughout the transition process, they might be more likely to send their child to kindergarten with same-age peers. Parents of children with complex special needs also might be more open to developing a collaborative and trustful

relationship with their child's school district much earlier and with more success if school leaders better understood what matters most to parents at this critical time.

The research plan for this action research project included the use of a quantitative survey for parents (Appendix C) and special education leaders (Appendix G). Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents (Appendix E) and special education leaders (Appendix I). The combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection approaches yielded a mixed-methods research design for this project. The parent survey was modified by the researcher from its original version and used with written permission obtained from Dr. Laura Lee McIntyre on August 5, 2022, from the University of Oregon (Appendix B).

The fiscal implications of this project are minimal as they relate to the resources needed by the researcher to conduct the research plan. In a broader sense, however, outcomes of this research could result in fiscal ramifications for school districts as well as for the preschool early intervention program. When children remain in early intervention for an additional year, they do so at the request of the child's parents and with permission from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, but without funding to the preschool early intervention program. The WIU early intervention program bills school districts for services provided to these students, but not usually to the level of \$5133 it receives for other non-Act 30 students. In turn, school districts also do not receive funding for the education of these students, though they are obligated to reimburse the preschool early intervention program. If special education leaders from school districts and the early intervention program are able to gain deeper insight into the priorities, concerns, and needs of parents of children with complex special needs, it strengthens a program's

ability to maximally support the child and family while potentially lowering the percentage of children who remain in early intervention beyond their eligibility to attend kindergarten in their school district. When children receiving early intervention services transition to kindergarten “on time” and with their same-age peers, it lessens the financial obligations of school districts and the preschool early intervention program.

Research Design, Methods, and Data Collection

This action research project was approved by the Pennsylvania Western University Institutional Review Board. This approval is effective 09/06/2022 and expires 09/05/2023. The researcher also received permission from Dr. Jason Conway, Executive Director of the Westmoreland Intermediate Unit, to proceed with the project before its onset. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in this study by the researcher for survey and interview participation.

A mixed methods research design was utilized to answer the three research questions. Mixed methods is a group of approaches that combine quantitative and qualitative data strands in a single study. According to Mertler (2022), interest in using a mixed methods approach has increased over the past decade as researchers have recognized the value that each data type brings to a study. Quantitative data provides a broader, more generalized understanding of a topic, and qualitative data enables a deeper understanding of a phenomenon with fewer participants. Quantitative studies can provide vast amounts of numeric data that can be considered more representative of a sample, while qualitative studies yield robust amounts of narrative and descriptive data. Although both kinds of data were collected for this study, the researcher prioritized the collection of quantitative data over that of qualitative, reflecting a type of mixed methods

approach that is known as an “explanatory-sequential research design” (Mertler, 2022). Known also as “explanatory design,” this particular type of mixed-methods research design includes the sequential collection of data in phases. Quantitative data is prioritized over qualitative data: it is collected first and is then examined and analyzed. The decision to prioritize quantitative data over qualitative is driven by the constructs of the research question(s). Once collected and analyzed, results obtained from the quantitative data are used to inform the collection of qualitative data. It is crucial to note that mixed methods researchers must not only collect quantitative and qualitative data, but they must also integrate them as well (Mertler, 2022).

Quantitative data was collected via surveys. A survey consent form and the Family Experiences and Involvement in Transition (FEIT) Survey-Modified were sent to 167 families of children eligible to transition to kindergarten in the fall of 2023 and who were receiving more than one special education service through the WIU Early Intervention program. Participants were informed that if they elected to access the survey link, they were granting informed consent to participate in the study as well as permitting the use of data collected through the survey. The survey was administered via Google Forms, and it contained 26 questions. Respondents remained anonymous, as email addresses were not collected in the Google Form. Question types included short answer, linear scale, check box, drop-down box, multiple choice, and multiple choice grid. Question types were divided into four sections: Demographics and Background Information, Priorities and Supports in Transition Planning, Next Steps – Interview Opportunity, and Parting Thoughts.

Survey consent forms and the Special Education Leader Transition Survey – Kindergarten (SELTS-K) were sent to 22 special education leaders representing the 17 school districts and the preschool early intervention program in Westmoreland County. Recipients of the consent/email were informed that if they chose to access the provided survey link, they were granting informed consent to participate in the study as well as permitting the use of data collected through the survey. The SELTS-K was administered via Google Forms, and it contained 22 questions. Respondents remained anonymous, as email addresses were not collected in the Google Form. Question types included short answer, linear scale, multiple choice, and multiple choice grid, as well as drop-down menu questions. Questions were divided into the following sections:

Background/Experience, Priorities and Supports in Transition Planning, Next Steps – Interview Opportunity, and Parting Thoughts.

Qualitative data was collected via semi-structured interviews. Parents and special education leaders who completed the survey were eligible to participate in an interview with the examiner. Participants were informed that if they volunteered to submit to an interview, anonymity with the researcher would be forfeited, as they would need to provide an email address for the purpose of making contact to schedule the interview. Once interest was indicated in participating in an interview, parent and school leader participants were sent interview consent forms by the examiner. All interviews were held in the researcher's virtual Zoom office, and permission was sought by the researcher from each interviewee to record the interview via the Zoom platform. Interview participants were informed that consent was voluntary, they could stop the interview at any time without question by the researcher, and they could choose not to answer a question.

Participants were also informed by the researcher that their responses would remain anonymous to others aside from the researcher, and interview participants were able to obtain a copy of the interview if they requested one. Recorded interviews were saved on a secure server and analyzed at a later date by the researcher. The semi-structured parent interview (Appendix E) consisted of eight questions, and the semi-structured special education leader interview (Appendix I) consisted of twelve questions. The research questions, data sources, and the timeline for this action research project were well aligned.

Research Question One

What are the priorities of parents of children with complex special education needs throughout their child's transition from preschool early intervention to kindergarten? The 26-question Family Experiences and Involvement in Transition (FEIT) Survey-Modified, which was modified from its original version and used with permission from Dr. Laura Lee McIntyre, was sent to the parents of children eligible to transition to kindergarten in the fall of 2023 and who were receiving more than one special education service through the WIU Early Intervention program in November and December 2022. Participants who completed the FEIT Survey-Modified and who agreed to be interviewed by the researcher were asked eight questions in a semi-structured interview format during January 2023. Interviews were recorded with participant consent and were stored on a secure server.

Research Question Two

What do preschool early intervention and school district special education leaders consider to be the concerns and priorities of parents of children with complex special

needs as their children transition from preschool early intervention to kindergarten? The 22-question Special Education Leader Transition Survey-Kindergarten (SELTS-K), which was developed by the researcher to mirror data collected by the FEIT-Modified Survey, was sent to special education leaders representing 17 school districts and the preschool early intervention program in December 2022. A 12-question, semi-structured interview was conducted by the researcher with special education leaders who completed the SELTS-K and who provided informed consent to be interviewed. With participant consent, interviews were recorded and stored on a secure server in January 2023.

Research Question Three

How are the reported priorities of parents of children with complex special education needs reflected in the transition to kindergarten practices of the WIU Early Intervention program and school districts in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania? Surveys sent to the parent and special education leader participant groups contained a variety of question forms (linear scale, drop down, multiple choice, multiple choice-grid, and short answer) to measure parent priorities (parent survey) and kindergarten transition practices of school entities (special education leader survey). Surveys were sent to both participant groups in December 2022. A small sample of participants from each group agreed to submit to an interview conducted by the researcher. Results obtained from both surveys and interview sets are used to examine the alignment of parent priorities with the transition to kindergarten practices of school districts and the early intervention program.

Fiscal Information

When parents feel as though their priorities and concerns are not addressed during their child's transition out of preschool early intervention and into school-age special

education programming, they might be more likely to elect for their child to remain in early intervention for an additional year and delay the child's entry into kindergarten. Neither the preschool early intervention program nor the child's school district receives funding for the provision of services to these children. The preschool early intervention program invoices school districts for services rendered to these children, but not typically to the level of the \$5133 that the program receives for children not yet eligible to transition to kindergarten. The number of students remaining in early intervention has minimally fluctuated over the years, with a five-year average of 68 students, as shown in Figure 1. The four-year average reimbursement received from school districts by the early intervention program for school years 2018-2019, 2019-2020, 2020-2021, and 2021-2022 is \$129,693. If the early intervention program had received monies for those same children through OCDEL's state allocation, the reimbursement for those children would have averaged \$347,760 for the same four-year period. The result is an average negative cost differential of \$218,067 for the early intervention program across the years 2018-2019, 2019-2020, 2020-2021, and 2021-2022 as depicted in Figure 2. School district invoicing for the 2022-2023 school year has not been completed at the time of this writing. However, during the 2022-2023 school year, there were 70 Act30/K5 students who remained in the early intervention program, which correlates to the trend that has been observed since the 2018-2019 school year.

Figure 1

Act 30/K5 Students in the WIU EI Program

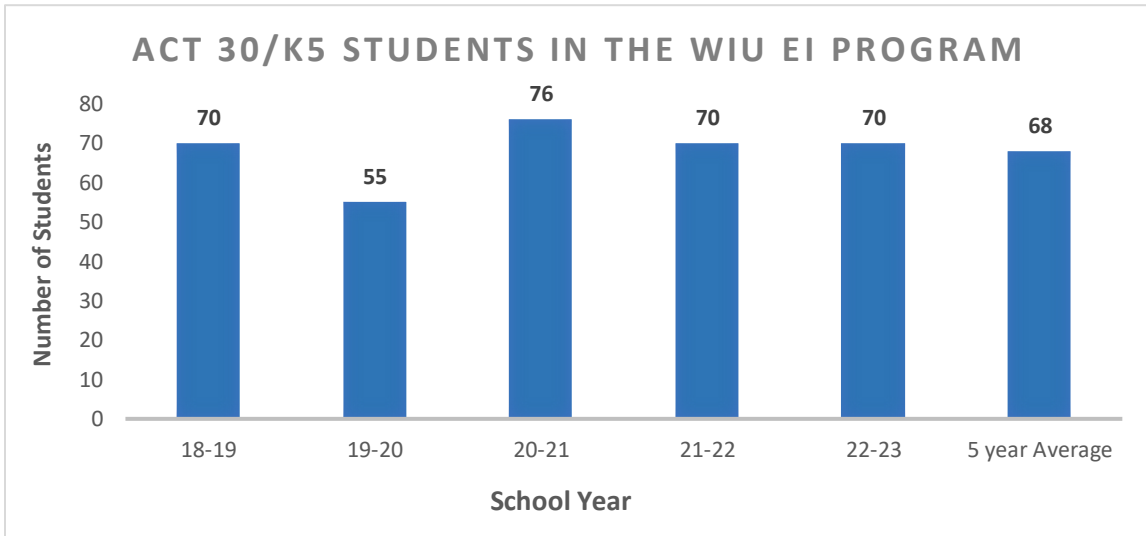
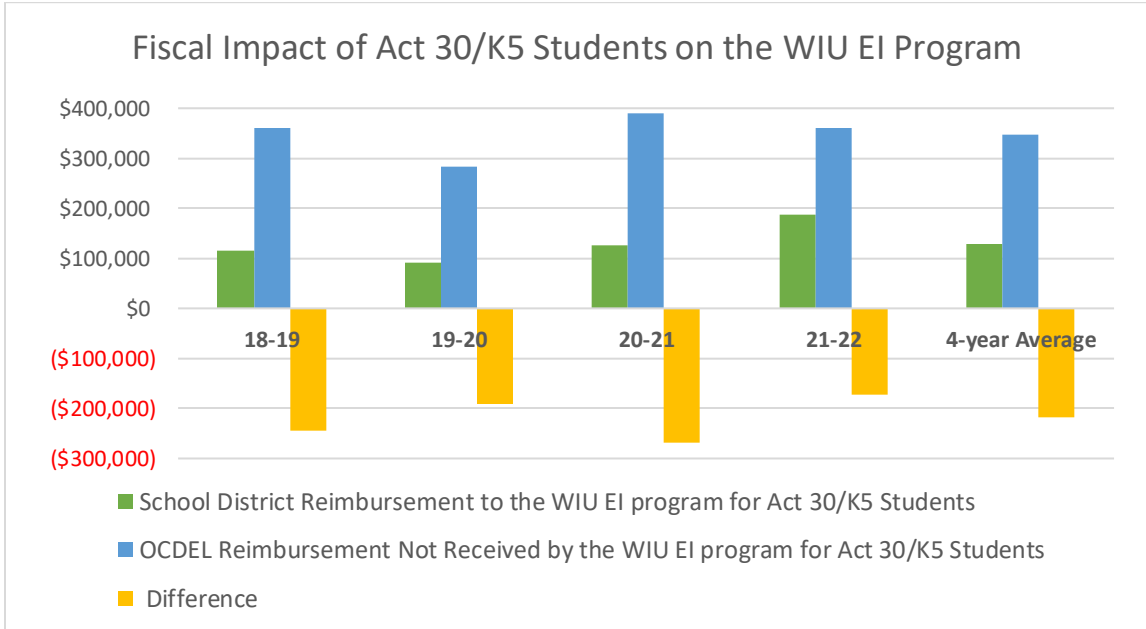


Figure 2

Act 30/K5 Student Fiscal Impact on the WIU EI Program



Regardless of a child’s age or eligibility to transition to kindergarten, the preschool early intervention program is legally, morally, and ethically bound to provide

the same level and quality of service needed by the child to access a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). In the eyes of Pennsylvania's OCDEL, the Westmoreland Intermediate Unit should be able to accomplish that task for \$5133 per child. However, when Act 30/K5 students remain in early intervention for the additional year (beyond when they are eligible to go to the school district), the early intervention program receives an average of \$1907 per student through invoicing the Act30/K5 students' school districts, which is \$3226 less per child than what the program would receive from the state allocation to properly meet the needs of the child and to ensure access to FAPE.

When school leaders understand the priorities and perspectives of parents of children transitioning from preschool early intervention services into school-age programming, it is logical to assume that school leaders stand better equipped to support those families and children throughout any transition process, especially the child's transition into kindergarten. If families feel optimally understood and supported, it is hypothesized that the number of Act30/K5 students in the preschool early intervention program would be reduced, which would alleviate a financial burden for the program.

Increasing the number of students transitioning into their school districts also has benefits for school districts as well. A school district provides, in almost all cases, a full day of educational programming to the child, whereas the preschool early intervention program is structured to provide (at most) a half day of educational programming. The longer time spent in a school day would undoubtedly benefit the child, who is age-eligible to attend kindergarten. In addition, when children transition to kindergarten with their same-age peers, the school district team can begin to intervene more quickly to meet the child's needs as they relate to the district's curriculum and expectations for learning

and being ready to learn. Intervening early in a focused and intentional manner would likely lead to improved student outcomes and increased cost savings for a school district in the long run. The overall cost of implementing this action research plan pales in comparison to the potential cost savings to the early intervention program and the overall and long-term educational benefits that could be realized for children with complex special education needs.

Validity

Validity is a critical characteristic of research and is defined as the “degree to which all the accumulated evidence supports the intended interpretation of test scores for the proposed purpose” (Mertler, 2022). Validity refers to the extent to which a study’s methods measure what they are intended to measure. Mertler (2022) describes several actions that researchers can take to ensure the validity of the research. Qualitative researchers should take precautions to ensure the factual accuracy of the information being collected to promote the trustworthiness and credibility of the data. Quantitative data, on the other hand, primarily pertains to numeric information. Numeric data might be accurate, but quantitative researchers must take care to ensure that the numeric data collected measures what the study intended to measure. In other words, does the data collected answer the research questions posed in the study?

One strength of a mixed methods research design is found in the combination and integration of qualitative and quantitative data sources. The strength of one approach can bolster the weakness of the other. Qualitative data, though narrow in breadth, is more robust in depth. For example, a qualitative study may include fewer participants from whom to gather data, but the data collection methods (e.g., interviews, focus groups,

observation, and note-taking) provide the researcher with a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Quantitative research sampling strategies vary greatly from those used in qualitative research. Typically, quantitative studies involve more people than qualitative ones, which makes the results more generalizable to a larger population.

When researchers collect data from a variety of sources, a study's validity is strengthened. "Triangulation" refers to the "process of relating multiple sources of data to verify their trustworthiness, accuracy, and consistency" (Mertler, 2022). The current study utilizes data collected from surveys (quantitative) and interviews (qualitative) from two different participant groups (i.e., parents and special education leaders). The collection of data from multiple sources that comprise this study's methodology adds to the credibility and validity of its findings. Results obtained from one data collection method that are also reflected in the other is an indication that the results are valid. This study's internal validity is also enhanced by the researcher's utilization of a modified version of the Family Experiences in Transition Survey, which was based on the original version first utilized by Dr. Laura Lee McIntyre in her own investigations.

Integrating data from various sources and examining the relationships among them can also provide evidence of a study's validity. Accurate results from the integration of data would not be credible without the creation of an audit trail. In this study, participant answers to Google Form survey questions were collected and stored in a Google Sheet on a secure server maintained by the Westmoreland Intermediate Unit. Participant interviews were recorded with informed consent, which created an audit trail for qualitative data collected. Data were collected during a finite period of time from two

participant groups, which decreased the likelihood that participant responses were influenced by outside variables. Participant groups were defined and created, and respondents represented a random sampling of each group, which additionally enhanced this study's internal validity.

External validity is the extent to which a study's results are generalizable to other groups or settings (Mertler, 2022). The sample used in this study represented two groups: parents of children with complex special education needs who were eligible for kindergarten in the fall of 2023 and special education leaders from school districts in the same county. Results obtained can be generalized to the larger groups represented by these samples since they represent fairly homogenous populations in a primarily rural-suburban county in southwestern Pennsylvania. The in-depth description of the setting and participants in this study by the researcher further enhances its external validity.

Summary

This research study aimed to determine the priorities of parents of children with complex special education needs throughout their child's transition from preschool early intervention to kindergarten as well as the perceptions of parent priorities by the preschool early intervention and school district special education leaders. This study also examined the extent to which the reported priorities of parents of children with complex special education needs were reflected in the transition to kindergarten practices of the WIU Early Intervention program and school districts in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. The participants in this study were comprised of two groups: parents of preschool-age children with complex special education needs and special education

leaders from the school districts in Westmoreland County as well as from the WIU preschool early intervention program.

A mixed methods research design was utilized to answer the three research questions. Mixed methods is a group of approaches that combine quantitative and qualitative data strands in a single study. The current study utilizes data collected from surveys (quantitative) and interviews (qualitative) from the two different participant groups (i.e., parents and special education leaders). The collection of data from multiple sources that comprise this study's methodology adds to the credibility and validity of its findings.

The researcher sent the Parent Email/Consent to Participate Form – FEIT (Modified) Survey to the parents of all children receiving more than one early intervention service and who were eligible to go to kindergarten in the fall of 2023 (Appendix A). The Form contained a link to the Family Experiences and Involvement in Transition (FEIT) Survey – Modified, which was used with written permission from Dr. Laura Lee of the University of Oregon (Appendix B) and administered through Google Forms (Appendix C). Parents who completed the survey were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview with the researcher. All parent participants who agreed to be interviewed completed the Parent Consent to Participate – Semi-Structured Interview Form (Appendix D) and answered questions posed by the researcher (Appendix E). The fiscal implications of this project are minimal as they relate to the resources needed by the researcher to conduct the research plan. In a broader sense, however, outcomes of this research could result in fiscal ramifications for school districts as well as for the preschool early intervention program. When children remain in early intervention for an

additional year, they do so at the request of the child's parents and with permission from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, but without funding for the preschool early intervention program or the child's school district. Understanding the priorities of the parents of these children could potentially encourage the timely transition of these children to kindergarten, where they could receive a longer instructional day alongside their same-age, non-disabled peers.

Chapters I and II provided an overview of the overall problem being addressed by this action research project and a comprehensive review of the literature, respectively. Chapter III offered an overview of the study's methodology, which included a description of the participants, setting, research plan, research design, data collection methods, and the fiscal implications of the project. Chapter IV will provide an in-depth description of the data analysis process, including the results obtained from a variety of data sources and the interpretation of the data as well as a summary of findings.

CHAPTER IV

Data Analysis and Results

Participants in this capstone research project were the parents of preschool-age children with complex special education needs eligible to transition to kindergarten in the fall of 2023 and special education leaders from school districts and the early intervention program. Data were obtained from both participant groups through Google Form surveys and semi-structured interviews. The parent survey and interview questions captured information about the priorities of parents during their child's transition out of early intervention and into kindergarten. Survey and interview questions that were administered to the school district and early intervention special education leaders probed their perceptions of parent priorities and concerns during the kindergarten transition. Results obtained from the survey and interview questions were used to determine to what extent, if any, parent priorities are reflected in the kindergarten transition practices of school districts and the early intervention program. The process utilized to analyze the data for this action research project is presented in this chapter, along with a summary of the results that will answer each of the research questions.

Research Questions

1. What are the priorities of parents of children with complex special education needs throughout their child's transition from preschool early intervention to kindergarten?
2. What do preschool early intervention and school district special education leaders consider to be the concerns and priorities of parents of children with complex special needs as their children transition from preschool early intervention to kindergarten?

3. How are the reported priorities of parents of children with complex special education needs reflected in the transition to kindergarten practices of the WIU Early Intervention program and school districts in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania?

The parent survey, Family Experiences in Transition (FEIT), was modified from its original version and used with permission from Dr. Laura Lee McIntyre, a researcher who had used the instrument and reported findings in a peer-reviewed journal publication (McIntyre et al., 2010). The resulting FEIT-Modified survey was sent electronically to 167 parents of children who were receiving more than one early intervention service from the WIU Early Intervention program and who were age-eligible to attend kindergarten in their school district of residence in the fall of 2023. The parent survey was disseminated, and data were received from 27 respondents in November-December 2022. The FEIT-Modified collected an assortment of demographic data, and survey questions consisted of Likert scale questions, multiple choice, one required open-ended question, and one optional open-ended question. The first and required open-ended question asked parents to describe in their own words what it means for a child to be “ready for kindergarten.” The second open-ended question asked parents who indicated they were not “not likely” to send their child to kindergarten in the fall of 2023, to share the reasoning for their decision in the form of a short answer.

Of the 27 FEIT-Modified survey respondents, five parents agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview with the researcher, which was conducted in December 2022-January 2023. All five parents consented for the interviews to be recorded, which were conducted via the Zoom platform. Interviews were recorded and stored on a secure server

at the WIU and were used to supplement the written notes collected in real-time by the researcher.

The Special Education Leader Transition-Kindergarten (SELTS-K) survey was developed by the researcher and designed to parallel many questions from the FEIT-Modified. The SELTS-K survey was sent electronically to 22 special education leaders from school districts and the WIU Early Intervention program in November 2022, and data from the SELTS-K were received in November-December 2022 by 12 respondents. The SELTS-K collected demographic data and included Likert scale questions, multiple choice, and two open-ended questions. Of the 12 special education leaders who completed the SELTS-K, eight consented to participate in a semi-structured interview with the researcher, which were conducted in December 2022-January 2023 via Zoom. All eight participants consented to recorded interviews, which were stored on a secure server at the WIU.

Triangulation

Triangulation is “a process of relating multiple sources of data to verify their trustworthiness, accuracy, and consistency” (Mertler, 2022, p. 20). Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were performed on the quantitative survey data and the qualitative interview data to assist in the triangulation process. Descriptive statistical analysis permits the summarization and simplification of data, while inferential statistical analysis enables the researcher to determine whether “the findings of a given study (e.g., the size of the difference between two groups or the strength of the relationship between two variables) are large enough in the sample studied to represent a meaningful difference or relationship in the population from which the sample was drawn” (Mertler,

2022, p. 14). The FEIT-Modified survey and the SELTS-K were comprised of various question types, which resulted in the integration and comparison of responses from diverse queries that ultimately contributed to a more extensive understanding of the phenomena under study.

Data Analysis

Frequency counts were used to tabulate the demographic data from both the FEIT-Modified survey and the SELTS-K measure. Surveys were administered through Google Forms, and data gathered from Likert scale questions on both surveys were collected into a Google Sheet. Those numbers were copied and pasted into an Excel spreadsheet for calculation of the mode and the median values for each potential area of parental concern and each potential area of transition to kindergarten support in order to best describe the distribution of responses. The interquartile range (IQR) was derived and used to determine the response variance for each item. When the IQR was smaller in value, it meant that there was more similarity (and less variance) between respondent answers. Conversely, a larger IQR was indicative of less similarity (and more variance) between respondent answers. The Mann-Whitney U test was performed several times to determine the existence of a statistically significant relationship between variables in this study. The null hypothesis, which proposed that no relationship existed between variables, was accepted in some cases and rejected in others.

Semi-structured interviews recorded via Zoom were uploaded to the transcription software Scribbr where the audio file was translated into text. Interview transcripts were compared to the notes taken by the researcher in real-time during the live interview. Those responses were color-coded according to themes that emerged in the answers of participants from the parent as well as from the special education leader group.

Research Question One: What are the priorities of parents of children with complex special education needs throughout their child's transition from preschool early intervention to kindergarten?

The results for research question one were collected via a parent survey and interview questions and were intended to capture information about the priorities of parents during their child's transition out of early intervention and into kindergarten.

FEIT-Modified Survey Data

The output results of these survey questions show the total survey responses between all parents of preschool-age children with complex special education needs eligible to transition to kindergarten in the fall of 2023 and were used to establish a median, mode, or no mode. The first section of questions on the Family Experiences and Involvement in Transition (FEIT) – Modified survey asked a series of demographic and background questions to better understand who was being surveyed. Of the 27 parents who responded to the FEIT-Modified survey, 70.37% of parents had a male preschool-age child with complex special education needs, and 29.63% of parent respondents had a female preschool-aged child with complex special education needs. Results indicated that 92.59% of parents responded to the survey about a White preschool-aged child, and 7.41% responded to the survey about a Black or African American preschool-aged child. None of the surveyed parents had a preschool-aged child of American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander descent. Additionally, 92.59% of parents classified their child's ethnic background as Non-Hispanic/Non-Latino and 7.41% of parents classified their child's ethnic background as Hispanic/Latino, which closely aligned to the most recent statistics on race in Westmoreland County,

Pennsylvania. Statistics on race indicate that 94.3% of the population of Westmoreland County are White, 2.8% Black or African American, 1.4% Hispanic or Latino, 1.0% Asian, and 0.2% American Indian (U.S. Census, n.d.). No respondents declined to answer questions about race or ethnicity on the FEIT-Modified survey.

One hundred percent of respondents to the FEIT-Modified survey reported that English is the primary language spoken in the home of the preschool-aged child with complex special education needs. Of the parents who were surveyed, nearly 60% rated themselves as “very likely” or “extremely likely” to send their child to kindergarten in the fall of 2023.

Following the demographic section of questions, parents were then asked to respond to a set of questions on the survey asking to describe the level of their concern in different areas as their child transitions to kindergarten. The question design gave those surveyed four options and required a “pick one” option. The four options used to describe the level of concern were “No concern,” “A few concerns,” “Some concerns,” and “Many concerns.” Parents were asked to answer questions about eleven different areas in which they may have some level of concern during the transition to kindergarten process for their child. Figure 3 shows a data table illustrating the eleven areas in which parents were asked to rate their concerns and illustrates the parent responses, in counts, based on their selection when completing the survey.

Figure 3*Levels of Parent Concern in Different Areas, Numeric Breakdown*

Areas of Concern	Level of Concern			
	No Concerns	A few concerns	Some concerns	Many concerns
Academics (e.g., knowing the alphabet)	8	3	10	6
Behavior (e.g., tantrums)	4	10	9	4
Following directions	3	8	10	6
Getting along with other children	10	9	5	3
Getting along with the teacher	14	6	4	3
Getting used to a new school	3	8	7	12
Child being ready for kindergarten	2	3	10	12
Separating from the family	12	7	4	4
Toilet training	5	4	6	12
Ability to communicate needs	1	5	8	13
Riding a school bus	7	6	5	9

Figure 4 illustrates the same data as Figure 3 and is represented as five side-by-side bar graphs, which show the distributions of responses from parents about the first five areas of concern.

Figure 4

Levels of Parent Concern, Comparison of Areas 1-5

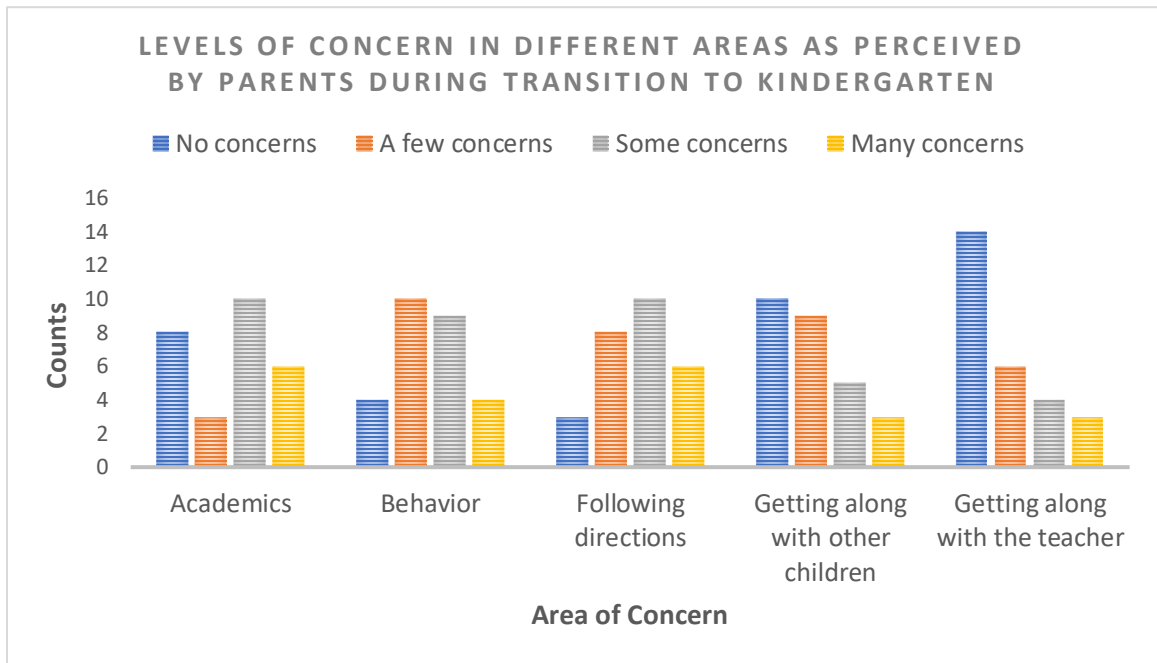
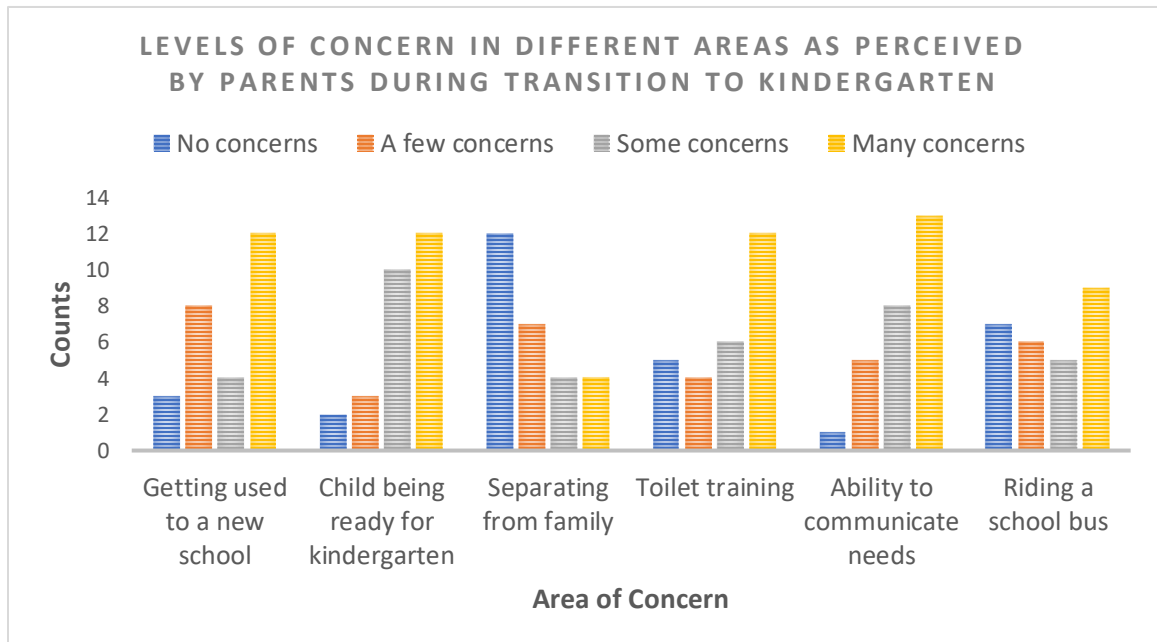


Figure 5 illustrates the same data as Figure 3 and is represented as six side-by-side bar graphs, which show the distributions of responses from parents of the final six areas of concern.

Figure 5

Levels of parent concern, comparison of areas 6-11



In order to perform statistical analysis on the data in Figures 3, 4, and 5, a numerical value was given to represent each response category with 1 being given to the response “No concern” and 4 being given to the response “Many concerns.” The data in row 1 of Figure 3 shows how parents perceive their level of concern about their preschool-age child’s academic abilities as they prepare to transition to kindergarten. Results indicated 29.62% of parents described their level of concern as “No concerns” and 11.11% described their level of concern as “A few concerns.” Additionally, 37.04% responded with “Some concerns” and 22.22% had “Many concerns” about their child’s academic abilities in the transition to kindergarten. The data in row 1 of Figure 3 is also

pictured as the first distribution in Figure 4. The data was analyzed to determine the distribution of responses is asymmetrical with a center of 3, given by the mode, which represents a response of “Some concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 2 categorical units, given by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question represented was 3, which represents a response value of “Some concerns.”

The data in row 2 of Figure 3 shows how parents perceive their level of concern about their preschool-age child’s behavior as they prepare to transition to kindergarten. 14.81% of parents described their level of concern to be “No concerns” and 37.04% described their level of concern as “A few concerns.” In addition, 33.33% responded with “Some concerns” and 14.81% had “Many concerns” about their child’s behavior in the transition to kindergarten. The data in row 2 of Figure 3 is also pictured as the second distribution in Figure 4. The data was analyzed to determine the distribution of responses is symmetrical with a center of 2, given by the mode, which represents a response of “A few concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 1 categorical unit, given by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question represented was 2, the same as the mode, and which represents a response value of “A few concerns.”

The third area of concern is shown in row 3 of Figure 3 and regards parent concern about the preschool-aged special education student’s ability to follow directions. Results indicated that 11.11% of parents had “No concerns” and 29.62% had “A few concerns” about their child’s ability to follow directions. Additionally, 37.04% of parents had “Some concerns” and 22.22% had “Many concerns” about their child’s ability to follow directions. The data in row 3 of Figure 3 is also pictured as the third distribution in Figure 4. The data was analyzed to determine that the distribution of responses is slightly

skewed to the left with a center of 3, given by the mode, which represents a response of “Some concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 1 categorical unit, given by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question represented was 3, the same as the mode, which represents a response value of “Some concerns.”

The data in row 4 of Figure 3 shows how parents perceive their level of concern about their preschool-age child’s ability to get along with other children as they prepare to transition to kindergarten. Results indicated that 37.04% of parents described their level of concern to be “No concerns” and 33.33% described their level of concern as “A few concerns.” In addition, 18.51% responded with “Some concerns” and 11.11% had “Many concerns” about their child’s ability to get along with other children. The data in row 4 of Figure 3 is also pictured as the fourth distribution in Figure 4. The data was analyzed to determine the distribution of responses is strongly skewed to the right with a center of 1, given by the mode, which represents a response of “No concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 2 categorical units, given by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question represented was 2, which is slightly higher than the mode, and which represents a response value of “A few concerns.”

Data in row 5 of Figure 3 shows how parents perceive their level of concern about their preschool-age child’s ability to get along with the teacher as they prepare to transition to kindergarten. Results indicated that 51.85% of parents described their level of concern to be “No concerns” about their child’s ability to get along with the teacher, 22.22% described their level of concern as “A few concerns”, 14.81% responded with “Some concerns”, and 11.11% had “Many concerns” about their child’s ability to get along with the teacher. The data in row 5 of Figure 3 is also pictured as the final

distribution in Figure 4. The data was analyzed to determine that the distribution of responses is strongly skewed to the right with a center of 1, given by the mode, which represents a response of “No concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 1.5 categorical units, given by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question represented was 1, the same as the mode, and which represents a response value of “No concerns.”

The sixth area of concern is shown in row 6 of Figure 3 and regards the parent’s concern about the preschool-aged special education student’s ability to get used to a new school. Results indicated that 11.11% of parents had “No concerns”, and 29.62% had “A few concerns” about their child’s ability to get used to a new school. Furthermore, 14.81% of parents had “Some concerns”, and 44.44% had “Many concerns” about their child’s ability to get used to a new school. The data in row 6 of Figure 3 is also pictured as the first distribution in Figure 5. The data was analyzed to determine that the distribution of responses is skewed to the left with a center of 4, given by the mode, which represents a response of “Many concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 2 categorical units, given by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question represented was 3, which was slightly lower than the center of the distribution, and which represents a response value of “Some concerns.”

The data in row 7 of Figure 3 shows how parents perceive their level of concern about their preschool-age child being ready for kindergarten. Results indicated that 7.41% of parents had “No concerns”, 11.11% had “A few concerns” about their child’s preparedness for kindergarten, 37.04% of parents had “Some concerns”, and 44.44% had “Many concerns” about their child’s level of preparedness for kindergarten. The data in

row 7 of Figure 3 is also pictured as the second distribution in Figure 5. The data was analyzed to determine that the distribution of responses is strongly skewed to the left with a center of 4, given by the mode, which represents a response of “Many concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 1 categorical unit, given by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question represented was 3, which is slightly lower than the mode of the distribution, and which represents a response value of “Some concerns.”

Data in row 8 of Figure 3 shows how parents perceive their level of concern about their preschool-age child’s readiness to be separated from the family. Results indicated that 44.44% of parents had “No concerns”, 25.93% had “A few concerns”, 14.81% had “Some concerns”, and 14.81% had “Many concerns” about their child’s ability to be separated from the family. The data in row 8 of Figure 3 is also pictured as the third distribution in Figure 5. The data was analyzed to determine the distribution of responses is skewed to the right with a center of 1, given by the mode, which represents a response of “No concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 2 categorical units, given by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question represented was 2, which was slightly higher than the center of the distribution, and which represents a response value of “A few concerns.”

Shown in row 9 of Figure 3 is parent perception of concern about their child’s preparedness in toilet training as they prepare to transition to kindergarten. Results indicated that 18.52% of parents had “No concerns”, 14.81% had “A few concerns”, 22.22% had “Some concerns”, and 44.44% of parents had “Many concerns” about their child’s preparedness in toilet training. The data in row 9 of Figure 3 is also pictured as the fourth distribution in Figure 5. The data was analyzed to determine the distribution of

responses is skewed to the left with a center of 4, given by the mode, which represents a response of “Many concerns”. The spread of the distribution is 2 categorical units, given by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question represented was 3, which was slightly lower than the center of the distribution, and which represents a response value of “Some concerns.”

The data in row 10 of Figure 3 shows how parents perceive their level of concern about their preschool-age child’s ability to communicate their needs. Results indicated that 3.7% of parents had “No concerns”, 18.52% had “A few concerns”, 29.63% had “Some concerns”, and 48.15 had “Many concerns” about their child’s ability to communicate needs. The data in row 10 of Figure 3 is also pictured as the fifth distribution in Figure 5. The data was analyzed to determine the distribution of responses is strongly skewed to the left with a center of 4, given by the mode, which represents a response of “Many concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 1 categorical unit, given by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question represented was 3, which was slightly lower than the center of the distribution, and which represents a response value of “Some concerns.”

The final row shows the data for parent level of concern about their child riding a school bus to kindergarten. Results indicated that 25.93% of parents had “No concerns”, 22.22% had “A few concerns”, 18.52% had “Some concerns”, and 33.33% of parents had “Many concerns” about their child’s ability to ride the bus. The data in the final row of Figure 3 is also pictured as the final distribution in Figure 5. The data was analyzed to determine the distribution of responses is asymmetrical with a center of 4, given by the mode, which represents a response of “Many concerns.” The spread of the distribution is

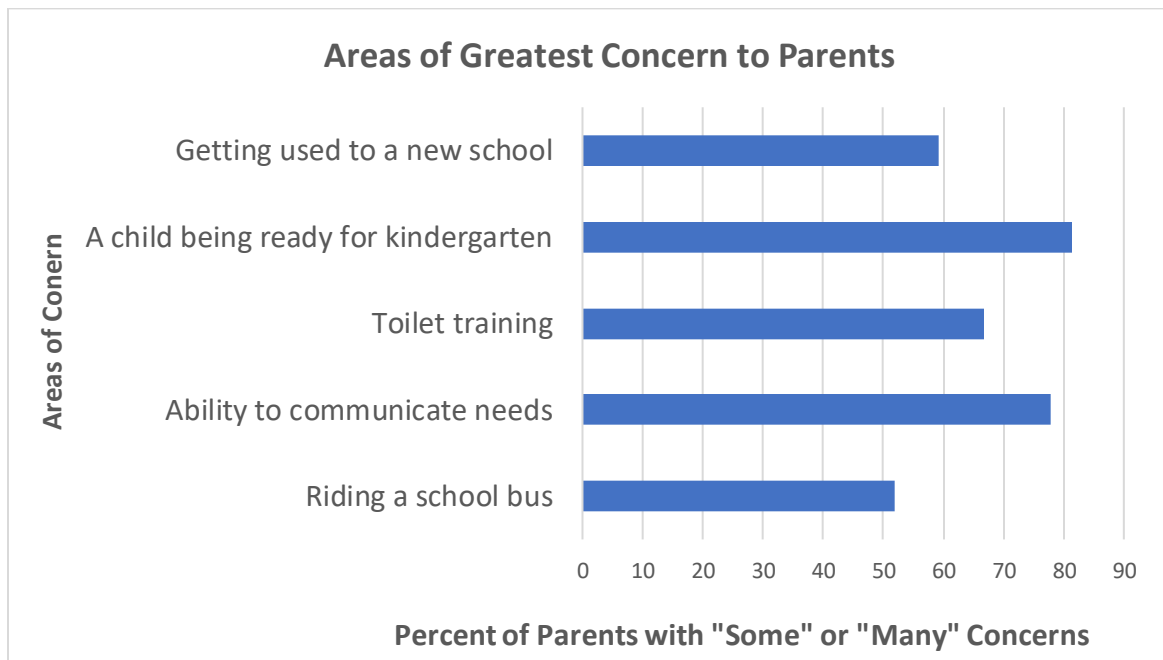
2.5 categorical units, given by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question represented was 3, which was slightly lower than the center of the distribution, and which represents a response value of “Some concerns.”

Upon further analysis of question 7 of the FEIT-Modified survey, there are five categories that have a distribution of responses centered at 4, which represents the highest categorical level of concern. The five areas of concern are the preschool-age child’s ability to get used to a new school, the child’s overall preparedness for kindergarten, the child’s toilet training abilities, the child’s ability to communicate their needs in the kindergarten setting, and the child’s ability to ride the school bus. More than 80 percent of parents reported that they have either “Some concern” or “Many concerns” about their child’s overall preparedness for kindergarten, making this the parent’s highest area of overall concern. The second highest area of overall parental concern regarding the preschool-age special education child’s transition to kindergarten was concern about the child’s ability to communicate their needs. More than 75% of parents rated their level of concern about their child’s ability to communicate their needs to be in the “Some concern” or “Many concerns” levels of the scale. The third overall highest area of concern was toilet training, and approximately 67% of parents rated their level of concern to be either “Some concern” or “Many concerns” with regard to their own child’s ability to transition to kindergarten with toilet training skills. Almost 60% or 3 out of 5 parents who responded to the FEIT-Modified survey rated their level of concern about their child’s ability to get used to a new school to be in one of the two highest levels of concern, either “Some concern” or “Many concerns”, and more than half, approximately

52% of parents, rated their level of concern for their child's ability to ride the bus to be either "Some concern" or "Many concerns." These results are illustrated in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Areas of greatest parent concern



There are three categories that have a distribution of responses centered at 1, which represents the lowest categorical level of concern. These three areas of concern are getting along with other children, getting along with the teacher, and separating from the family. Results indicated that 70.37% of parents who responded to the FEIT-Modified survey rated their level of concern about the child's ability to get along with other children as either "No concerns" or "A few concerns", the two lowest ratings of concern. Of those parents who responded, 74.07% rated their level of concern about the child's ability to get along with the teacher as "No concerns" or "A few concerns." Additionally, 70.37% of parents responded "No concerns" or "A few concerns" as their level of concern about their child being separated from the family. These three areas of concern

can be considered the lowest areas of concern to parents of children with complex special education needs throughout their child's transition from preschool early intervention to kindergarten.

In section 2 of the FEIT-Modified survey, parents were asked to respond to a set of questions about the importance of twelve supports that could potentially be offered during the transition to kindergarten process. The question design gave those surveyed five options and required a "pick one" option. The five options used to describe the level of concern were numbered 1-5, where 1 represented a response of "Not important", 2 represented a response of "Slightly important", 3 of "Neutral", 4 of "Very important", and 5 represented a response of "Extremely important". Figure 7 shows a data table illustrating the twelve areas in which parents were asked to give their rating of importance.

Figure 7

Parent importance ratings of twelve supports, numeric breakdown

Supports	Rating of Importance				
	Not important	Slightly important	Neutral	Very important	Extremely important
Early intervention program hosts a meeting about what to expect	1	2	4	7	13
Receive monthly contact from your child's early intervention teacher	1	3	4	7	12
Parents to attend the transition to kindergarten planning meeting	1	0	1	4	21
Early intervention teacher to be in attendance at the transition to kindergarten meeting	1	0	4	0	22

Potential kindergarten teacher to attend the transition to kindergarten meeting	1	1	3	5	17
Visit child's kindergarten classroom before kindergarten starts	0	0	2	3	22
Member of child's school district transition team to observe child	2	0	3	7	15
Receive correspondence from your child's kindergarten teacher	0	0	4	6	17
Receive a home visit from your child's kindergarten teacher	8	5	9	1	4
Attend kindergarten orientation activities with other incoming kindergarten students	0	0	3	7	17
School district transition planning team to conduct a full evaluation of child	0	1	3	5	18
Receive information about how to register your child for kindergarten	1	2	5	4	15

Figure 8 illustrates the same data as Figure 7 and is represented as six side-by-side bar graphs which show the distributions of responses from parents of the first six areas of supports.

Figure 8

Parent support importance ratings, comparison of supports 1-6

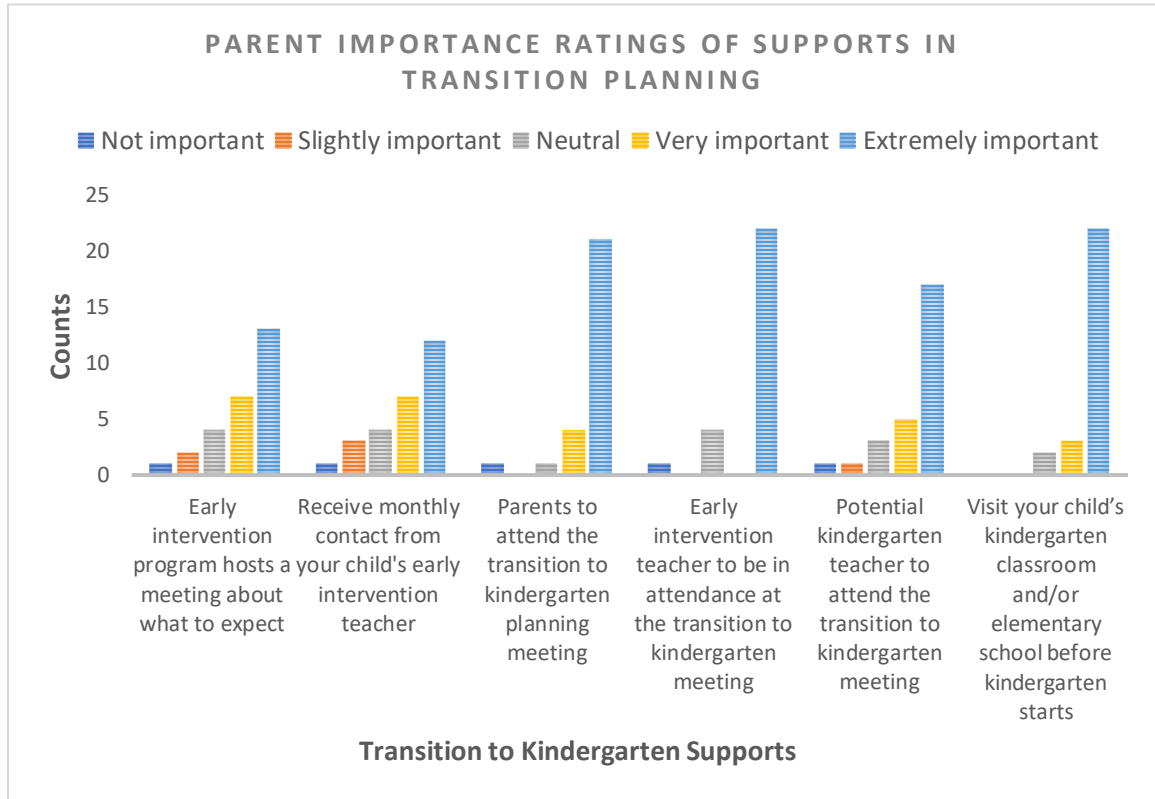
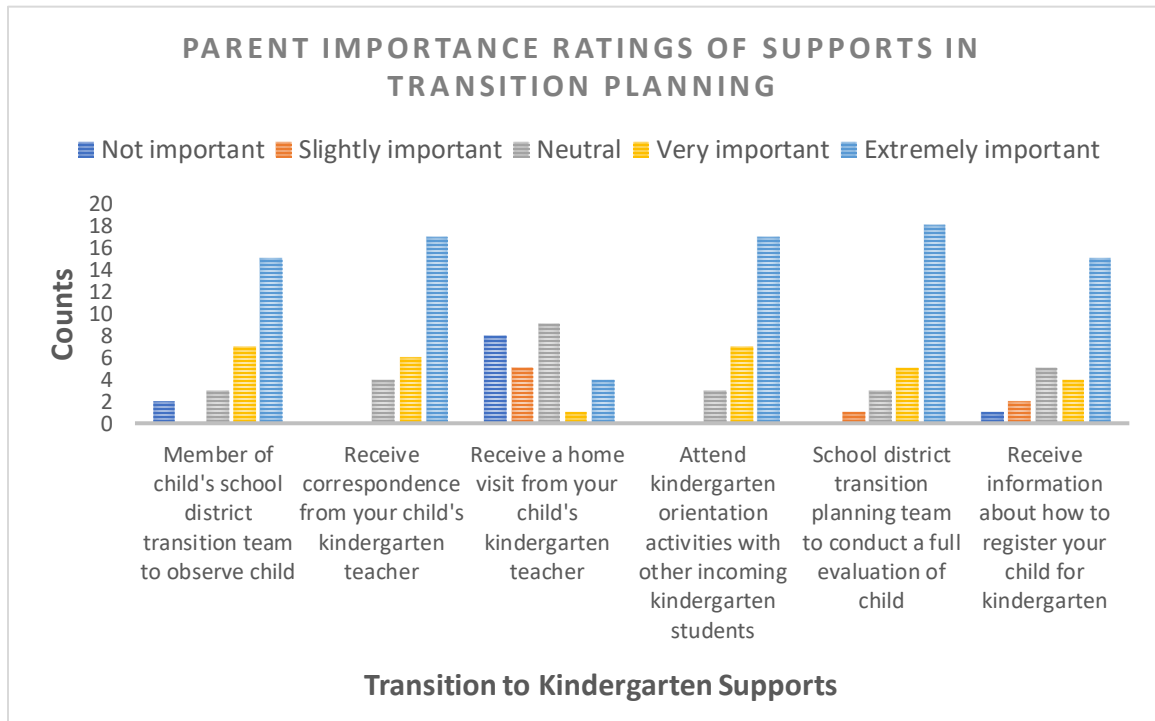


Figure 9 illustrates the same data as Figure 7 and is represented as six side-by-side bar graphs which show the distributions of responses from parents of the final six areas of supports.

Figure 9

Parent supports importance ratings, comparison of supports 7-12



To perform statistical analysis of the data in Figures 7, 8, and 9, a numerical value was given to represent each response category, with 1 being given to the response “Not important” and 5 being given to the response “Extremely important.” The data in row 1 of Figure 7 shows how parents perceive their rating of the importance of the early intervention program hosting a meeting for parents to learn about what to expect in the transition to kindergarten. Results indicated that 74.07% or nearly three out of four parents responded that having a meeting about what to expect during the transition process was either “Very important” or “Extremely important,” and only 3.70% thought

that the meeting was “Not important.” This data is also pictured in the first distribution of Figure 8 and was analyzed to determine the distribution of responses is strongly skewed to the left with a center of 5, given by the mode, which represents a response of “Extremely important.” The spread of the distribution is 1.5 categorical units, given by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question represented was 4, which represents a response value of “Very important” and is slightly below the mode value.

The information presented in row 2 of Figure 7 illustrates the perceptions of parents regarding the importance they attribute to receiving monthly contact from their child's early intervention teacher. Only 14.81% of parents considered this as “Not important” or “Slightly important,” whereas a significant majority (70.37% of respondents) expressed that such monthly contact was “Very important” or “Extremely important.” This data is also depicted in the second distribution of Figure 8 and was analyzed to reveal a strong left skewness in the distribution of responses. The mode, representing an “Extremely important” response, serves as the center point with a value of 5. The spread of the distribution, measured by the interquartile range (IQR), is 2 categorical units. The median response to the survey question was 4, indicating a value of “Very important,” which slightly deviates from the mode value.

The data shown in row 3 of Figure 7 highlights how parents perceive the importance of attending a transition to kindergarten planning meeting with representatives from the early intervention program and the child’s school district. An overwhelming majority, 92.59% of parents, indicated that attending such a meeting was either “Very important” or “Extremely important.” This data is also depicted in the first

distribution of Figure 8, and an analysis of the responses revealed a pronounced left skewness in the distribution. The mode, representing an “Extremely important” response, serves as the center point with a value of 5. The distribution exhibits a spread of 0 categorical units, as indicated by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question was 5, which aligns with the mode value and signifies a response of “Extremely important.”

The information presented in row 4 of Figure 7 illustrates how parents perceive the importance of having the early intervention teacher present at the transition to kindergarten meeting. Among the parents who responded, 81.48% expressed that it was “Extremely important” for the early intervention teacher to attend. This data is also visualized in the fourth distribution of Figure 8, which was analyzed to reveal a strong left skewness in the distribution of responses. The mode, representing an “Extremely important” response, serves as the central value with a rating of 5. The distribution exhibits a spread of 0 categorical units, as indicated by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question was 5, aligning with the mode value and indicating a response of “Extremely important.”

The data presented in row 5 of Figure 7 reveals the perceptions of parents regarding the importance of having the potential kindergarten teacher attend the transition to kindergarten meeting. Among the parents who participated, 81.48% emphasized that it was either “Very important” or “Extremely important” for the potential kindergarten teacher to be present at the meeting. This data is also depicted in the fifth distribution of Figure 8, and an analysis of the responses indicates a strong left skewness in the distribution. The mode, representing an “Extremely important” response, serves as the

central value with a rating of 5. The distribution exhibits a spread of 1 categorical unit, as denoted by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question was 5, matching the mode value and reflecting a response of “Extremely important.”

The information presented in row 6 of Figure 7 showcases how parents perceive the importance of visiting their child's kindergarten classroom before the start of kindergarten. A significant majority (92.59% of parents) indicated that visiting the kindergarten classroom was either “Very important” or “Extremely important.” Remarkably, no parents considered the visit as “Not important” or “Slightly important.” This data is also illustrated in the final distribution of Figure 8, which was analyzed to reveal a strong left skewness in the distribution of responses. The mode, representing an “Extremely important” response, serves as the central value with a rating of 5. The distribution demonstrates a spread of 0 categorical units, as determined by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question was 5, aligning with the mode value and indicating a response of “Extremely important.”

The information presented in row 7 of Figure 7 depicts how parents perceive the importance of having a member of the child's school district transition team observe their child. Of the parents surveyed, 81.48% expressed that this was either “Very important” or “Extremely important.” This data is also visualized in the first distribution of Figure 9, and an analysis of the responses indicates a strong left skewness in the distribution. The mode, representing an “Extremely important” response, serves as the central value with a rating of 5. The distribution exhibits a spread of 1 categorical unit, as indicated by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question was 5, matching the mode value and indicating a response of “Extremely important.”

The data presented in row 8 of Figure 7 demonstrates how parents perceive the importance of receiving correspondence from their child's kindergarten teacher. An overwhelming majority (85.19% of parents) indicated that this was either “Very important” or “Extremely important.” This data is also illustrated in the second distribution of Figure 9 and was analyzed, revealing a strong left skewness in the distribution of responses. The mode, representing an “Extremely important” response, serves as the central value with a rating of 5. The distribution exhibits a spread of 1 categorical unit, as determined by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question was 5, aligning with the mode value and indicating a response of “Extremely important.”

The information presented in row 9 of Figure 7 illustrates how parents perceive the importance of receiving a home visit from their child's kindergarten teacher. Results indicated that 48.15% of parents considered this as either “Not important” or “Slightly important,” whereas only 18.52% of parents who responded felt that it was either “Very important” or “Extremely important.” This data is also depicted in the third distribution of Figure 9 and was analyzed to reveal an asymmetrical distribution of responses. The mode, representing a “Neutral” response, serves as the central value with a rating of 3. The distribution exhibits a spread of 2 categorical units, as indicated by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question was 3, aligning with the mode value and indicating a response of “Neutral.”

The data presented in row 10 of Figure 7 provides insights into how parents perceive the importance of having their child attend kindergarten orientation activities alongside other incoming kindergarten students. An overwhelming majority (88.89% of

parents) expressed that this was either “Very important” or “Extremely important.” This data is also depicted in the fourth distribution of Figure 9, and upon analysis, it was found that the distribution of responses is strongly skewed to the left. The mode, representing an “Extremely important” response, serves as the central value with a rating of 5. The distribution demonstrates a spread of 1 categorical unit, as indicated by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question was 5, aligning with the mode value and indicating a response of “Extremely important.”

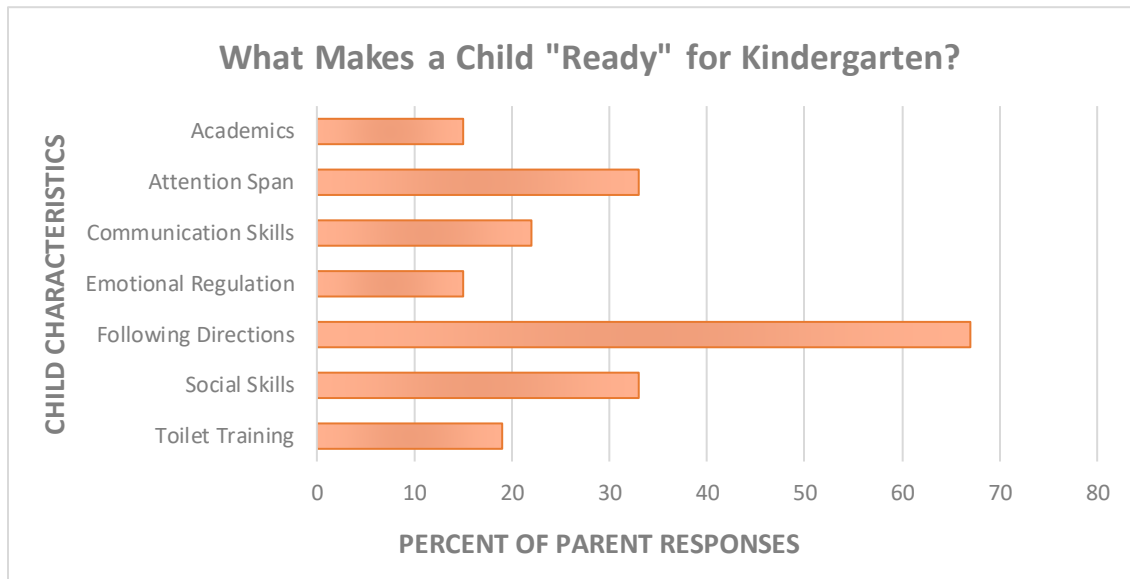
The data presented in row 11 of Figure 7 showcases how parents perceive the importance of having the school district transition planning team conduct a full evaluation of their child. A significant majority (85.19% of parents) indicated that this was either “Very important” or “Extremely important.” This data is also depicted in the fifth distribution of Figure 9, which was analyzed to reveal a strong left skewness in the distribution of responses. The mode, representing an “Extremely important” response, serves as the central value with a rating of 5. The distribution exhibits a spread of 1 categorical unit, as indicated by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question was 5, aligning with the mode value and indicating a response of “Extremely important.”

The information presented in row 12 of Figure 7 reflects how parents perceive the importance of receiving information about how to register their child for kindergarten. A notable 70.37% of parents considered this as either “Very important” or “Extremely important.” This data is also represented in the final distribution of Figure 9, and an analysis of the responses reveals a strong left skewness in the distribution. The mode, which signifies an “Extremely important” response, serves as the central value with a

rating of 5. The distribution exhibits a spread of 2 categorical units, as indicated by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question was 5, aligning with the mode value and indicating a response of “Extremely important.”

Upon further analysis of Section 2 of the FEIT-Modified survey, there are nine categories that have a distribution of responses centered at 5, given by the mode, as well as a median value of 5, which represents the highest rating of importance. These nine areas of support include: attending the transition to kindergarten planning meeting in February, having an early intervention teacher in attendance at the meeting, having a potential kindergarten teacher in attendance at the meeting, visiting the child’s kindergarten classroom, having a member of the child’s school district transition team observe the child, receiving correspondence from the child’s kindergarten teacher, attending kindergarten orientation activities with other incoming kindergarten students, having the school district transition planning team to conduct a full evaluation of the child, and receiving information about how to register the child for kindergarten. Of these nine areas of support, more than 80 percent of parents responded with “Very important” or “Extremely important” for eight of the support areas. The ninth area, receiving information about how to register the child for kindergarten, had 70.37% of responses as “Very important” or “Extremely important.” Most significantly, two areas of support had 92.59% of responses in either the “Very important” or the “Extremely important” category. These two areas of support were attending the transition to kindergarten planning meeting and visiting the child’s classroom before kindergarten starts. Transition to kindergarten supports of highest importance to parents are shown in Figure 10.

There were two free-form questions (one required and one that was optional) on the FEIT-Modified survey, which permitted respondents to answer in short answer, open-text format and yielded the collection of qualitative data. In an attempt to better understand the perceptions of parents of preschool children with special needs about the transition to kindergarten process, parents were prompted to share their ideas on the following: “In your own words, describe what it means for a child to be ‘ready’ for kindergarten.” Figure 10 represents the parent responses to this item. Of the 27 parents who completed the FEIT-Modified survey, 18 respondents (67%) cited a child’s ability to follow directions, nine respondents (33%) referenced the child’s ability to interact socially with others, nine respondents (33%) referenced a child’s ability to communicate effectively, five respondents (19%) referenced being toilet-trained, four respondents (15%) referenced a child’s ability to appropriately regulate their emotions, four respondents (15%) referenced a child’s academic as being integral to a child’s kindergarten readiness.

Figure 10*Parent perspectives on kindergarten readiness*

The second open-ended question on the FEIT-Modified survey was optional and asked, “If you are ‘not likely’ to send your child to kindergarten in the fall of 2023, please share why in the space provided below.” Out of four respondents, three (75%) referenced concerns about their child’s communication skills, one respondent (25%) referenced concern about their child’s lack of independence with dressing and toilet training, and one respondent (25%) cited the child’s late summer birthday and the fact that the child would be the “youngest in his class” as being the reason for not enrolling the child in kindergarten.

Semi-Structured Parent Interview Data

Out of the 27 respondents who completed the FEIT-Modified survey, five parents consented to complete a semi-structured interview with the researcher. The first semi-structured interview question that pertained to parent perceptions regarding kindergarten transition asked parents, “In your own words, describe what it means for a child to be

‘ready’ for kindergarten.” Two out of the five respondents (40%) referenced a child’s ability to communicate effectively, socialize appropriately with peers, appropriately regulate emotions, and maintain an appropriate attention span. Most remarkably, each of the five respondents (100%) explicitly expressed that a child’s academic knowledge was not relevant to a child being “ready” for kindergarten.

The second semi-structured parent interview question asked participants to describe how the WIU Early Intervention (EI) program could support the family before, during, and after the legally required transition meeting that would take place for their child in February 2023. Four out of the five respondents (80%) referenced how they would appreciate the WIU EI program preparing the families about what to expect during the February transition meeting, and one respondent (20%) indicated that she would like for the WIU EI program to give her an “honest appraisal” of her child’s skills in advance of the February meeting.

Three out of five respondents (60%) indicated that they would be best supported during the February transition meeting by the WIU EI program by being given time to ask questions and contribute to a collaborative and holistic information-sharing discussion about their child. Two respondents (40%) referenced being introduced to everyone at the meeting and having their roles explained as a way that the WIU EI program could be supportive. Two respondents (40%) referenced having the child’s preschool teacher present at the meeting, and one respondent (20%) indicated that having the child’s potential kindergarten teacher at the February transition meeting would be supportive measures.

In terms of supportive measures that the WIU EI program could take to support the family after the February transition meeting, one respondent (20%) referenced having the WIU EI program invite the school district personnel to an IEP meeting for the child. Two respondents (40%) referenced finding out who their child's kindergarten teacher would be before school started, and two respondents (40%) referenced being given a tour of the elementary school. One respondent (20%) was not sure what supports would be helpful after the February transition meeting and stated, "My child is very anxious. Any way that that could be supported would be great."

The next set of questions on the semi-structured parent interview pertained to the ways in which the child's school district could support the parent during and after the February transition meeting. Four of the respondents (80%) referenced having representatives from the school district clearly "laying out" the transition process and explaining what to expect. One of those four respondents actually described that having a "visual map of what the process is going to be" would be incredibly helpful to her. Two of the respondents (40%) indicated that the school district could be supportive by answering parents' questions and by fostering a collaborative discussion about their child and the child's needs.

In terms of the ways in which the school district could be supportive of the parent in the months following the February transition meeting, three of the five respondents (60%) indicated that touring the school or kindergarten classroom as well as meeting the teacher before the start of school would be supportive measures for the school district to provide. One respondent (20%) indicated that receiving a follow-up call from the school

district after the February transition meeting to keep the parent informed about “where things stand with my child’s evaluation.”

Parents were then asked, “What is your greatest concern when you think about your child going to kindergarten and why?” Responses to this question were varied. Two respondents (40%) referenced their child’s ability to communicate with others as being their greatest concern: “If she can communicate with the people around her and the other kids is a concern of mine because she is nonverbal, and she uses a device.” Another respondent (20%) referenced her child’s happiness and ability to make continued progress as her greatest concern: “Her enjoying school and her liking where she goes to school, and of course making progress.” Another parent shared that having her child “get the services he needs” as being her greatest concern when she thinks about her child going to kindergarten. The final respondent (20%) cited her child’s behavior and his tendency toward aggression to be her greatest concern: “Behavior. His aggression and how the teachers are going to manage him. The way you interact with him will either make him or break him.”

When asked if they would send their child to kindergarten in the fall of 2023, each of the five respondents (100%) answered in the affirmative. When asked “why” they intended to send their child to kindergarten (as opposed to electing for the child to remain in early intervention for an additional year), the responses were varied. Two of the respondents (40%) referenced the risk of their child being “bored” if they did not go to kindergarten “on time.” One parent explained that “the risk of him being bored would be worse than him struggling a little bit.” Two other respondents (40%) indicated age to be a factor in sending their child to kindergarten with same-age peers. One respondent (20%)

indicated that she wanted her child to “perhaps be around kids that are more verbal” and also that she had seen her child “evolve” and “make progress” since being in early intervention. That same respondent further shared, “I just know she’s ready.”

One of the last questions on the semi-structured parent interview asked, “What is your greatest priority when you think about your child transitioning out of early intervention and into kindergarten?” All five respondents (100%) provided answers that pertained to the overall well-being of the child. Reported priorities of parents included seeing the child socialize and make friends, making sure the child will like the new school, making sure the child is “happy,” and watching the child being “emotionally ready” to be part of a bigger building. One parent even explained that “I’m not worried about the academic side as long as he is engaged, making friends, and develops social relationships.” Parent rejection of academics as being important to them during the kindergarten transition process through either the exclusion of it from their answer to this question on the semi-structured interview or the explicit verbal rejection of it aligned with the data collected from the FEIT-Modified Survey Question 7. On Question 7, when parents were asked to share how concerned they were about “Academics,” the median response to the survey question represented was 3, which represented a response value of “Some concerns.” This resulting concern level paled in comparison to the concern parents reported in other areas (e.g., communicating effectively, getting used to a new school, and riding a school bus).

Quantitative and qualitative data collected from the FEIT-Modified Survey as well as the qualitative data collected during the semi-structured parent interview, revealed that the priorities of parents of preschool children with complex special needs during the

transition to kindergarten process include areas of potential concern and ideas about the importance of specific support measures that could be provided by the early intervention program or the school district. Parents in this study reported the highest level of concern in the following areas as these areas pertain to their child's transition out of early intervention and into kindergarten on the FEIT-Modified survey: the preschool-age child's ability to get used to a new school, the child's overall preparedness for kindergarten, the child's toilet training abilities, the child's ability to communicate their needs in the kindergarten setting, and the child's ability to ride the school bus. Aside from being one of the five areas of greatest concern for parents on the parent survey, the child's ability to communicate needs was also reflected in the answers of two of the respondents (40%) during the semi-structured parent interview, making it a highly concerning area for parents of children with complex special needs as they prepare to have their child transition into kindergarten. Concerns about their child's ability to communicate with others was the reason given by 3 out of the 4 respondents (75%) when asked why they were "Not likely" to send their child to kindergarten "on time" and with their same age peers in the fall of 2023.

Potential supportive measures that could be provided by the early intervention program or school districts were another area of inquiry explored to find out more about what is important to parents during this time of transition for their child. Out of twelve items presented to parents on the FEIT-Modified survey, nine of them received the highest overall rating of importance from parents: attending the transition to kindergarten planning meeting in February, having the child's early intervention teacher in attendance at the meeting, having the child's potential kindergarten teacher in attendance at the

meeting, visiting the child's kindergarten classroom, having a member of the child's school district transition team observe the child, receiving correspondence from the child's kindergarten teacher, attending kindergarten orientation activities with other incoming kindergarten students, having the school district transition planning team to conduct a full evaluation of the child, and receiving information about how to register the child for kindergarten. Nearly 93% of respondents on the FEIT-Modified survey rated attending the transition to kindergarten planning meeting and visiting the child's classroom before kindergarten starts to be either "Very important" or "Extremely important."

During the semi-structured interview, parents were questioned about the ways in which the early intervention program and the school district could support them through their child's transition to kindergarten experience. Supports mentioned during the interview that were also revealed in the survey data included: having the child's early intervention teacher and potential kindergarten teacher attend the transition meeting in February and visiting the child's kindergarten classroom before the start of school. It is noteworthy that visiting the child's kindergarten classroom before the start of school was mentioned prominently in the survey data as well as in the semi-structured interview. It was one of two areas of support in which nearly 93% of respondents rated it as either "Very important" or "Extremely important," making it one of the most important supports to parents of children with complex special needs as their child transitions from preschool early intervention to kindergarten.

Parent participants in this study were asked questions about what it meant for a child to be "ready" for kindergarten to gain additional insight into parents' perceptions

surrounding the transition to school-age programming. Qualitative data obtained from the administration of one open-ended, short-answer question on the FEIT-Modified survey revealed the answer to that question. Child functioning and performance across the following areas were listed as being present when a child is “ready” to go to kindergarten: following directions, socializing appropriately, being able to communicate needs, attention span, toilet training, academics, and emotional regulation. It is interesting to note that when the five respondents to the semi-structured parent interview were asked that question, child functioning in the areas of communication skills, attention span, socialization skills, and emotional regulation were mentioned. Academics was rejected by all parent interview participants as an area to be considered to determine if a child is “ready” for kindergarten.

Triangulation of the data for this study and to answer research question one included analysis and consideration of data from a variety of sources. The results obtained were compared using descriptive and inferential statistics. The results revealed through the analysis of survey and interview data of this mixed methods research design are considered highly valid since they were derived from multiple data sources, which adds to the overall strength of the study.

Research Question Two: What do preschool early intervention and school district special education leaders consider to be the concerns and priorities of parents of children with complex special needs as their children transition from preschool early intervention to kindergarten?

The results for research question two were collected via a survey of special education leaders and interview questions that intended to capture information about

what special educators perceive the priorities of parents to be during their child's transition out of early intervention and into kindergarten.

SELTS-K Results

The output results of these survey questions show the total survey responses between all special education leaders who responded and were used to establish a median, mode, or no mode. The first section of questions on the Special Education Leader Transition Survey-Kindergarten (SELTS-K) asked a series of demographic questions to better understand the background of leaders who were being surveyed. Of the 12 education leaders who responded to the SELTS-K, 25% had 1-4 years of experience as a special education leader, 33.33% had 5-9 years of experience, 25% had 10-14 years of experience, and 16.67% of special education leaders had 15-19 years of experience. Of those special education leaders who responded to the survey, job titles included seven Special Education Directors, two Student Services Directors, one Early Intervention Supervisor, one Early Intervention Service Coordinator, and one Assistant to the Superintendent of Student Services.

Special education leaders were next asked to respond to a set of questions on the survey asking to describe what they perceive the parent of a special education child's level of concern is in different areas as their child transitions to kindergarten. The question design gave those surveyed four options and required a "pick one" option. The four options used to describe the level of concern were "No concern," "A few concerns," "Some concerns," and "Many concerns." Special education leaders were asked to answer questions about eleven different areas in which parents may have some level of concern during the transition to kindergarten process. These eleven areas corresponded to the

potential areas of concern represented in the FEIT-Modified survey. Figure 11 shows a data table illustrating the eleven areas in which special education leaders were asked to rate their perceived level of parent concerns and shows the educator responses, in counts, based on their selection when completing the survey.

Figure 11

Special education leader (SEL) perceptions of parent concerns, numeric breakdown

Areas of Concern	Level of Concern			
	No Concerns	A few concerns	Some concerns	Many concerns
Academics (e.g., knowing the alphabet)	0	6	5	2
Behavior (e.g., tantrums)	0	1	2	9
Following directions	0	4	7	1
Getting along with other children	0	4	6	2
Getting along with the teacher	2	7	3	0
Getting used to a new school	0	0	7	5
Child being ready for kindergarten	0	2	4	6
Separating from the family	1	6	4	1
Toilet training	1	3	4	4
Ability to communicate needs	0	1	5	6
Riding a school bus	0	2	5	5

Figure 12 illustrates the same data as Figure 11 and is represented as five side-by-side bar graphs which show the distributions of responses from special education leaders in the first five areas of concern.

Figure 12

SEL perceptions of parent concerns, areas 1-5

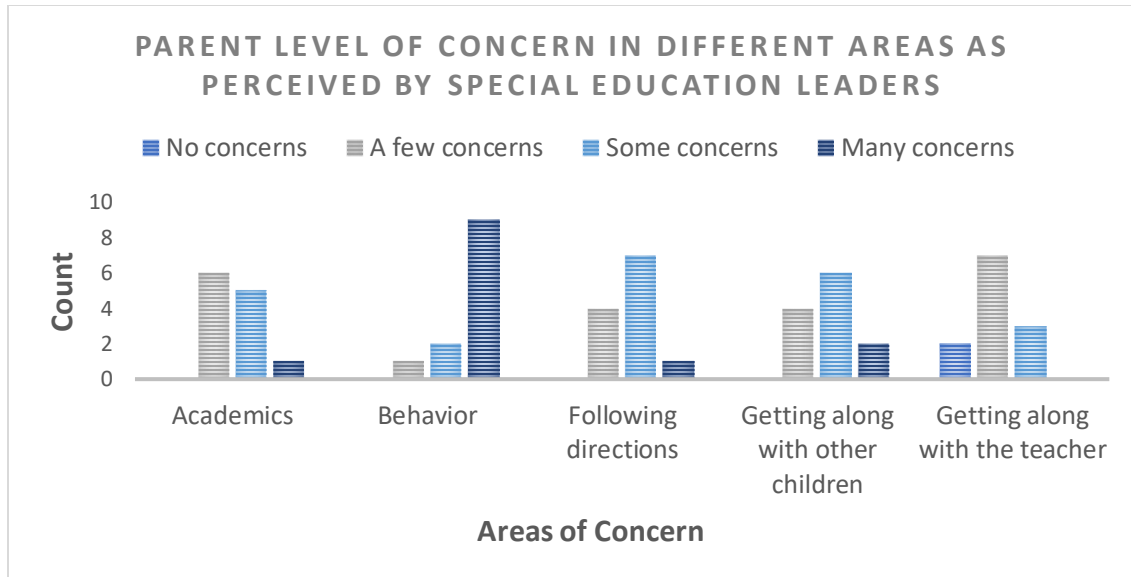
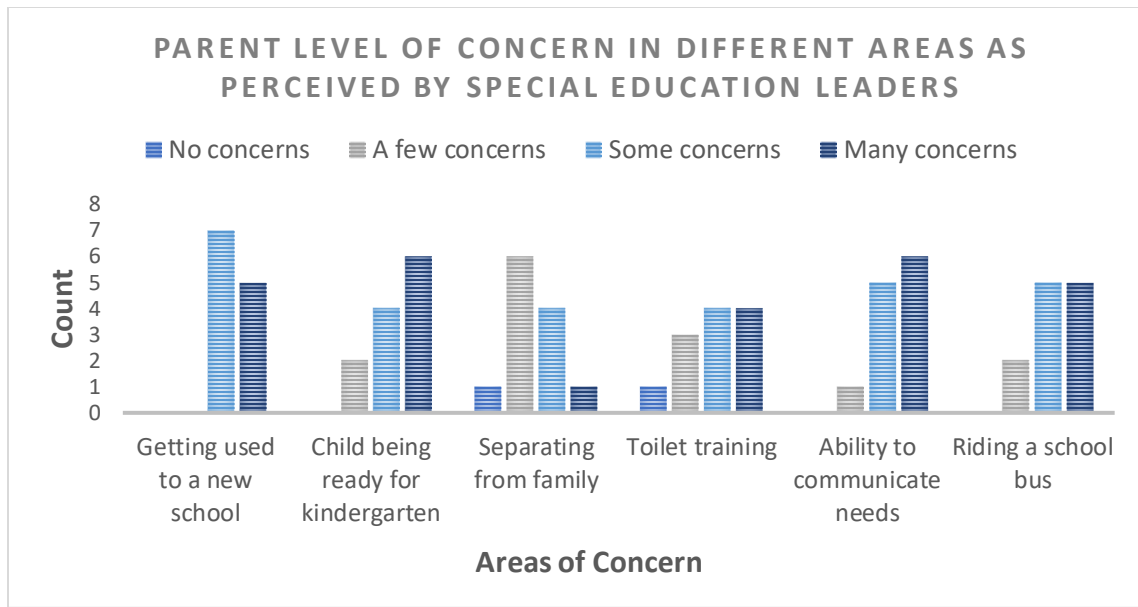


Figure 13 illustrates the same data as Figure 11 and is represented as six side-by-side bar graphs which show the distributions of responses from special education leaders about the final six areas of concern.

Figure 13

SEL Perceptions of Parent Concerns, Areas 6-11



In order to perform statistical analysis of the data in Figures 11, 12, and 13, a numerical value was given to represent each response category, with 1 being given to the response “No concern” and 4 being given to the response “Many concerns.” The data in row 1 of Figure 11 shows how special education leaders perceive parent level of concern about their preschool-age child’s academic abilities as they prepare to transition to kindergarten. There were no special educators who described the parent level of concern to be “No concerns” for their child’s academic abilities, and 50% described the parent level of concern as “A few concerns” for this area. Results further indicated that 41.67% responded with “Some concerns,” and 8.33% perceived that parents had “Many concerns” about their child’s academic abilities in the transition to kindergarten. The data in row 1 of Figure 11 is also pictured as the first distribution in Figure 12. The data was analyzed to determine the distribution of responses is slightly skewed to the right with a center of 2, given by the mode, which represents a response of “A few concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 1 categorical unit, given by the interquartile range (IQR). The

median response to the survey question represented was 2.5, which represents a response value somewhere between “A few concerns” and “Some concerns.”

The data in row 2 of Figure 11 shows how special education leaders perceive parent level of concern about their preschool-age child’s behavior as they prepare to transition to kindergarten. Results indicated that 8.33% of special educators described the parent level of concern to be either “No concerns” or “A few concerns,” 16.67% responded with “Some concerns,” while 75% perceived that parents had “Many concerns” about their child’s behavior in the transition to kindergarten. The data in row 2 of Figure 11 is also pictured as the second distribution in Figure 12. The data was analyzed to determine the distribution of responses is skewed to the left with a center of 4, given by the mode, which represents a response of “Many concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 0.25 categorical units, given by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question represented was 4, which represents a response value of “Many concerns” and is the same as the value for the mode.

The information presented in row 3 of Figure 11 pertains to how special education leaders perceive the level of concern among parents regarding their preschool-age child's ability to follow directions during the transition to kindergarten. Notably, no special educators reported “No concerns” from parents. Instead, 91.67% indicated that parents would have “A few concerns” or “Some concerns” about their child's ability to follow directions in this transition. Additionally, 8.33% of special education leaders believed that parents would have “Many concerns.” The data in row 3 of Figure 11 is also depicted as the third distribution in Figure 12. Upon analysis, it was determined that the distribution of responses exhibits asymmetry, with a central value of 3 representing the

mode, indicating “Some concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 1 categorical unit, as denoted by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question was 3, which aligns with the mode value and represents a response of “Some concerns.”

The information provided in row 4 of Figure 11 illustrates the perception of special education leaders regarding the level of concern among parents concerning their preschool-age child's ability to get along with other children during the transition to kindergarten. It is noteworthy that no special educators reported “No concerns” from parents in this regard. Instead, 83.33% indicated that parents would have “A few concerns” or “Some concerns” about their child's ability to socialize with other children during the transition. Additionally, 16.67% of special education leaders believed that parents would have “Many concerns.” The data in row 4 of Figure 11 is also represented as the fourth distribution in Figure 12. Upon analysis, it was determined that the distribution of responses exhibits relatively symmetrical characteristics, with a central value of 3 representing the mode, signifying “Some concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 1 categorical unit, as indicated by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question was 3, which aligns with the mode value and represents a response of “Some concerns.”

The data presented in row 5 of Figure 11 depicts the perception of special education leaders regarding the level of concern among parents regarding their preschool-age child's ability to establish a positive relationship with the teacher during the transition to kindergarten. Results indicated that 16.67% of special educators reported “No concerns” from parents in this aspect, and 83.33% indicated that parents would have “A few concerns” or “Some concerns” about their child's ability to get along with the

teacher. No special education leaders expressed the belief that parents would have “Many concerns.” The data in row 5 of Figure 11 is also represented as the final distribution in Figure 12. Data analysis revealed that the distribution of responses exhibits a relatively symmetrical pattern, with a central value of 2 representing the mode, indicating “A few concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 0.25 categorical units, as indicated by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question was 2, aligning with the mode value and representing a response of “A few concerns.”

The data presented in row 6 of Figure 11 illustrates the perception of special education leaders regarding the level of concern among parents about their preschool-age child's ability to adapt to a new school environment. Notably, no special educators reported “No concerns” or “A few concerns” from parents in this regard. However, all respondents, totaling 100%, indicated that parents would have “Some concerns” or “Many concerns” about their child's ability to adjust to a new school. The data in row 6 of Figure 11 is also represented as the first distribution in Figure 13. Analysis of the data revealed that the distribution of responses demonstrates a slight right skew, with a central value of 3 representing the mode, indicating “Some concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 1 categorical unit, as determined by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question was 3, aligning with the mode value and representing a response of “Some concerns.”

The data presented in row 7 of Figure 11 depicts how special education leaders perceive the level of concern among parents regarding their preschool-age child's overall readiness for kindergarten. Notably, there were no special educators who reported 'No concerns' from parents in this aspect. Approximately 50% of respondents indicated that

parents would have “A few concerns” or “Some concerns” about their child's overall readiness for kindergarten. The remaining 50% of special education leaders perceived a higher level of concern, categorizing it as “Many concerns.” The data in row 7 of Figure 11 is also represented as the second distribution in Figure 13. Upon analysis, it was determined that the distribution of responses skews to the left, with a central value of 4 representing the mode, which corresponds to “Many concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 1 categorical unit, as indicated by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question was 3.5, which falls between “Some concerns” and “Many concerns” and slightly below the value associated with the mode.

The data shown in row 8 of Figure 11 illustrates the perception of special education leaders regarding the level of concern among parents about their preschool-age child separating from the family. Among the special education leaders, 8.33% reported “No concerns” in this area, and 83.33% of respondents indicated that parents would have “A few concerns” or “Some concerns” about their child's separation from the family. The remaining 8.33% of special education leaders perceived a higher level of concern, categorizing it as “Many concerns.” The data in row 8 of Figure 11 is also depicted as the third distribution in Figure 13. Analysis of the data revealed a slight right skew in the distribution of responses, with a central value of 2 representing the mode, which corresponds to “A few concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 1 categorical unit, as indicated by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question was 2, reflecting a response value of “A few concerns,” which aligns with the value for the mode.

The data presented in row 9 of Figure 11 provides insights into how special education leaders perceive the level of concern among parents regarding their preschool-age child's toilet training abilities. Among the special education leaders surveyed, 8.33% indicated that parents would have “No concerns” in this area. Approximately 58.33% of respondents believed that parents would express “A few concerns” or “Some concerns” about their child's toilet training abilities. The remaining 33.33% of special education leaders perceived a higher level of concern, labeling it as “Many concerns.” The data in row 9 of Figure 11 is also represented as the fourth distribution in Figure 13. Upon analysis, it was observed that the distribution of responses is bimodal and skewed to the left, with a central value of 3 indicated by the median, which represents a response of “Some concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 2 categorical units, as determined by the interquartile range (IQR). The survey question responses exhibited two modes, both at 3 and 4, representing values of “Some concerns” and “Many concerns,” respectively.

The data presented in row 10 of Figure 11 sheds light on how special education leaders perceive the level of concern among parents regarding their preschool-age child's ability to communicate their needs. None of the special education leaders surveyed indicated that parents would have “No concerns” in this regard. Approximately 50% of respondents believed that parents would express “A few concerns” or “Some concerns” about their child's ability to communicate their needs. The remaining 50% of special education leaders perceived a higher level of concern, labeling it as “Many concerns.” The data in row 10 of Figure 11 is also represented as the fifth distribution in Figure 13. Upon analysis, it was observed that the distribution of responses is skewed to the left, with a central value of 4 indicated by the mode, which represents a response of “Many

concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 1 categorical unit, as determined by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to the survey question represented was 3.5, representing a response value between “Some concerns” and “Many concerns” and slightly below the value for the mode.

The data presented in the last row of Figure 11 illustrates how special education leaders perceive the level of concern among parents regarding their preschool-age child riding a school bus. None of the special education leaders surveyed reported that parents would have “No concerns” in this regard. Approximately 58.33% of respondents indicated that parents would express “A few concerns” or “Some concerns” about their child riding a school bus. The remaining 41.66% of special education leaders perceived a higher level of concern, categorizing it as “Many concerns.” The data in the final row of Figure 11 is also depicted as the last distribution in Figure 13. Through analysis, it was determined that the distribution of responses is bimodal and skewed to the left, with a central value of 3 indicated by the median, representing a response of “Some concerns.” The spread of the distribution is 1 categorical unit, as measured by the interquartile range (IQR). Notably, the survey question yielded two modes with response values of 3 and 4, corresponding to “Some concerns” and “Many concerns,” respectively.

Additional analysis of this section of questions on the SELTS-K revealed three categories with a distribution of responses centered at 4, which represents the highest categorical level of concern. The three areas of concern are the child’s behavior, the child’s overall preparedness for kindergarten, and the child’s ability to communicate their needs in the kindergarten setting. Results indicated that 91.67% of special education leaders reported that they perceived parents would have either “Some concern” or “Many

concerns” about their child’s behavior during the transition to kindergarten. Additionally, 91.67% of special education leaders perceived parent level of concern about their child’s ability to communicate their needs as either “Some concern” or “Many concerns.” Thus, behavior and ability to communicate needs were the two areas over which special education leaders perceived parents would have the highest level of concern. The third area of concern that special education leaders felt parents would be highly concerned about was the child’s overall preparedness for kindergarten. Results indicated that 83.33% of special education leaders felt that parents would have either “Some concerns” or “Many concerns” about their child’s level of preparedness for kindergarten.

For research question one, parents responded to the FEIT-Modified survey that revealed five areas of the highest level of concern: the preschool-age child’s ability to get used to a new school, the child’s overall preparedness for kindergarten, the child’s toilet training abilities, the child’s ability to communicate their needs in the kindergarten setting, and the child’s ability to ride the school bus. Of the three areas that special education leaders felt were the highest area of concern for parents, two of the areas corresponded to the actual highest level of concern ratings from parents. The two areas in which special education leaders felt parents would have a high level of concern, and according to the responses from parents in the FEIT-Modified survey, did, in fact, have a high level of concern were the child’s overall preparedness for kindergarten and the child’s ability to communicate their needs in the kindergarten setting.

The Mann-Whitney U test was performed on the FEIT-Modified survey, and the SELTS-K results about the overall rating of the level of concern that parents had or were perceived to have during the transition to kindergarten process about their child’s overall

preparedness for kindergarten. The null hypothesis was established to test whether there was a difference between how special education leaders and parents perceived their level of concern about the child's overall preparedness for kindergarten. After performing the test, the data was found to have a U-value of 151, which allows for the use of the z-score. The z-score is -0.3195, and the p-value was reported as .74896. At the 5% significance level, the result is not significant, and we fail to reject the null hypothesis. There is no convincing evidence that there is a difference between how parents and special education leaders perceived the parent level of concern about their child's overall preparedness for kindergarten.

Following this result, the Mann-Whitney U test was performed on the FEIT-Modified survey and SELTS-K results about the overall rating of the level of concern that parents had or were perceived to have during the transition to kindergarten process about their child's ability to communicate their needs in the kindergarten setting. The null hypothesis was established to test whether there was a difference between how special education leaders and parents perceived their level of concern about the child's ability to communicate their needs in the kindergarten setting. After performing the test, the data was found to have a U-value of 147.5, which allows for the use of the z-score. The z-score is -0.42601, and the p-value was reported as .6672. At the 5% significance level, the result is not significant, and we fail to reject the null hypothesis. There is no convincing evidence that there is a difference between how parents and special education leaders perceived the parent level of concern about their child's ability to communicate their needs.

Finally, the Mann-Whitney U test was performed on the FEIT-Modified and the SELTS-K survey results about the overall rating of the level of concern that parents had or were perceived to have during the transition to kindergarten process about their child's overall behavior. It was found in previous analysis that special education leaders perceived this to be one of the highest areas of concern for parents, whereas this was not found in the FEIT-Modified survey results. The null hypothesis was established to test whether there was a difference between how special education leaders and parents perceived their level of concern about the child's overall behavior. After performing the test, the data was found to have a U-value of 53, which allows for the use of the z-score. The z-score is -3.30155, and the p-value was reported as .00096. At the 5% significance level, the result is significant, and we reject the null hypothesis. There is convincing evidence that there is a difference between parents' reported level of concern and the degree to which special education leaders perceive the parent level of concern about their child's overall behavior.

In section 2 of the SELTS-K, special education leaders were then asked to respond to a set of questions asking to give their perception of a parent's rating on the importance of a series of priorities and supports in place during the transition to kindergarten process. The question design gave those surveyed five options and required a "pick one" option. The five options used to describe the level of concern were numbered 1-5, where 1 represented a response of "Not important," 2 represented a response of "Slightly important," 3 of "Neutral," 4 of "Very important," and 5 represented a response of "Extremely important." Special education leaders were asked to answer questions about twelve different supports which parents may experience during

the transition to kindergarten process. Figure 14 shows a data table illustrating the twelve areas in which special education leaders were asked to give their perception of parent ratings of support importance.

Figure 14

SEL perceptions of parent support ratings, numeric breakdown

Supports	Rating of Importance				
	Not important	Slightly important	Neutral	Very important	Extremely important
Early intervention program hosts a meeting about what to expect	0	1	0	0	11
Receive monthly contact from your child's early intervention teacher	0	1	0	0	11
Parents to attend the transition to kindergarten planning meeting	0	1	0	0	11
Early intervention teacher to be in attendance at the transition to kindergarten meeting	0	1	0	0	11
Potential kindergarten teacher to attend the transition to kindergarten meeting	0	1	0	0	11
Visit child's kindergarten classroom before kindergarten starts	0	1	0	0	11
Member of child's school district transition team to observe child	0	1	0	0	11
Receive correspondence from your child's kindergarten teacher	0	1	0	0	11
Receive a home visit from your child's kindergarten teacher	0	1	0	0	11

Attend kindergarten orientation activities with other incoming kindergarten students	0	1	0	0	11
School district transition planning team to conduct a full evaluation of child	0	1	0	0	11
Receive information about how to register your child for kindergarten	0	1	0	0	11

Figure 15 illustrates the same data as Figure 14 and is represented as six side-by-side bar graphs which show the distributions of responses from special education leaders for the first six areas of support.

Figure 15

SEL perceptions of parent support ratings, supports 1-6

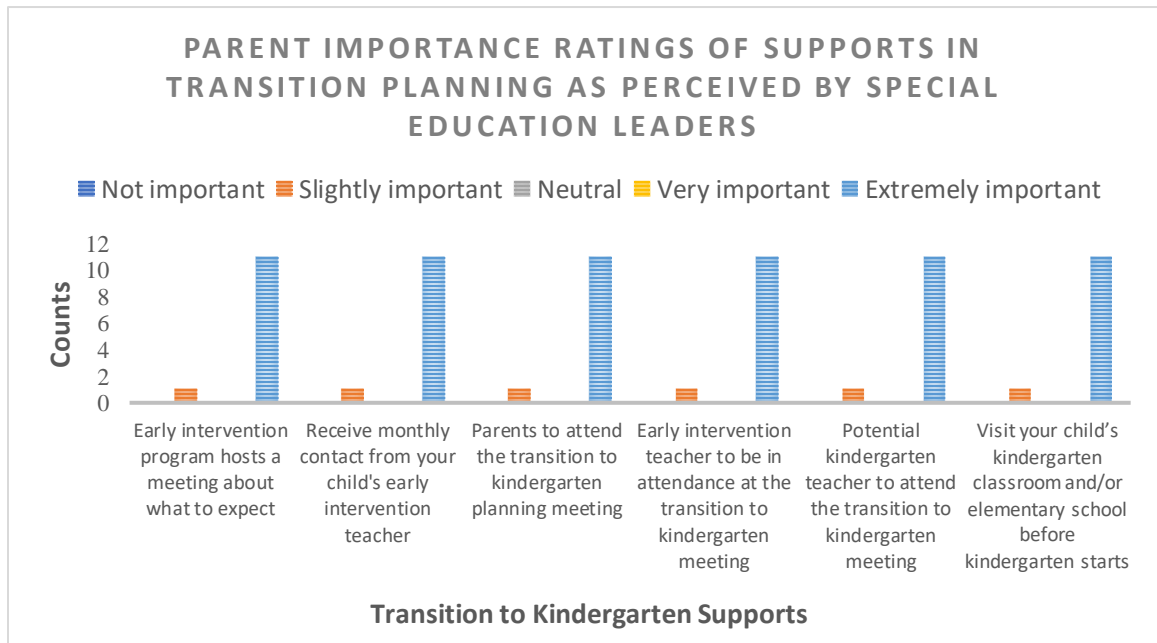
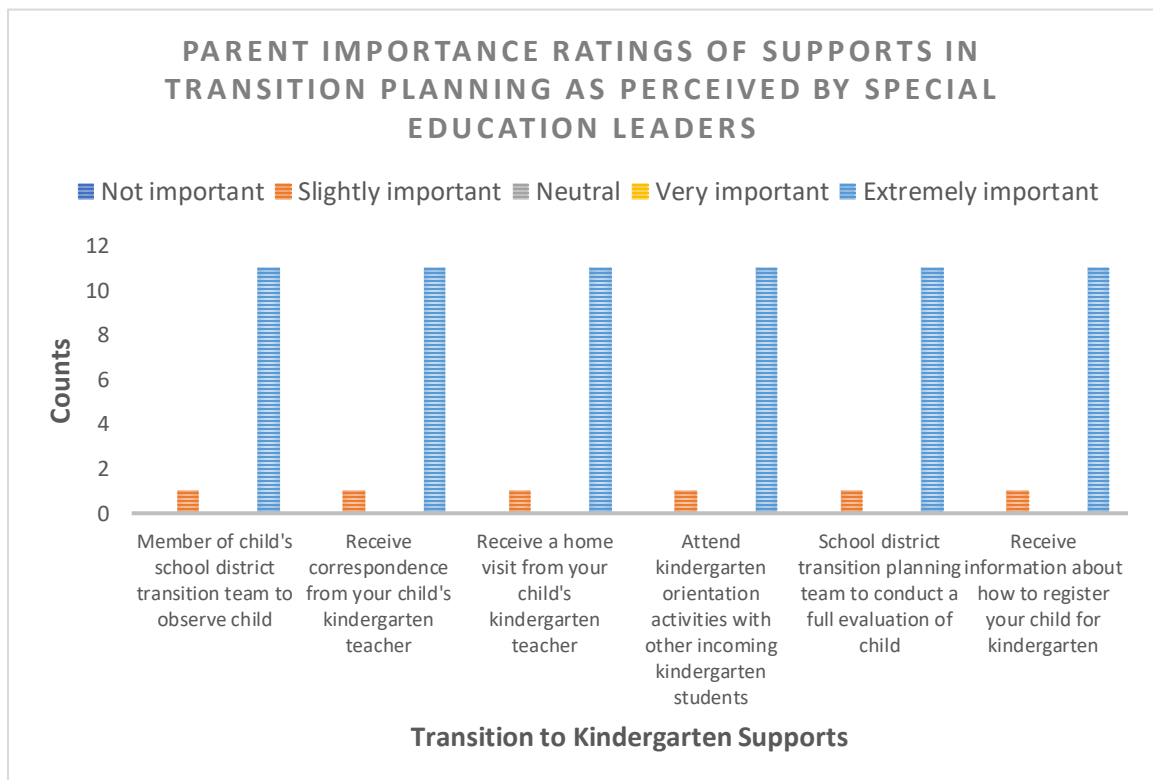


Figure 16 illustrates the same data as Figure 14 and is represented as six side-by-side bar graphs which show the distributions of responses from special education leaders for the final six areas of support.

Figure 16

SEL perceptions of parent support ratings, supports 7-12



To perform statistical analysis of the data in Figures 14, 15, and 16, a numerical value was given to represent each response category, with 1 being given to the response “Not important” and 5 being given to the response “Extremely important.” It is significant and worth noting that of the 12 priorities and supports that special education leaders were asked to give their perception of a parent’s rating on the importance of each support, each distribution of responses was exactly the same. Each of the 12 distributions was unimodal. Of the 12 survey respondents, 11 special education leaders rated each

support a '5' which corresponds to an "Extremely important" rating. Just one respondent had different responses to each survey question in this section, and that individual responded with a rating of '2' or "Slightly important" for all twelve supports. Responses from this respondent were a possible outlier, and a larger sample size would have helped to identify this as such. Each of the 12 distributions was unimodal with a center of 5, given by the mode and representing a response of "Extremely important." The spread of each of the 12 distributions is 0 categorical units, given by the interquartile range (IQR). The median response to each of the 12 survey questions was 5, which represents a response value of "Extremely important" and is the same as the mode value for each question.

In analyzing research question one and responses to the FEIT-Modified survey, it was found that there were nine parent response distributions centered at 5, representing the highest rating of importance. These nine areas of support are: attending the transition to kindergarten planning meeting, having an early intervention teacher in attendance at the meeting, having the child's potential kindergarten teacher in attendance at the meeting, visiting the child's kindergarten classroom, having a member of the child's school district transition team observe the child, receiving correspondence from the child's kindergarten teacher, attending kindergarten orientation activities with other incoming kindergarten students, having the school district transition planning team to conduct a full evaluation of the child, and receiving information about how to register the child for kindergarten. Upon analysis of the responses to the SELTS-K and in order to answer research question two, it was found that all 12 special education leader response distributions were centered at 5, representing the highest rating of importance. These

twelve areas of support include the nine areas of support that parents found to be most important, as well as three additional areas. The additional areas of support are the early intervention program hosting a meeting about what to expect, receiving monthly contact from the child's early intervention teacher, and receiving a home visit from the child's kindergarten teacher. The Mann-Whitney U test was performed on these three areas to determine if there was a statistical difference in how parents perceived their level of importance and how special education leaders perceived parent ratings of support importance.

The Mann-Whitney U test was performed on the FEIT-Modified survey and the SELTS-K results about the overall rating of the importance parents felt or were perceived to feel during the transition to kindergarten process about having the early intervention program host a meeting about what to expect as the child nears the entry to kindergarten. The null hypothesis was established to test whether there was a difference between how special education leaders and parents perceived their rating of the importance of having the early intervention program host the meeting. After performing the test, the data was found to have a U-value of 96.5, which allows for the use of the z-score. The z-score is -1.97789, and the p-value was reported as .0477. At the 5% significance level, the result is significant, and we reject the null hypothesis. There is convincing evidence that there is a difference between how parents and special education leaders perceived the rating of the importance of having the early intervention program host a meeting.

Following this result, the Mann-Whitney U test was performed on the FEIT-Modified survey and the SELTS-K results about the overall rating of the importance parents felt or were perceived to feel during the transition to kindergarten process about

receiving monthly contact from the child's early intervention teacher. The null hypothesis was established to test whether there was a difference between how special education leaders and parents perceived their rating of importance for receiving monthly contact from the child's early intervention teacher. After performing the test, the data was found to have a U-value of 90.5, which allows for the use of the z-score. The z-score is -1.97789, and the p-value was reported as .0477. At the 5% significance level, the result is significant, and we reject the null hypothesis. There is convincing evidence that there is a difference between how parents and special education leaders perceived the rating of the importance of receiving monthly contact from the child's early intervention teacher.

Finally, the Mann-Whitney U test was performed on the FEIT-Modified and the SELTS-K results about the overall rating of the importance parents felt or were perceived to feel during the transition to kindergarten process about receiving a home visit from the child's kindergarten teacher. The null hypothesis was established to test whether there was a difference between how special education leaders and parents perceived their rating of the importance of receiving a home visit from the child's kindergarten teacher. After performing the test, the data was found to have a U-value of 38.5, which allows for the use of the z-score. The z-score is -1.97789, and the p-value was reported as .0477. At the 5% significance level, the result is significant, and we reject the null hypothesis. There is convincing evidence that there is a difference between how parents and special education leaders perceived the rating of the importance of receiving a home visit from the child's kindergarten teacher.

Of the twelve areas of support, special education leaders correctly perceived the level of importance that parents felt towards nine support areas. These nine areas

included: attending the transition to kindergarten planning meeting, the early intervention teacher being in attendance at the meeting, potential kindergarten teacher being in attendance at the meeting, visiting the child's kindergarten classroom, having a member of the child's school district transition team observe the child, receiving correspondence from the child's kindergarten teacher, attending kindergarten orientation activities with other incoming kindergarten students, having the school district transition planning team to conduct a full evaluation of the child, and receiving information about how to register the child for kindergarten. Upon analysis, it was determined that in the remaining three areas of support, special education leaders may have misunderstood the perceptions of parents. These three areas of support included the early intervention program hosting a meeting about what to expect, receiving monthly contact from the child's early intervention teacher, and receiving a home visit from the child's kindergarten teacher.

There was one open-ended question included on the SELTS-K, which provided the researcher an opportunity to collect qualitative data from special education leaders respective to the question, "Describe what you think people mean when they say that a child is 'ready' for kindergarten." Figure 17 represents the special education leader responses to this item. Of the 12 respondents, parents who completed the SELTS-K, nine respondents (75%) cited academics, six respondents (50%) referenced toilet training, five respondents (42%) referenced following directions, three respondents (25%) referenced a child's communication skills, three respondents (25%) referenced emotional regulation, one respondent (17%) referenced attention span, and one respondent (17%) referenced getting along socially with others.

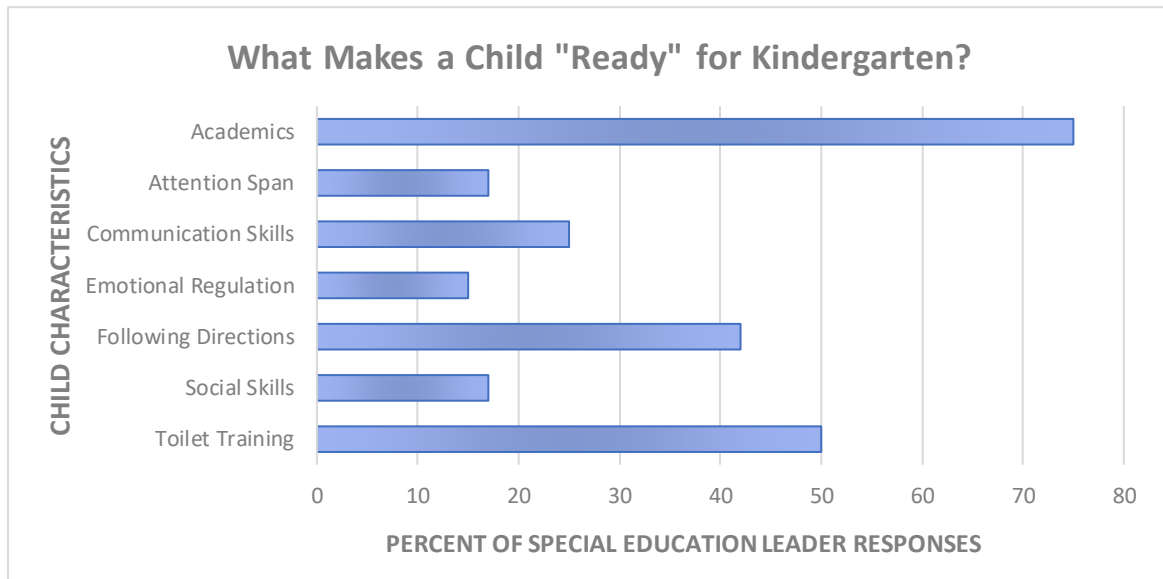
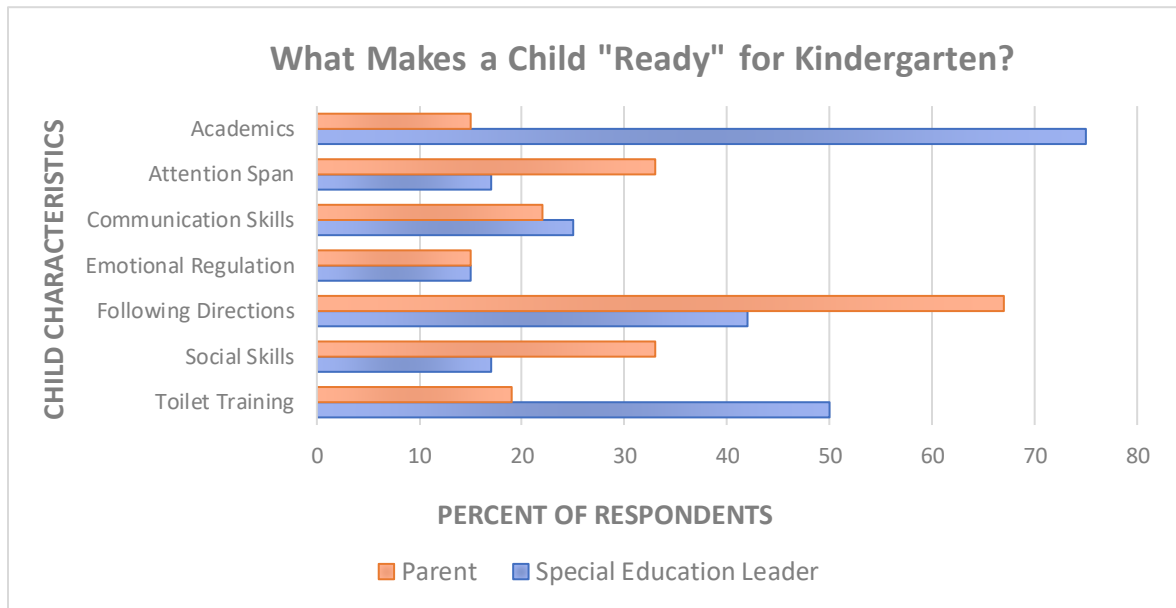
Figure 17*SEL perspectives on kindergarten readiness*

Figure 18 represents a comparison of parent and special education leader responses to what it means for a child to be “ready” for kindergarten. Notable differences were observed most prominently in the areas of academics, toilet training, and following directions.

Figure 18

A comparison of responses about kindergarten readiness in children



Semi-structured Special Education Leader Interview Data

There were two questions on the special education leader semi-structured interview that questioned respondents about what they considered to be the most concerning to parents and also the most important to parents of children with special needs through the transition out of early intervention and into school-age programming. Of the 12 respondents to the SELTS-K, six special education leaders consented to be interviewed by the researcher. Four of the 6 respondents (67%) mentioned that parents are most concerned about their child's safety, and 2 respondents (33%) reported that a child's communication skills are the most concerning area for parents. One respondent (17%) reported that she believed parents to be most concerned about their child riding the school bus, and another respondent (17%) reported that she believed parents to be most concerned about toilet training.

In terms of what special education leaders perceive as most important to parents of incoming kindergarten students from early intervention with special needs, two respondents (33%) reported having their child be socially accepted, “included and not forgotten.” Two respondents (33%) mentioned that making sure their child gets the needed supports in kindergarten to be the most important thing to parents of preschoolers with special needs during the kindergarten transition process. One respondent (17%) reported that knowing who the child’s kindergarten teacher will be is of the highest importance to parents.

Quantitative and qualitative data collected from the SELTS-K as well as the qualitative data collected during the semi-structured parent interview revealed what special education leaders perceive to be the priorities of parents of preschool children with complex special needs during the transition to kindergarten process. Inferential statistical analysis was used to determine a statistically significant difference between how special education leaders perceive the importance of certain supports to parents and how parents actually report how important those supports would be to them during this time of transition for their child. Those three areas of significant difference include the early intervention program hosting a meeting to prepare parents for what to expect during the transition meeting, receiving monthly contact from the preschool early intervention teacher to answer questions about kindergarten transition, and receiving a home visit from the child’s kindergarten teacher before school starts. Another area of discrepancy between what special education leaders perceive and what parents report was found in the question about what it means for a child to be “ready” to go to kindergarten. Notable

discrepancies were found in the areas of academics, toilet training, and following directions.

Data triangulation occurred through the collection of data from multiple sources during a finite period of time. Statistical analysis enabled the comparison of data sets to determine if significant differences existed between them. Demographic data revealed that the racial/ethnic representation in the sample of parent participants very closely aligned with the most recent U.S. Census data for Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, which adds another layer of validity to this study.

Research Question Three: How are the reported priorities of parents of children with complex special education needs reflected in the transition to kindergarten practices of the WIU Early Intervention program and school districts in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania?

To better understand how the reported priorities of parents of preschool-age children with complex special needs are reflected in the transition to kindergarten practices of the WIU preschool EI program and the school districts in Westmoreland County, one must first understand the lawful requirements of each educational entity as they relate to a child's move out of early intervention and into school-age programming. One major legal responsibility of preschool early intervention programs and school districts in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is to support the transition of preschool-age children with disabilities from early intervention services into school-age programming. Act 212 of 1990, the Early Intervention Systems Act, establishes the legal requirements involved with the provision of early intervention services to children in Pennsylvania, including the services required to facilitate a smooth transition of the child

from preschool early intervention and into school-age programming. Planning for the move into kindergarten must begin when the child is within one year of transition to a school-age program. Within that time frame, preschool early intervention Individualized Education Plan (IEP) teams are required to develop transition plans intended to support the child and the family through the child's move out of early intervention and into kindergarten. Act 212 of 1990 further requires that preschool early intervention programs in Pennsylvania convene transition meetings each February for children eligible to attend preschool or first grade in the fall. During the transition meeting, the Preschool Early Intervention program must review with the family and present an *Intent to Register* form, which enables parents to indicate whether they intend to send the child to kindergarten in the fall (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2022b; Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2022c). In Pennsylvania, parents have the option of requesting that their child with special needs remain in the Preschool Early Intervention program for one additional year rather than transitioning into school-age programming. At the conclusion of the additional year of preschool early intervention, the child must transition out of the early intervention program.

Parental choice about whether the child will be enrolled in the school district or charter school is recorded on the Intent form. Once the Intent form is received by the child's school district of residence and the parents indicate the intent to enroll the child in kindergarten or first grade with the school district, school districts are then legally required by Act 212 of 1990 to inform the family about the *Notice of Options* for the child's transition out of early intervention and into school-age programming (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2022d). Such options include the agreement

between the parents and school district to adopt and implement the preschool early intervention IEP in its entirety or with revisions upon the child's entry into kindergarten or agreement between the parents and the school district or charter school to conduct a re-evaluation of the child in preparation for the child's transition into school-age programming. Aside from these legal requirements for preschool early intervention and school districts, the law does not offer guidance about how to conduct the kindergarten transition process from a quality perspective to maximally support parent priorities and the child's needs.

Only one of the 12 supports (8%) presented to parents in the FEIT-Modified survey (attending a transition to kindergarten meeting with representatives from the WIU early intervention program and your child's school district that will take place in February 2023) happens with regularity due to the fact that holding the February transition meeting is required by Act 212 of 1990 in Pennsylvania. In the fall of 2022, representatives from the WIU EI program and from a few school districts participated in a virtual meeting to explain to families what to expect during the February transition meeting. That virtual kindergarten transition preparation meeting was attended by approximately 30 families. In addition, when possible, the WIU EI program attempts, when possible, to have the child's early intervention teacher attend the February transition meeting; however, the lack of substitute teacher coverage oftentimes prevents the EI teacher from attending. Although some of the other supports may happen on occasion throughout the transition to kindergarten process, they are not occurring in each school district in Westmoreland County with sustained regularity. Results of this study revealed that there is a vast difference between the priorities reported by parents in terms

of supports needed are only minimally evident with regularity across all school districts and the early intervention program.

Discussion

The responses obtained through the administration of the FEIT-Modified survey revealed that parents of preschool children with complex special needs have many concerns when they think about their child transitioning out of early intervention and into kindergarten. The five areas of reported highest concern for parents, listed in order from most concerning to least, were: worry about their child's overall preparedness for kindergarten, concerns about the child's ability to communicate their needs, toilet training, the child's ability to get used to a new school, and the child's ability to ride the school bus. Parents reported the least amount of concern about their child's ability to get along with other children, their child's ability to get along with the teacher, and their child being separated from the family when the child made the transition from early intervention to kindergarten.

Parents of children with special needs are most concerned about their child's overall preparedness for kindergarten. Data was collected via the FEIT-Modified survey and during the semi-structured parent interview to find out what parents think it means for a child to be "ready" for kindergarten. On the FEIT-Modified survey, parents identified several child characteristics that should be observed for a child to be considered "ready" for kindergarten. A majority of parents (67%) identified a child's ability to follow directions as being associated with a child's readiness to attend kindergarten. Thirty-three percent of parents identified a child's ability to socialize appropriately and to possess an adequate attention span for learning as being integral to a

child's readiness for kindergarten. Twenty-five percent of parents identified a child's communication skills, 19% of parents referenced toilet training, and 15% of parents listed emotional regulation as well as academics as being integral to a child being "ready" to go to kindergarten. Some of these same child characteristics were mentioned during the semi-structured parent interviews. Two out of five parent interview participants (40%) identified a child's communication skills, social skills, emotional regulation, and attention span. Since these same child characteristics were reported on the FEIT-Modified survey as well as during the parent interviews, one could interpret them as being quite concerning to parents during the transition to kindergarten process. One hundred percent of parents who were interviewed rejected academics as being integral to a child's kindergarten readiness. Rejection of academics as being associated with a child's kindergarten readiness was determined by the researcher based on its exclusion from the answers of four respondents and the explicit verbal rejection of it from one respondent: "It's not super important how many letters or numbers or colors they know."

Parents of preschool children with special needs are exceptionally concerned about their child's ability to communicate with others when they think about their child's transition into kindergarten. When parents, who identified as 'Not likely' to send their children to kindergarten in the fall of 2023, reported the reasoning for their decision on the FEIT-Modified survey, three out of the four respondents (75%) only cited concerns about their child's difficulty with communication skills. Communication skills were not only mentioned on the survey as well as during parent interviews, but it was also reported as the main reason for parents not to send their children to kindergarten "on time" with their same-age peers, making it an extremely high concern area for parents.

The FEIT-Modified survey also collected data from parents about the types of kindergarten transition supports and their perceived importance of each. Analysis of parental responses revealed that there were nine supports that received the highest possible ranking of importance from parents. Those nine areas were: attending the transition to kindergarten planning meeting in February, having an early intervention teacher in attendance at the meeting, having a potential kindergarten teacher in attendance at the meeting, visiting the child's kindergarten classroom, having a member of the child's school district transition team observe the child, receiving correspondence from the child's kindergarten teacher, attending kindergarten orientation activities with other incoming kindergarten students, having the school district transition planning team to conduct a full evaluation of the child, and receiving information about how to register the child for kindergarten. Of these nine areas of support, more than 80 percent of parents responded with "Very important" or "Extremely important" for eight of the support areas. The ninth area, receiving information about how to register the child for kindergarten, had 70.37% of responses as "Very important" or "Extremely important." Most significantly, two areas of support had 92.59% of responses in either the "Very important" or the "Extremely important" category. These two areas of support were attending the transition to kindergarten planning meeting and visiting the child's classroom before kindergarten starts. Statistical analysis helped the researcher to determine these two areas to be of the highest priority to parents as they consider their child's transition from preschool early intervention to kindergarten.

Data collected during parent interviews revealed that parents would feel most supported by the WIU EI program and the school district in the following ways:

preparing the families about what to expect during the February transition meeting, being given time to ask questions and contribute to a collaborative and holistic information sharing discussion about their child during the transition meeting, having the child's preschool teacher and the child's potential kindergarten teacher in attendance at the February transition meeting. Being permitted to tour the child's elementary school and visit the kindergarten classroom before school starts were reported as important supports by parents during the interviews.

During the semi-structured parent interviews, parents were asked to comment on what they considered to be their highest priority when they thought about their child's transition out of early intervention and into kindergarten. All five respondents (100%) provided answers that pertained to the overall well-being of the child. Reported priorities of parents included seeing the child socialize and make friends, making sure the child will like the new school, making sure the child is "happy," and watching the child being "emotionally ready" to be part of a bigger building. Once again, parents rejected academics as being relevant during the kindergarten transition process, which aligned with the parent data collected from the FEIT-Modified Survey.

After data was collected from the SELTS-K, analyzed, and compared to the results obtained from the FEIT-Modified survey, it was determined that special education leaders' perceptions of parent priorities and concerns are not always accurate. Significant differences were determined to exist between special education leader perceptions of parent importance rankings for the following transition to kindergarten supports: having the WIU EI program hold a kindergarten transition preparation meeting in advance of the February transition meeting, having monthly contact from the child's early intervention

program to answer questions about the kindergarten transition process, and having a home visit from the child's kindergarten teacher before school starts. In these three areas, special education leaders reported that parents perceived these supports as being somewhat or extremely important when in reality, parents do not place much importance on these supports.

A comparison of special education leader and parent responses to potential concern areas for parents revealed more alignment than what was observed for the potential supports question. The three areas of concern that special education leaders reported were of the highest concern for parents: the child's behavior, the child's overall preparedness for kindergarten, and the child's ability to communicate their needs in the kindergarten setting. Of the three areas that special education leaders felt were the highest area of concern for parents, only the child's overall preparedness for kindergarten and the child's ability to communicate needs in the kindergarten setting corresponded to the actual highest level of concern ratings from parents. Statistical analysis revealed that a significant difference exists between the importance that special educators reported that parents place on their child's behavior and actual parental concern about that variable.

A high degree of variance was noted on the topic of a child's readiness for kindergarten between parent and special education leader responses to the question, "What does it mean for a child to be ready for kindergarten?" A child's overall preparedness for kindergarten was rated as a high concern area for parents by both the parent and special education leader group. However, these groups differed noticeably, especially in the areas of academics, following directions, and toilet training as being relevant to a child's readiness to attend kindergarten, as illustrated in Figure 15. A

majority of special education leaders (75%) referenced academics as being related to a child's readiness to attend kindergarten, whereas only 15% of parents surveyed felt the same about academics. Half (50%) of special education leaders reported toilet training as being part of the kindergarten readiness discussion, whereas only 19% of parent survey respondents reported the same. Finally, only 42% of special education leaders mentioned a child's ability to follow directions as being related to a child's readiness for kindergarten, whereas 67% of parent respondents reported the same.

The phrase "ready for kindergarten" is often used when discussing whether a parent will or will not send their child, with or without disabilities, to kindergarten "on time" and with their same-age peers. For parents of children with disabilities, the elements identified as relating to a child's "readiness" for kindergarten varied from those identified by special education leaders in some instances. It seems as though special education leaders place more emphasis on academics and toilet training when they describe what others are talking about when they refer to a child being "ready" for kindergarten than parents of children with special needs.

There is only one requirement for a child to attend kindergarten in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In Pennsylvania, a child must meet their school district's "minimum entry age for kindergarten, which may not be less than a chronological age of 4 years 7 months before the first day of the school term" in order to be eligible to attend kindergarten (Public School Code, 1949d). Compulsory education begins at age six in Pennsylvania, and although a child's attendance in kindergarten is not mandatory, there are no skill-based requirements for a child to attend. Quite interestingly, no one from either survey participant group referenced a child's age as being a relevant

factor associated with a child's readiness to attend kindergarten. It is possible that the age requirement, as being the only factor necessary to be established before a child can attend kindergarten, is still being overshadowed by child readiness-only models of kindergarten transition and influenced by the academicization of kindergarten. Basing the determination of "kindergarten readiness" for a child, with or without special needs, on the presence or absence of a particular skill or skill set "places the burden of proof on the child" (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1995). If we regard a child's transition into kindergarten as a process, as opposed to a single event in time, we may wish to contemplate the adoption of a more dynamic approach to supporting parents and their children, which includes consideration of the impact of family, peers, school, teachers, neighborhood, and community on the child as well as the effects of the child on the same in return. The impact of the interconnectedness of several factors on a child's development and learning competence is what may be the best predictor of success during the child's transition into kindergarten and beyond.

Summary

The desired outcome of this study was to gather, analyze, and summarize the data collected from various sources to better understand the perceptions and priorities of parents of preschool-age children with special needs throughout their child's transition from early intervention into school-age programming. The research design enabled the investigator to study the phenomena within a framework of scientific inquiry that enabled the establishment of valid results. The results obtained provide a deeper understanding of the perspectives of parents and practitioners and will support the development of better practices to support families and children.

Chapter IV described the collection of quantitative and qualitative data from two participant groups through the use of surveys and semi-structured. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to describe relationships among variables and to triangulate the data to enhance the validity of findings. Chapter V will present the conclusions of this study, derived from the results, along with limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER V

Conclusions and Recommendations

Special education leaders in early intervention programs and in school districts across Pennsylvania are required, by law, to support the transition of preschoolers with disabilities out of early intervention services and into school-age programming. Though Act 212 of 1990 in Pennsylvania outlines the legal requirements for early intervention programs and school districts to follow from a compliance perspective, such laws do not inform practitioners about how to support parents and children from a quality standpoint. One goal in wanting to find out more about what parents are thinking and feeling during this time of change for their child is to support the timely move out of children out of early intervention and into kindergarten. Pennsylvania's Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) provides the following guidance:

While parents have the option of having their child remain in Early Intervention when their child is eligible for kindergarten, it is incumbent on the IEP team to fully inform the parents of the advantages of transitioning to school-age programming with same-age peers (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2003).

The timely transition of preschoolers with special needs into school-age programming supports the exposure of the child to, in most instances, a longer instructional day with same-age peers while also avoiding a negative fiscal impact on the early intervention program.

Chapter III outlined the mixed methods research design, which was used to set the framework for the collection and analysis of data that ultimately answered three research

questions in this study. Chapter IV provided a detailed explanation of the data analysis methods used to analyze the data collected to arrive at a set of results. Twenty-seven parents of children with complex special needs eligible to go to kindergarten in the fall of 2023 completed a parent survey, and five parent participants agreed to be interviewed by the researcher. Twelve special education leaders from the WIU EI program and several school districts in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, completed the special education survey, and six agreed to be interviewed by the researcher. Data were collected during a finite period of time during the 2022-2022 school year. Statistical analyses and the collection of data from multiple sources through various question types supported the triangulation of data, which bolstered the validity of the study. Chapter V will present a discussion of the conclusions derived from the analyzed results, the limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

Conclusions

Each research question will be examined individually in this chapter to explore the findings that led to each conclusion related to the perceptions and priorities of parents, the viewpoints of special education leaders as they relate to what parents think are concerning and important, and the identification of those reported outcomes in the transition to kindergarten practices of the early intervention program and school districts.

Research Question One: What are the priorities of parents of children with complex special education needs throughout their child's transition from preschool early intervention to kindergarten?

The first research question aimed to determine what is most important to the parents of children with complex education needs throughout their child's transition out

of the WIU EI program and into kindergarten at one of the 17 school districts in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. This question was answered through the collection of survey and interview data from the parent participant group. Likert scale survey questions were divided into two sections: a section that asked parents to describe their level of concern about 11 potential variables as well as a section that asked parents to rank the importance of 12 potential supports for kindergarten transition. The concept of what it means for a child to be “ready” for kindergarten was explored through the inclusion of a short answer question on the parent survey as well as through a question asked during the parent interview. The parent interview protocol also included questions about what concerns parents have and about what is most important during this time of change for their child with special needs.

Results of this study indicated that parents have many concerns about their child transitioning out of preschool early intervention and into school-age programming, which is consistent with previous research on the topic (Fontil et al., 2020; Hacıbrahimoglu, 2022; Jewett et al., 1998; Larcombe et al., 2019). In this study, the five areas of highest concern to parents of children with complex special needs when they consider their child’s move out of early intervention and into kindergarten are: the preschool-age child’s ability to get used to a new school, the child’s overall preparedness for kindergarten, the child’s toilet training abilities, the child’s ability to communicate their needs in the kindergarten setting, and the child’s ability to ride the school bus. More than 80% of parents, who were surveyed, reported that they have either “Some concern” or “Many concerns” about their child’s overall preparedness for kindergarten, making this the parent’s highest area of overall concern. The second highest area of overall parental

concern regarding the preschool-age special education child's transition to kindergarten was concern about the child's ability to communicate their needs, followed closely by concerns about the child's toilet training skills. When parents were interviewed, the concern areas expressed by nearly half of the respondents included the child's ability to communicate. Other parents who were interviewed indicated they were most worried about their child's behavior as well as their child getting the necessary services to make continued progress.

This concept of parent concern was explored through a question on the survey that pertained to the reasoning behind a parent's decision to hold their child back from kindergarten and elect for the child to remain in early intervention for an additional year. Of the four parent survey respondents who indicated they were "Not likely" to send their child to kindergarten "on time" and with their same-age peers, three of them (75%) listed concerns with their child's communication skills as being the reason for their decision. The report of concern about a child's communication skills on the parent survey and during the parent interviews as well as its emergence as a reason for not sending a child to kindergarten "on time" and with same-age peers, clearly establishes it as one of the highest priorities and considerations for parents of preschoolers with complex special needs.

Data gathered pertaining to the importance of 12 potential kindergarten transition supports gave deeper insight into the perspectives of parents of preschoolers with complex special needs as these parents considered their child's transition out of early intervention and into school-age programming. Nearly all parents ranked attending the transition to kindergarten planning meeting and visiting the child's classroom before

kindergarten starts as being either “very” or “extremely” important. The importance of these two supports also emerged during the parent interviews. Over half of the respondents (60%) indicated that touring the school or kindergarten classroom would be a supportive measure for the school district to provide, positioning this variable as one of the most important supports that parents of children with complex special needs could be provided during their child’s transition out of early intervention and into kindergarten. One respondent to the parent survey referenced her child’s anxiety level as being an area in which she would welcome support. It is highly plausible that facilitating a tour of the elementary school or the kindergarten classroom for the parent and even the child in advance of school starting would help to decrease the anxiety level for her child and potentially others as well.

The importance of the February transition to kindergarten meeting to parents cannot be overstated, as evidenced by the results of this study. Aside from being ranked by nearly all respondents in the parent survey as being “very” or “extremely” important, 80% of parents interviewed mentioned the importance of being provided a clear overview of the transition process by the school district as well as being supported by the WIU EI program and the school district in contributing to a collaborative discussion about their child during the transition meeting.

Besides the substance of information discussed and the establishment of a collaborative climate at the February transition meetings, parents are also very interested in who is invited to attend the February transition meeting for their child. Over 80% of survey respondents ranked having the early intervention and the child’s potential kindergarten teacher in attendance at the February transition meeting as being either

“very” or “extremely” important, and some parents referenced the importance of having the child’s preschool early intervention teacher and kindergarten teacher there as well. Since the presence of these teachers was identified in both the survey and the interview data, they should be considered highly important supports for parents during this time of change for their children.

Though having a member of the child’s school district transition team observe the child, receiving correspondence from the child’s kindergarten teacher, attending kindergarten orientation activities with other incoming kindergarten students, and having the school district transition planning team conduct a full evaluation of the child were ranked by over 80% of parent survey respondents as either “very” or “extremely” important, they were not identified by parents during interviews conducted by the researcher. Their importance as supports to families, however, should not be overlooked.

When given the chance to answer the question about their greatest priorities during their child’s transition to kindergarten using an open-ended question format during the semi-structured interview, parents overwhelmingly provided answers that pertained to their child’s overall well-being and happiness. Interestingly, no parents reported academics as being a priority for them as they considered their child’s transition out of preschool early intervention and into school-age programming.

Research Question Two: What do preschool early intervention and school district special education leaders consider to be the concerns and priorities of parents of children with complex special needs as their children transition from preschool early intervention to kindergarten?

The second research question aimed to determine the perceptions of special education leaders from the early intervention program and school districts about the concerns and priorities of parents of children with complex special needs as their children transition from preschool early intervention to kindergarten. Survey and interview data were collected and statistically analyzed to determine the existence of a statistical significance in areas of concern and in areas of potential transitional supports.

Results indicated some overlap in reported concern areas for parents and those identified by special education leaders as also being concerning to parents. Over 90% of respondents to the special education leader survey perceived parents would have the highest level of concern about their child's ability to communicate, and over 80% of respondents referenced a child's overall preparedness for kindergarten as being highly concerning to parents. These results coincided with those reported by parents on the survey and interview instruments, which indicated a high degree of accuracy in the understanding of parent concerns by special education leaders for these two areas.

The third area of concern considered by over 90% of respondents on the special education survey to be highly concerning to parents of children with complex special needs on the cusp of their child's transition into kindergarten pertained to concern regarding the child's behavior, which was not identified on the parent survey as an area of high concern. Statistical analysis determined the existence of a significant relationship between the way in which special education leaders perceive the concern of parents about their child's behavior and the actual level of concern parents have about that variable.

In terms of special education leader understanding of the potential transitional supports that parents find important, statistically significant results were obtained for a

few of the areas listed on the survey. An explanation of the results in this area must begin with reference to a significant and noteworthy outcome from the special education leader survey. Of the 12 potential transitional supports that special education leaders were asked to give their perception of a parent's rating of importance, each distribution of responses was exactly the same. Of the 12 special education leader survey respondents, 11 of them rated each of the 12 supports a '5' which corresponds to an "Extremely important" rating. These twelve areas of support include the nine areas of support that parents found to be most important, as well as three additional areas. The additional areas of support are the early intervention program hosting a meeting about what to expect, receiving monthly contact from the child's early intervention teacher, and receiving a home visit from the child's kindergarten teacher. Inferential statistical analyses were performed on these three areas to determine if there was a statistical and significant difference in how parents reported the level of importance of each support and how special education leaders perceived parent ratings of importance. There was convincing evidence that there is a statistical and significant difference between how parents and special education leaders perceived the rating of importance in all three of the following areas: the early intervention program hosting a meeting about what to expect, receiving monthly contact from the child's early intervention teacher, and receiving a home visit from the child's kindergarten teacher.

The notion of a child's "readiness" for kindergarten was also explored in this study through survey and interview data collection of both participant groups. Parents were asked, through a short answer survey question, to share their ideas on the following: "In your own words, describe what it means for a child to be 'ready' for kindergarten."

Of the 27 parents who completed the FEIT-Modified survey, 18 respondents (67%) cited a child's ability to follow directions, nine respondents (33%) referenced the child's ability to interact socially with others, nine respondents (33%) referenced a child's ability to communicate effectively, five respondents (19%) referenced being toilet-trained, four respondents (15%) referenced a child's ability to appropriately regulate their emotions, four respondents (15%) referenced a child's academic as being integral to a child's kindergarten readiness. Interestingly, academics was rejected by all parent interview participants as an area to be associated with a child being "ready" for kindergarten, which stands in stark contrast to the answers provided by special education leader survey participants.

When posed the question: "Describe what people mean when they say a child is "ready" for kindergarten," 75% of special education leaders cited academics, which is highly discrepant from the 15% of parents who responded the same. In addition to the area of academics, notable discrepancies between what parents and special education leaders report about kindergarten readiness in children were also observed prominently in the areas of toilet training and following directions. For toilet training, a higher percentage of special education leaders associated the variable with kindergarten readiness (50%) than parents (19%), whereas a higher percentage of parents (67%) associated a child's ability to follow directions as being related to a child's readiness for kindergarten as opposed to a lower percentage of special education leaders (42%). When presented with a question that assumed the application of a child-centered model of kindergarten transition, parents of children with complex special needs and special education leaders appear to have differing perspectives about the conditions associated

with a child's readiness to go to kindergarten. Aside from one parent who listed their child's late summer birthday as being the reason for "not likely" sending the child to kindergarten "on time" and with same-aged peers, which was actually in response to a different question on the parent survey, no other participant from either group identified a child's age as being a factor related to a child's "readiness" to go to kindergarten. In Pennsylvania, a child's ability to meet the age requirement set by the school district is the only kindergarten "readiness" factor that needs to be met in order for a child to be eligible to attend kindergarten (Public School Code, 1949d). Although the wording of the questions pertaining to kindergarten "readiness" on the parent and the special education leader surveys may have contributed to answers that placed the responsibility for a successful kindergarten transition squarely on the shoulders of the child without any regard for action or planning on the part of the school teams, it would be fairly reasonable to conclude that elements inherent in the Child Effects Model of Transition, which was described in Chapter II, are still prevalent in the minds and in the perceptions of parents of children with special needs and special education leaders, who participated in this study.

Research Question Three: How are the reported priorities of parents of children with complex special education needs reflected in the transition to kindergarten practices of the WIU Early Intervention program and school districts in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania?

In this study, parents reported that attending the February transition to kindergarten meeting to discuss their child in a collaborative atmosphere and to receive information about the transition process from the school district is one of the two most

important supports. The other support, rated by nearly 100% of parent survey respondents, was touring the elementary school or the child's kindergarten classroom in advance of the start of school. The February transition meeting and an explanation of the *Notice of Options* by the school district are two of the three legally required transitional supports required by Act 212 of 1990 (Public School Code, 1949d; Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2022d). In this regard, the WIU EI program, which is responsible for coordinating the transition to kindergarten meeting, and all 17 school districts in Westmoreland County are clearly reflecting the reported priorities of parents of children with complex special needs throughout the transition to kindergarten process.

Fiscal Implications

While other potential transitional supports reported by parents as being “very” or “extremely” important may be provided by the WIU EI program or school districts on an occasional basis, they are not provided consistently in all instances. In some cases, the reason for failure to implement might be based on a resource or fiscal restraint. For example, over the past two years, the WIU EI program has made a strong effort to include the child's preschool early intervention teacher as a participant in the February transition meeting. Priority for attendance at a February transition meeting is given for the cases of children with the most complex and involved needs. However, staffing challenges and the lack of substitute teachers have made the provision of this support for all cases difficult to provide. Certainly, the advent of virtual meetings has alleviated this burden somewhat by permitting the early intervention teacher to attend the February transition meeting remotely, yet there are still scheduling and lingering staffing challenges in implementing this support program-wide at this time. Attendance of the

child's potential kindergarten meeting at the February transition meeting presents similar challenges for a school district. Without a substitute teacher to "cover" that teacher's class, it would be a challenge for that teacher to attend the February meeting. Even if a substitute teacher could be secured, the added expense of such a support may create a fiscal challenge for some districts. Even if special education leaders better understood that more is needed to maximally support parents of children with special needs upon the transition into kindergarten and out of early intervention, staffing, and fiscal challenges may impose a barrier to their implementation. For the WIU EI program, it is fiscally advantageous for children to transition to kindergarten "on time" and with same-age peers. Any cost associated with securing additional staff to provide coverage during the February transition meetings should be weighed against the unrealized subsidies for the provision of special education supports and services to these children.

Recommendations

"Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better" (Angelou, 2023). It is likely the fervent hope of all researchers that the findings revealed through scientific study and inquiry will serve to positively inform practice within one's field of study. This research project is no different in that regard, as potential recommendations for future practice on this topic are discussed.

While some supports may be more challenging and costly to implement, there may be others that are more feasible, especially in the short term. One strategy for the consideration of changes to the transition to kindergarten process for either the WIU EI program or school districts might be to examine the relationships that exist between concerns and supports that were revealed through this study. Connecting reported areas

of highest concern for parents and the supports that parents rated as most important could be one immediate and highly effective way that schools could support parents of children with complex needs through this time of change. For example, the variable “getting used to a new school” was one of the five areas of highest reported concern by parents in this study when they considered their child’s transition out of early intervention and into kindergarten. Touring the elementary school and seeing the child’s kindergarten classroom in advance of school starting was ranked by almost all of the parent survey respondents as being “very” or “extremely” important. If school districts decided to offer a tour of the school and of the child’s kindergarten room before school starts, the concern could be alleviated, and the support provided. Before this study, it is possible that the special education leaders in Westmoreland County working in both the WIU EI program and in school districts may not have fully understood the deep importance of touring the elementary school and seeing the child’s kindergarten classroom before school starts is for parents of children with complex special needs. It is just one example of how the insights gained from this study could shape the transition to kindergarten practices for the benefit of children and their families.

On the topic of concerns, it is extremely important that special education leaders understand how deeply concerned parents are concerned about their child’s ability to communicate and their child’s overall preparedness for kindergarten as consideration is given to future practices. It is vitally important that the WIU EI program continues to support the communication needs of its students from the time of the child’s entry into the program until the child’s transition to kindergarten. Already, the WIU EI program places the establishment of a functional system of communication for each child with

special needs as one of its highest priorities. Results of this study emphasize the need for a continued commitment in this area from early interventionists, early childhood teachers, parents, and early intervention leaders as well as the continued partnership with school district special education leaders to share information about the child's system of communication to maximize support to parents in this area and to promote the success of the child in kindergarten.

The deep concern expressed by parents about their child's overall preparedness for kindergarten in this study cannot be overlooked as current practices are examined, and future ones are developed. A more comprehensive understanding of what it means for a child to be "ready," or prepared, for kindergarten was gained by asking parents what that concept meant to them. Overwhelmingly, parents rejected academics as being important to a child being "ready" for kindergarten on the survey as well as during the interviews, which stood in stark contrast to the answers provided by special education leaders. Similarly, while half of the special education leaders surveyed associated toilet training with a child's "readiness" for kindergarten, a minority of parents reported the same. It should be noted, however, that toilet training was ranked as one of the top five concerns by parents in the survey, which should not be overlooked. Even though it appears as though parents are concerned about this variable as their child approaches the transition to kindergarten, the parents in this study did not associate toilet training with contributing to a child's "readiness" to go to kindergarten. As special education leaders participate in discussions with parents during the February transition meetings, they may wish to consider the inclusion of information about how the child would be supported in this regard and avoid any perception of conveying to parents that a child's ability to use the

restroom independently would prevent, or make undesirable, a child's transition into kindergarten.

Limitations

Although mixed methods research designs draw strength from the integration of quantitative as well as qualitative data, there are limitations to any research study, and this one is no different. In this study, a parent survey was sent to 167 parents of children receiving two or more special education services from the WIU EI program; however, only 27 parents completed it. This limited sample, which represented a 6% return rate, was well below what was hoped for by the researcher. Of the 27 who completed the survey, only five parents consented to and completed an interview with the researcher. Although the participation rates for the special education leader survey and the interview were more robust, the representation of leaders from all 17 school districts was not reached. Small sample sizes in research studies can prevent the generalization of the results to the larger population and can negatively impact the detection of statistical differences between variables.

Another limitation of this study is found in the phrasing of some of the survey and interview questions. Although the FEIT-Modified survey was based on an instrument used in research by Dr. Laura Lee McIntyre and colleagues, the SELTS-K had been developed by the researcher and used for the first time in this study. In addition, the wording of the question pertaining to kindergarten readiness in children was worded slightly differently on the parent survey than it was on the special education survey, which could have skewed the results when the two sets of responses were compared. In addition, the wording of the kindergarten readiness question on both surveys could have

predisposed participants to provide answers reflective of the Child Effects Model of Transition, which may or may not form the basis of ideas about kindergarten readiness for children with complex special needs in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania.

Recommendations for Future Research

The topic of study under investigation in this mixed methods research study should be examined further with a larger sample to verify the validity of the results. Beyond replication of the findings contained within this study, this inquiry has prompted ideas about future study in this area. Perspectives about kindergarten readiness in children were explored with parents of children with complex special needs and special education leaders in this study. Although many child characteristics were identified by both groups, parents in this study also identified areas of concern and categories of important supports for the kindergarten transition process, which suggests acknowledgment of the Indirect Effects Model for Transition, a more dynamic approach to conceptualizing the process of kindergarten transition. Future study could include the interaction of several components and the influence of each on the other. This study was designed to collect data from two participant groups before the February kindergarten transition meetings were held. Much information was gained about the supports that parents conjectured would be important to them before any were actually provided. Future studies could survey parents about the helpfulness of the list of supports provided by the WIU EI program or the child's school district. The transition of a child with special needs "on time" and alongside same-age peers was another aspect of this study. When students remain in the WIU EI program, a negative fiscal impact is borne by the program. It may be of interest to conduct research with the parents of the children who

remain in the WIU EI program beyond the year in which the child is eligible to attend kindergarten to find out more about the perspectives and priorities of this group. By design, these parents were excluded from participation in this study so that the results obtained would represent the priorities and perspectives of parents of children with complex special needs who were never before eligible to attend kindergarten.

Summary

Special education leaders from early intervention programs and school districts are legally required to support the transition to kindergarten process for preschoolers with disabilities. Families of children with special needs experience many educational transitions, and children with special needs are at risk for experiencing challenges during the transition from early intervention into school-age programming. In Pennsylvania, parents can elect for their child with special needs to remain in early intervention for an additional year, despite the child being age-eligible to attend kindergarten in their school district. OCDEL encourages members of IEP teams to inform families of the benefits of having children with special needs transition to kindergarten alongside same-age peers, which includes equitable access to a longer instructional day in most cases and membership in an educational environment with more opportunities for learning. Early intervention programs do not receive subsidies for the provision of legally mandated special education services for children of eligible kindergarten age; therefore, the timely transition of children to kindergarten is fiscally important to programs. Parents of children with special needs report a specific set of worries than parents of typically developing children when the topic of kindergarten transition is studied. If special education leaders better understood the specific concerns and priorities of parents and

could design practices and procedures to maximally support families and children, the critical transition from early intervention into kindergarten could be enhanced, and the educational success of the child supported, potentially, for years to come.

Chapter I of this study provided an overview of why studying the priorities of parents of children with special needs is integral to developing transition to kindergarten practices that are highly supportive to parents and children. Chapter II presented a comprehensive review of the literature related to the topic under investigation and necessary to guide practice. Chapter III offered an overview of the study's methodology, which included a description of the participants, setting, research plan, research design, data collection methods, and the fiscal implications of the project. Chapter IV included an in-depth description of the data analysis process, including the results obtained from a variety of data sources and the interpretation of the data as well as a summary of findings. Chapter V presented the conclusions, a description of how the findings of this study can be applied to practice, the limitations of this study, and suggestions for future research into the topic of transition to kindergarten for preschoolers with complex special needs. In summary, this research revealed significant and factual information about the perceptions and priorities of parents of children with complex special needs throughout the transition from early intervention programming into kindergarten. Rather than relying on one's own speculation about what might be important to the parents of preschool children with complex special needs as they prepare for their child's entry into school-age programming, special education leaders can now be more assured of how parents really feel about the process and use the results to potentially design new or to revise

existing kindergarten transition practices that are specifically tailored to meet the identified needs of parents during this very important transition in the life of their child.

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APPENDIX A



Institutional Review Board
250 University Avenue
California, PA 15419
instreviewboard@calu.edu
Melissa Sovak, Ph.D.

Dear Denise,

Please consider this email as official notification that your proposal titled “The Priorities and Perceptions of Families of Preschool Age Children with Complex Special Needs Throughout the Transition to Kindergarten Process” (Proposal #PW22-018) has been approved by the Pennsylvania Western University Institutional Review Board as submitted.

The effective date of approval is 09/06/2022 and the expiration date is 09/05/2023. These dates must appear on the consent form.

Please note that Federal Policy requires that you notify the IRB promptly regarding any of the following:

- (1) Any additions or changes in procedures you might wish for your study (additions or changes must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented)
- (2) Any events that affect the safety or well-being of subjects
- (3) Any modifications of your study or other responses that are necessitated by any events reported in (2).
- (4) To continue your research beyond the approval expiration date of 09/05/2023, you must file additional information to be considered for continuing review. Please contact instreviewboard@calu.edu

Please notify the Board when data collection is complete.

Regards,

Melissa Sovak, PhD.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX B

Dear Denise,

Thank you for your outreach. Your research sounds important and timely. Feel free to use the Family Experiences and Involvement in Transition (FEIT) survey. I've attached a copy. You may modify the measure or use "as is". Please simply just cite the original source of the measure:

McIntyre, L. L., Eckert, T. L., Fiese, B. H., DiGennaro, F. D., & Wildenger, L. K. (2007). The transition to kindergarten: Family experiences and involvement. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 35, 83–88. DOI: 10.1007/s10643-007-0175-6

Good luck with your research!

Best,
Laura Lee

Laura Lee McIntyre | Interim Dean & Castle-McIntosh-Knight Professor (she/her)

University of Oregon | College of Education

230 Hedco Education Building | Eugene, OR 97403-1215

llmcinty@uoregon.edu | <https://education.uoregon.edu>

APPENDIX C

Parent Email/Consent to Participate Form – FEIT (Modified) Survey

Dear Parent,

You know me as the administrator for your child’s early intervention program at the Westmoreland Intermediate Unit. I am also a doctoral student at Pennsylvania Western University (formerly California University of Pennsylvania) and am conducting a research study titled “**The Priorities and Perceptions of Families of Preschool Age Children with Complex Special Needs Throughout the Transition to Kindergarten Process.**” Outcomes of this research will potentially assist special education leaders in early intervention programs and in school districts in developing a more comprehensive understanding of how to best support parents of children receiving early intervention services as the transition to kindergarten process approaches and unfolds.

You are being contacted because your child is eligible to transition to kindergarten in the fall of 2023. I am interested in finding out more about your priorities and perceptions surrounding your child’s upcoming transition out of early intervention and into kindergarten, which will unfold as the 2022-2023 school year progresses. **Even if you are unsure about whether you will send your child to kindergarten next fall, you are still welcome and eligible to participate in this survey.**

Within this study, you will be asked to participate in a survey that is collected via Google Forms and will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. You will be asked basic demographic questions along with several multiple-choice, rank order, and Likert Scale questions in which you will rate answers along a scale of 1 to 5 related to your priorities and perceptions of the transition to kindergarten process for your child.

If you are willing to share your perspective and insight, please follow the link below to answer the survey questions. Your contribution is a critical part of the data collection. While you will not benefit directly from participating in the study, information that is gathered may be of value to the Westmoreland Intermediate Unit and to the school districts in our county. The risks associated with participating are minimal. There are no physical or mental risks from participating in this study and every attempt will be made to protect your privacy. While I may present the results of the research as a published study and potentially in journals or periodicals, your name and other identifying information will remain confidential. The study will not cost you anything to participate in and there will not be direct compensation for participating. You should feel empowered to make an informed decision and are able to discuss and ask the researcher any questions you may have.

Remember, consent to participate is voluntary. If you do not wish to participate, you are not obligated to complete the survey and you are able to stop participating at any time without explanation or penalty.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Denise Lohr at KNE1153@pennwest.edu or 724-219-2312 or Pennsylvania Western University Professor, Dr. Keruskin at keruskin@pennwest.edu. This research has been approved by the Pennsylvania Western University Institutional Review Board. This approval is effective 09/06/2022 and expires 09/05/2023. By clicking on this link, you are indicating your agreement to participate and permit the use of data collected through the survey: <https://forms.gle/n4ch2M87qncy2XEH7>

Sincerely,
Denise Lohr, M.A., CCC-SLP
Early Childhood Services Administrator
Westmoreland Intermediate Unit

APPENDIX D

Family Experiences and Involvement in Transition (FEIT) Survey - Modified*

This survey will provide early intervention and school district special education leaders valuable insights about the priorities and perceptions of parents surrounding the transition to kindergarten process. Parents of children with special needs, who are receiving multiple early intervention services from the Westmoreland Intermediate Unit's Early Intervention program and who are eligible to transition to kindergarten in the fall of 2023 are welcome and encouraged to complete this survey. *This survey has been modified from its original version and used with permission from Dr. Laura Lee McIntyre of the University of Oregon.

Section 1: Demographics & Background Information

Description (optional)

What is your child's date of birth (month, day, year)? *

Month, day, year



What is your child's gender? *

Female

Male

What kinds of services is your child currently receiving from the Westmoreland Intermediate Unit's Early Intervention program? Please check all that apply. *

- Specialized Instruction ("Developmental" services)
- Speech-language services
- Occupational therapy services
- Physical therapy services
- Vision services
- Hearing support services
- Nursing services
- Personal care assistant (PCA) services
- Transportation services
- Social work services
- Other...

What is your child's race? *

1. White
2. Black or African American
3. American Indian or Alaskan Native
4. Asian
5. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
6. Prefer not to say

What is your child's ethnic background? *

1. Non-Hispanic/Non-Latino
2. Hispanic/Latino
3. Prefer not to say

Is English the primary language spoken in your child's home? *

1. Yes
2. No

What type of early childhood educational program is your child enrolled in currently? *

- WIU7 Early Childhood Special Education Classroom
- Community Preschool (not Pre-K Counts or Head Start)
- Pre-K Counts Preschool Program
- Head Start Preschool Program
- Daycare (center-based or in-home)
- A combination of a WIU ESCE classroom and a typical preschool program (i.e., community preschool, Pr...
- My child does not currently attend an early childhood educational program.
- Other...

Please share how concerned you are about each of the following areas as you think about your child transitioning to kindergarten. *

	No Concerns	A few concerns	Some concerns	Many concerns
Academics (e.g., knowing the alphabet)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Behavior (e.g., tantrums)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Following directions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Getting along with other children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Getting along with the teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Getting used to a new school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Child being ready for kindergarten	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Separating from family	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Toilet training	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ability to communicate needs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Riding a school bus	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

In your own words, describe what it means for a child to be "ready for kindergarten." *

Long answer text

Section 2: Priorities and Supports in Transition Planning

In January 2023, you will receive an invitation to a transition to kindergarten meeting between the early intervention program and your child's school district. That meeting will take place in February 2023. Please share how important the following supports are to you in the months preceeding that meeting, during the meeting, and after the meeting by answering the questions in Section 2.

Please use the following KEY when rating the importance of each support: **1=Not important; 2=Slightly important; 3=Neutral; 4=Very important; 5=Extremely important.**

How important is it to you for the early intervention program to host a meeting for parents about what to expect during the transition to kindergarten process sometime before the February 2023 transition meeting? *

1 2 3 4 5

Not important Extremely important

How important is it to you to receive monthly contact from your child's early intervention teacher to answer any questions you may have about transition to kindergarten? *

1 2 3 4 5

Not important Extremely important

How important is it to you to attend the transition to kindergarten meeting with representatives from the WIU early intervention program and your child's school district that will take place in February 2023? *

1 2 3 4 5

Not important Extremely important

How important is it to you that your child's early intervention teacher attend the transition meeting with your child's school district in February 2023? *

1 2 3 4 5

Not important Extremely important

How important is it to you for your child's potential kindergarten teacher to attend the transition meeting between the early intervention program and the school district in February 2023? *

1 2 3 4 5

Not important Extremely important

How important is it to you to receive information about how to register your child for kindergarten during the transition to kindergarten meeting in February 2023? *

1 2 3 4 5

Not important Extremely important

How important is it to you for a member of your child's school district transition team to observe your child in their early childhood educational setting sometime during the spring of 2023? *

1 2 3 4 5

Not important Extremely important

How important is it to you for your school district transition planning team to conduct a full evaluation of your child sometime **after** the February meeting but **before** school starts to determine your child's strengths and needs? *

1 2 3 4 5

Not important Extremely important

How important is it to you to visit your child's kindergarten classroom and/or elementary school with your child sometime before kindergarten starts? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely important

How important is it to you to receive correspondence from your child's kindergarten teacher (phone call, email) sometime before kindergarten starts? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely important

How important is it to you to receive a home visit from your child's kindergarten teacher sometime before kindergarten starts? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely important

How important is it to you for you and your child to attend kindergarten orientation activities with other incoming kindergarten students and their families sometime before kindergarten starts? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely important

At this moment, how likely are you to send your child to kindergarten in the fall of 2023? **1=Not likely; 2=Somewhat likely; 3=Undecided; 4=Very likely; 5=Extremely likely** *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not likely	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely likely

If you are "not likely" to send your child to kindergarten in the fall of 2023, please share why in the space provided below:

Long answer text

In what school district does your child reside? *

1. Belle Vernon Area School District
2. Burrell School District
3. Derry Area School District
4. Franklin-Regional School District
5. Greater Latrobe School District
6. Hempfield Area School District
7. Jeannette City School District
8. Kiski Area School District
9. Ligonier Valley School District
10. Monessen City School District
11. Mount Pleasant Area School District
12. New-Kensington Arnold School District
13. Norwin School District
14. Penn-Trafford School District
15. Southmoreland School District
16. Yough School District
17. I prefer not to say.

Section 3: Next steps - Interview Opportunity

Description (optional)

If you are willing to participate in a virtual interview with the researcher following submission of this survey to convey more of your thoughts about the transition to kindergarten process, please provide your email address on the line below. I sincerely appreciate your consideration. Thank you!

Short answer text
.....**Section 4: Parting Thoughts**

Description (optional)

Please provide any additional information that you would like to share about your child and the transition to kindergarten process.

Long answer text
.....

APPENDIX E**Parent Consent to Participate Form – Semi-Structured Interview**

Dear Parent,

You indicated interest in participating in a virtual interview regarding the transition to kindergarten process. Your participation in this study will help the researcher learn more about how parents of preschool age children with complex special education needs perceive the transition out of early intervention and into kindergarten for their child as well as their priorities throughout the process.

If you agree to participate in this interview, you will be asked to join a virtual Zoom meeting with the researcher. The researcher will ask you detailed questions about your priorities and perceptions surrounding your child's transition out of early intervention and into kindergarten.

All interviews will be conducted in the researcher's virtual Zoom office. Participants will be asked permission to record the virtual interview to support the researcher's ability to review collected information at a later time and to ease the burden of transcribing answers "in the moment."

Participants may decline recording of the interview or request that the recording end at any time during the interview with the researcher. All recordings will be deleted at the conclusion of the study. Interviews are expected to last approximately 30-60 minutes each.

Your participation is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time by notifying the researcher. There will be no penalty if you choose not to participate. The researcher will not ask you why you opted to withdraw. There are minimal risks to this study. You will not be asked questions of a sensitive nature. The interview questions may make you feel uncomfortable as some people do not like to volunteer information/feedback that could be perceived as negative or complaining. However, participants are reminded that they are not required to answer any questions of which they choose.

Participants can also stop their participation at any time without question. Interview responses collected will be kept confidential, which means only the researcher will see or have access to the data. Your responses are anonymous. No names or other identifying information will be reported in the report of the findings. Data will be stored on a secure server and will be password-protected.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will assist the researcher in better understanding the priorities and perceptions of parents of early intervention students with complex special education needs as the transition to kindergarten process approaches and unfolds.

If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher, Denise Lohr, at KNE1153@pennwest.edu or at 724-219-2312. If you would like to speak with someone other than the researcher, please contact Dr. Todd Keruskin, who is a professor at Pennsylvania Western University at keruskin@pennwest.edu.

_____ I agree to participate in the interview. I give consent for the researcher to record the interview. I understand that the recording will be deleted at the conclusion of the study.

_____ I agree to participate in the interview. I do not give consent for the researcher to record the interview.

_____ I do not agree to participate in the interview.

APPENDIX F**Semi-Structured Interview Questions - Parent**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The answers you provide will help special education leaders to better understand parents' perceptions, needs and concerns as their children with complex special education needs transition out of preschool early intervention services and into kindergarten. Your anonymity will be preserved, and you will be able to obtain a copy of this interview record if you choose. You may stop this interview at any time without question by the researcher. The risks assumed by participating in this study are minimal. You may decline to answer any question(s) that you so choose.

1. Your child has been receiving preschool early intervention services with the Westmoreland Intermediate Unit's Early Intervention program. Tell me about your child and his/her needs.
2. Your child is eligible to go to kindergarten next fall. How do you feel about that?
3. In your own words, describe what it means for a child to be "ready for kindergarten."
4. You will be invited to a transition meeting in February between the early intervention program and your child's school district. Talk about how the early intervention program could support you in the months leading up to your child's transition to kindergarten meeting in February. How could the early intervention program support you and your child during the transition meeting? After the transition meeting (March-August)?
5. Talk about how your child's school district could support you during the transition meeting in February. How could your child's school district support you and your child after the transition meeting (March-August)?
6. What is your greatest concern when you think about your child going to kindergarten? Why?
7. Will you send your child to kindergarten in the fall of 2023? Why or why not?
8. What is your greatest priority when you think about your child transitioning out of early intervention services and into kindergarten? How could the early intervention program support you in this regard? How could your child's school district support you in this regard?

APPENDIX G**Special Education Leader Email/Consent to Participate Form – Special Education Leader Transition Survey-Kindergarten (SELTS-K)**

Dear Special Education Leader,

I am a doctoral student at Pennsylvania Western University (formerly California University of Pennsylvania) and am conducting a research study titled “**The Priorities and Perceptions of Families of Preschool Age Children with Complex Special Education Needs Throughout the Transition to Kindergarten Process.**” For my research, a child with “complex special education needs” is a child who is receiving more than one service in the early intervention program. Outcomes of this research will potentially assist special education leaders in developing a more comprehensive understanding of how to best support parents of children receiving early intervention services as the transition to kindergarten process approaches and unfolds.

You are being contacted because part of my research involves comparing what parents think and feel about the transition to kindergarten process to the perceptions and opinions of special education leaders, such as yourself. I will also compare what parents feel is important during kindergarten transition with the practices in place in many of our school districts in the county to find out how much of what parents need is actually reflected in our practices as special education leaders. Therefore, I am very interested in finding out more about your insights surrounding the transition of students out of early intervention and into your school district.

Within this portion of the study, you will be asked to participate in a survey that is collected via Google Forms and will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. You will be asked basic professional questions along with several multiple-choice, rank order, and Likert Scale questions in which you will rate answers along a scale of 1 to 5 related to your perceptions and insights about what parents of children with complex special education needs feel is most important during their child’s transition out of early intervention and into kindergarten.

If you are willing to share your perspective and insight, please follow the link below to answer the survey questions. Your contribution is a critical part of the data collection. While you will not benefit directly from participating in the study, information that is gathered may be of value to the Westmoreland Intermediate Unit and to the school districts in our county. The risks associated with participating are minimal. There are no physical or mental risks from participating in this study and every attempt will be made to protect your privacy. While I may present the results of the research as a published study and potentially in journals or periodicals, your name and other identifying information will remain confidential. The study will not cost you anything to participate in and there will not be direct compensation for participating. You should feel empowered to make an informed decision and are able to discuss and ask the researcher any questions you may have.

Remember, consent to participate is voluntary. If you do not wish to participate, you are not obligated to complete the survey and you are able to stop participating at any time without explanation or penalty. If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Denise Lohr at KNE1153@pennwest.edu or 724-219-2312 or Pennsylvania Western University Professor, Dr. Keruskin at keruskin@pennwest.edu. This research has been approved by the Pennsylvania Western University Institutional Review Board. This approval is effective 09/06/2022 and expires 09/05/2023. By clicking on this link, you are indicating your agreement to participate and permit the use of data collected through the survey: <https://forms.gle/g8htt2nDWcaefjyP9>

Sincerely,

Denise Lohr, M.A., CCC-SLP
Early Childhood Services Administrator
Westmoreland Intermediate Unit

APPENDIX H

Special Education Leader Transition Survey - Kindergarten (SELTS-K)

Thank you for participating in this survey. Outcomes of this research will potentially assist special education leaders in developing a more comprehensive understanding of how to best support parents of children receiving early intervention services as the transition to kindergarten process approaches and unfolds.

I have been in my current position for: *

1. Less than 1 year
2. 1-4 years
3. 5-9 years
4. 10-14 years
5. 15-19 years
6. 20 or more years

I have been in my current position for: *

1. Less than 1 year
2. 1-4 years
3. 5-9 years
4. 10-14 years
5. 15-19 years
6. 20 or more years

Which of the following best describes your job title? *

- Student Services Director
- Special Education Director
- Early Intervention Supervisor
- Early Intervention Service Coordinator
- School Psychologist
- School Counselor
- Other: _____

For this study, "complex special education needs" is defined as receiving two or more service types from the early intervention program. *

When parents of children with complex special education needs think about their child going to kindergarten, how concerned are they about the areas listed below?

	No Concerns	A few concerns	Some concerns	Many concerns
Academics (e.g., knowing the alphabet)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Behavior (e.g., tantrums)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Following directions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Getting along with other children	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Getting along with the teacher	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Getting used to a new school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Child being ready for kindergarten	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Separating from family	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Toilet training	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ability to communicate needs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Riding a school bus	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Describe what you think people mean when they say that a child is "ready for kindergarten." *

Your answer _____

Section 2: Priorities and Supports in Transition Planning

Please

share how important you think the following supports are for parents of children with complex special education needs throughout the transition to kindergarten process.

Please use the following KEY when rating the importance of each support: **1=Not important; 2=Slightly important; 3=Neutral; 4=Very important; 5=Extremely important.**

How important is it for the early intervention program to host a meeting for parents to discuss what should be expected during the transition to kindergarten process? *

Not important 1 2 3 4 5 Extremely important

How important is it for parents to attend the transition to kindergarten planning meeting that will take place in February 2023 with representatives from the WIU early intervention program and your school district? *

Not important 1 2 3 4 5 Extremely important

How important is it for the child's early intervention teacher to be in attendance at *
the February 2023 transition to kindergarten meeting at your school district?

1 2 3 4 5
Not important Extremely important

How important is it for the child's potential kindergarten teacher to attend the *
February 2023 transition to kindergarten meeting at your school district?

1 2 3 4 5
Not important Extremely important

How important is it for a member of your school district transition team to, at *
some point after the February transition meeting, observe the child in their current
early childhood educational setting?

1 2 3 4 5
Not important Extremely important

How important is it for your school district transition planning team to conduct a full evaluation of the child before school starts to determine the child's strengths and needs? *

1 2 3 4 5
Not important Extremely important

How important is it for parents of children with complex special education needs to visit the child's kindergarten classroom and/or elementary school along with their child sometime before kindergarten starts? *

1 2 3 4 5
Not important Extremely important

How important is it for parents of children with complex special education needs to receive correspondence from their child's kindergarten teacher (phone call, email) sometime before kindergarten starts? *

1 2 3 4 5
Not important Extremely important

How important is it to tailor transition to kindergarten processes and practices to meet the needs and priorities of parents of children with complex special education needs? *

1 2 3 4 5

Not important Extremely important

How often do you feel that your school district's transition to kindergarten processes and practices successfully address the concerns and meet the priorities of parents of children with complex special education needs? *

KEY: 1=Never; 2=Rarely; 3=Occasionally; 4=Often; 5=Always

1 2 3 4 5

Never Always

If you could change something about your school district's transition to kindergarten process in order to improve it in some way, what would you change? How could the intermediate unit help you in this regard? *

Your answer _____

:::

What school district or early intervention program do you represent? *

1. Belle Vernon Area School District
2. Burrell School District
3. Derry Area School District
4. Franklin-Regional School District
5. Greater Latrobe School District
6. Greensburg-Salem School District
7. Hempfield Area School District
8. Jeannette City School District
9. Kiski Area School District
10. Ligonier Valley School District
11. Monessen City School District
12. Mount Pleasant Area School District
13. New-Kensington Arnold School District
14. Norwin School District
15. Penn-Trafford School District
16. Southmoreland School District
17. Yough School District
18. WIU 7 Early Intervention program
19. I prefer not to say.

Section 3: Next Steps: Interview Opportunity

If you are willing to participate in a virtual interview with the researcher following submission of this survey to convey more of your thoughts about the transition to kindergarten process, please provide your email address on the line below. I sincerely appreciate your consideration. Thank you!

Your answer _____

Section 4: Parting Thoughts

Please provide any additional information that you would like to share about the transition to kindergarten process in the space provided below. Thank you!

Your answer _____

APPENDIX I**Special Education Leader Consent to Participate Form – Semi-Structured Interview**

Dear Special Education Leader,

You indicated interest in participating in a virtual interview regarding the transition to kindergarten process in your school district or early intervention program. Your participation in this study will help the researcher learn more about how parents of preschool age children with complex special education needs perceive the transition out of early intervention and into kindergarten for their child as well as to learn more about their priorities throughout the process. This study will also explore how accurately special education leaders understand the concerns and priorities of parents of preschool age children with complex special education needs as those parents consider their child's entry into kindergarten.

If you agree to participate in this interview, you will be asked to join a virtual Zoom meeting with the researcher. The researcher will ask you detailed questions about your insights into the transition to kindergarten process.

All interviews will be conducted in the researcher's virtual Zoom office. Participants will be asked permission to record the virtual interview to support the researcher's ability to review collected information at a later time and to ease the burden of transcribing answers "in the moment." Participants may decline recording of the interview or request that the recording end at any time during the interview with the researcher. All recordings will be deleted at the conclusion of the study. Interviews are expected to last approximately 30-60 minutes each.

Your participation is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time by notifying the researcher. There will be no penalty if you choose not to participate. The researcher will not ask you why you opted to withdraw. There are minimal risks to this study. You will not be asked questions of a sensitive nature. The interview questions may make you feel uncomfortable as some people do not like to volunteer information/feedback that could be perceived as negative or complaining. However, participants are reminded that they are not required to answer any questions of which they choose.

Participants can also stop their participation at any time without question. Interview responses collected will be kept confidential, which means only the researcher will see or have access to the data. Your responses are anonymous. No names or other identifying information will be reported in the report of the findings. Data will be stored on a secure server and will be password-protected.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will assist the researcher in better understanding the how special education leaders view the transition to kindergarten process and how well they understand the concerns and priorities of parents of children with complex special education needs.

If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher, Denise Lohr, at KNE1153@pennwest.edu or at 724-219-2312. If you would like to speak with someone other than the researcher, please contact Dr. Todd Keruskin, who is a professor at Pennsylvania Western University at keruskin@pennwest.edu.

_____ I agree to participate in the interview. I give consent for the researcher to record the interview. I understand that the recording will be deleted at the conclusion of the study.

_____ I agree to participate in the interview. I do not give consent for the researcher to record the interview.

_____ I do not agree to participate in the interview.

APPENDIX J**Semi-Structured Interview Questions - Special Education Leader**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Your participation in this study will help the researcher learn more about how parents of preschool age children with complex special education needs perceive the transition out of early intervention and into kindergarten for their child as well as to learn more about their priorities throughout the process. This study will also explore how accurately special education leaders understand the concerns and priorities of those same parents when those consider their child's departure from early intervention services and prepare for entry into kindergarten. Your anonymity will be preserved, and you will be able to obtain a copy of this interview record if you choose.

1. What led you to pursue a career in special education leadership? For how long have you worked in special education leadership? For how long have you served in your current role?
2. What is the most rewarding part of your job? The least?
3. Tell me about the relationships that you already have with parents of children with complex special education needs in grades kindergarten through grade 3 (K-3) in your district. So in other words, with the families of children who have recently (in the past 3 years) transitioned from early intervention and into kindergarten. Describe how you built those relationships? What were the challenges?
4. What do you feel concerns parents the most when they think about their child with special needs going to kindergarten?
5. What are the priorities of parents of children with complex special needs during the transition to kindergarten process? In other words, what are the things that are most important to these parents?
6. What is the most important thing for parents to know as their child with complex special needs approaches that point of transitioning out of early intervention services and into your school district?
7. What is the most important thing for parents to do as their child with complex special needs approaches that point of transitioning out of early intervention services and into your school district?
8. How do you think your district's process for transition to kindergarten aligns with what you feel families need? What would you change (if anything) about the process?
9. Talk about the challenges that you encounter with parents of incoming kindergarten students with complex special education needs? What are your ideas about ways to overcome those challenges? How can the intermediate unit assist you in this regard?
10. Describe the rewards you gain as a result of working with parents of incoming kindergarten students with complex special needs? What about the process, if anything, makes you feel as though you have made a positive difference for children and their families?
11. How could the early intervention program further assist you and your school district during the transition to kindergarten process?
12. Please add any additional information that you would like to share.