University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Public Access Theses and Dissertations from the College of Education and Human Sciences

Education and Human Sciences, College of (CEHS)

Summer 7-29-2011

A Qualitative Study of Nebraska Sixpence Program Directors' Experiences and Perceptions

Katherine E. Hauptman
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, katehauptman@aol.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cehsdiss

Part of the Other Education Commons

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF NEBRASKA SIXPENCE PROGRAM DIRECTORS'

EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS

by

Katherine E. Hauptman

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Science

Major: Child, Youth, and Family Studies

Under the Supervision of Professor Helen Raikes

Lincoln, Nebraska

August, 2011

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF NEBRASKA SIXPENCE PROGRAM DIRECTORS'

EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS

Katherine E. Hauptman M.S.

University of Nebraska, 2011

Advisor: Helen Raikes

In Nebraska more than one-third of infants and toddlers live in conditions that are not conducive to early learning, putting them at-risk of failing in school and in life. By age four impoverished children are behind their peers by an average of 18 months. Sixpence Early Learning Fund works to ensure that children who are identified as at-risk in Nebraska are given the most optimal beginnings, preparing them for success throughout their lives. Currently, Sixpence is supporting thirteen programs across eleven school districts in Nebraska. Early childhood educators fulfill an important role that deserves increased recognition. Leadership in regards to early childhood education has received limited research attention. The purpose of this study was to gather descriptive information about Nebraska Sixpence programs and about what directors of successful programs attribute to the success of programs. Three Sixpence program directors were interviewed. Five themes emerged: (1) empowering families, (2) individualization, (3) ongoing growth and development, (4) collaboration and partnering, and (5) balance. This research adds to the growing body of information available for early childhood education for infants and toddlers, and particularly by illuminating the directors' perspective, taking one step closer towards the goal of increasing knowledge which supports early childhood success. Implications for future research and practical application were discussed.

Dedication

For the children and families at-risk and in need of improvements in early childhood education, with hope that continual strides are made. Know that you are valuable, and deserve the best opportunities.

Acknowledgements

I will always be grateful to the strong early childhood leaders I was able to work with throughout my education. My advisor, Dr. Helen Raikes, for providing me support and encouragement, and for empowering me throughout this journey. My graduate committee, Dr. Julia Torquati and Dr. Carolyn Edwards, for their dedication. And my professors who demonstrated such passion in their work. Without these role models I would not have continued my education.

I am fortunate to have a strong support system of family and friends, each person affecting me in different ways. Thank you for always believing in me. My mom, who taught me how to learn from everything, and to find humor in mysterious places. My sister, who taught me that no matter where life takes you, you can always grow and improve. My aunt Jan and uncle John, who taught me that intelligence is power, and who supported me in so many ways throughout my education. My aunt Karen and uncle Marty, who helped me truly value myself. My nephews Atticus and Hunter, who make me smile each and every day. And Miles, who sparked my initial desire to become a strong, educated woman. Without the support of my family and friends, obtaining my Master Degree would not have been possible.

Thank you to the directors who participated in this study, for being leaders working towards the greater good, and for showing me how I can too be successful. Thank you to everyone who assisted in the development of my thesis. Finally, thank you to the children and families who I have encountered throughout this journey, as your special impact has inspired me to dream big, working towards improvement in early childhood.

Table of Contents

List of Multimedia Objects

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Research illustrates investing in children under age three who are identified as at-risk is important, effective, crucial, and beneficial to their long-term achievement (Martin, Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, Buka, & McCormick, 2008). Although no program should be expected to meet the needs of all populations, a basic structure of program focus for children birth through three and identified at-risk has emerged over the past several decades. Successful early childhood programs generate a model to best fit the general needs of the population served, are comprehensive, and are flexible enough to individualize. Some groups will need more medical care, while some will need more educational opportunities, etc. Ideally, programming includes a comprehensive service package, intending to meet the needs of the whole child, rather than focusing on one area of development (Seitz, 1990). In this paper I will provide information about Nebraska Sixpence programs.

It is imperative to recognize that families have many needs. Home visiting appears to have positive effects on child outcomes (Seitz, 1990), perhaps due to the fact that a home visitor can personally observe the needs of the family. Referrals to outside resources are also important. Programs that have home visiting as a component appear to closely monitor the home environment, where parents are able to feel comfortable and safe while learning about their child. In this introduction, I present characteristics of two large and well-known studies of intervention programs for infants and toddlers living in low-income families as examples of programs that have preceded Nebraska Sixpence.

Each of the two studies reviewed included comprehensive services, provided support and services for both children and their families, and was designed to ensure that

the needs of the families were met by including an array of services, rather than targeting a single area of improvement. Comprehensive programs apply Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and operate with the assumption that progress in child development or in parental practices also requires that the family's basic needs are addressed.

At the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy are needs that constitute the most basic for human beings: the physiological needs for food, sleep, shelter, the need to belong and be respected. At the next level are the more advanced needs: developing knowledge and understanding, and the need to know and understand yourself and the world. The top of the hierarchy includes the most abstract needs, such as realizing your life's meaning and self actualization (Hough, 2010).

Recognizing that children and families identified at-risk often have many needs to be met, early childhood educators are able to better assess, plan, and facilitate appropriate intervention techniques for children and their families. Children who were classified as having several risk factors demonstrate having more positive outcome measures than those in comparison groups at similar levels of risk (Martin, 2010).

As I progressed through this research, I observed power behind providing services to parents. The idea here and the premise of many programs for low-income infants and toddlers (Sweet & Appelbaum, 2004) is that services to parents will in turn transfer to the child, because the parents have more information and better resources and also are personally supported through a respectful relationship. When parents are provided with the correct tools to help their children succeed they are able to assist in the child's development.

Successful programming requires having quality providers, who enhance the overall experience for the children and families served. Serving a crucial role in the lives of children and families, these quality providers can lead the early childhood field to future success.

"The quality of early childhood experiences for children depends on the quality of teachers and directors in center and home-based programs. Leadership is sorely needed in order for early childhood practitioners to provide high quality early childhood experiences and build the foundation for every child's healthy growth and development" (Taba et al., 1999).

Overall comprehensive services do not simply stop when the child exits the center (or program). These services continue to benefit the participants in a chain-like reaction. The families are first provided with education and then the tools needed for more effective interactions with children, and better management of stress. Families are also referred to additional community resources, and receive support to access these resources. After experiencing comprehensive services, families are more likely to utilize community resources, and are more capable of locating those services (Seitz, 1990).

Prior to observable progress, early childhood professionals need to empower parents and community members. Through leadership, early childhood professionals progress the early childhood community in a direction towards realizing the early years of life are critical. Early in life children are "set up" for success or failure in school and in life (Taba, et al., 1999).

Although many studies of birth through three programs exist, I chose to include studies from two programs that I felt demonstrated what is included in successful

programming. I selected the National Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Study,

because a partnership exists with Sixpence. I selected the Carolina Abecedarian Project

because it is one of the most successful programs (Ramey & Campbell, 1984). I

acknowledge important contributions from additional studies, including studies of the

Infant Health and Development Program (IHDP; Brooks-Gunn, Klebenov, Liaw, &

Spiker, 1993); the Yale Child Welfare Program (Seitz, Rosenbaum, & Apfel, 1985);

Nurse Family Partnership studies (NFP; Olds, 1995); Healthy Families America (HFA;

Daro & Harding, 1999), Parents as Teachers (PAT; Wagner & Clayton, 1999) and others.

Early Head Start

The Head Start program began in 1965 for low-income three and four-year-olds

(Administration for Children and Families, 2002), and was followed in 1994 by the Early

Head Start program for children prenatal to age three and their families. Head Start is a

two-generational comprehensive early childhood development and school readiness

program. Both of these Head Start programs share the goal of promoting the school

readiness of low-income children by enhancing their cognitive, social, and emotional

development. The programs seek to strengthen the families served through a variety of

services. Early Head Start includes pregnant women and their low-income families

(Administration for Children and Families, 2002).

Guidelines for Head Start eligibility include homelessness, being below 100% of

the federal poverty guideline, or receiving public assistance. Each program conducts a

community needs-assessment and determines which children and families have greatest

needs (beyond initial guidelines). The program aims to serve highest-need families in

that community. Head Start programs are required to have at least 10% of enrollment

consist of children with a disability. Head Start funding consists of 80% from the federal government, and 20% from local funding. Each program must follow the Head Start Program Performance Standards. These are to ensure that children receive educational, social, health, nutritional, parent involvement, and family support services (Administration for Children and Families, 2002).

Early Head Start programs are able to choose among center-based, home-based, or mixed approach programming. Center-based programs require two home visits each year. Home-based programs require weekly home visits and attendance at a minimum of two social events per month. Mixed approach programs combine requirements based on the preference of the program policy makers within the program guidelines.

Although each Early Head Start program strives to meet the same goals, programs utilize different techniques. Center-based programs typically provide services relating to child development directly, while home-based programs typically provide indirect child development services through improving parenting and nurturing parent-child relationships. Mixed approach programs utilize both techniques and provide services directly and indirectly (Administration for Children and Families, 2002).

The National Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Study began in 1994 as a longitudinal experimental design, intended to measure the effects of programs. The study included a control group of non-Early Head Start participants for comparison. Cognitive, language, socio-emotional, and health domains of children were the focus of measurements. The program impacts on parenting, parental practices, behavior, and self-sufficiency were also explored. The study investigated 17 programs. The study began at

the onset of the Early Head Start program, and therefore examined the program when it was new and under development.

The study found favorable intent-to-treat effect sizes in multiple developmental areas when the children were three-years-old and had completed the program. Overall significant effects (p>.05) were found in child cognitive and language development, socio-emotional development, emotionally supportive parenting, parenting behavior, parenting knowledge, parent self-sufficiency, and educational activities/credentials (Administration for Children and Families, 2002).

Significant effects were also found for Early Head Start children's engagement during play and sustained attention during play. Early Head Start parents reduced child negativity towards their parents during play and reduced children's aggressive behaviors (Administration for Children and Families, 2002).

Early Head Start parents, in comparison to non-Early Head Start parents, were identified as increasing their parenting skills, demonstrated by favorable significant impacts on emotionally supportive parenting, parent-child activities, the learning support of parents, negative parenting behavior, parent knowledge of child safety, and discipline strategies. Early Head Start demonstrated having a positive impact on the home environment as well, with statistically significant scores on the HOME rating scale (Caldwell & Bradley, 1984) (Administration for Children and Families, 2002).

Early Head Start parents had statistically significant scores, in comparison to the control group, for parent self-sufficiency measures as well. They were more likely to be employed, more likely to work more hours each week, and more likely to attend high school or high school equivalent programs. When children were five and nearly ready to

enter kindergarten, Early Head Start parents, compared with controls, were more emotionally supportive, provided more language and learning stimulation, read to their children more, and spanked less. They were also less depressed than parents from the control group, as measured on the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (Administration for Children and Families, 2002).

Overall, Early Head Start demonstrated several important positive impacts for the children and families served. There was a strong presence of improved child development and family functioning.

The Carolina Abecedarian Project

The Carolina Abecedarian Project was an experimental study of early childhood educational interventions for children from families in poverty (Martin, et al., 2008). The project was based on relations between poverty, suboptimal cognitive development, and academic failure. To identify existing relations, the project examined early environments. Study participants were randomly assigned to the Abecedarian group or a control group. When children entered elementary school, study participants were randomly assigned to one of four intervention conditions: educational treatment from infancy through three-years in public school (up to age eight), preschool treatment only (infancy to age five), primary school treatment only (age five through eight), or an untreated control group.

The Carolina Abecedarian Project used techniques based on the idea that a child's cognitive development should be enhanced through strengthening the intellectual stimulus value and developmental appropriateness of the early environment. It was hypothesized that with this improved environment a child would enter school with a

higher degree of school readiness and an enhanced likelihood of success, which would transfer into later success as well as increased social and cultural rewards (Ramey & Ramey 1998). The project was based on the General Systems Theory: developmental outcomes are the result of transactions between systems, ranging from that of the child, the parents, the school, the community, to society as a whole (Martin, et al., 2008).

Four cohorts of subjects were enrolled in the study from 1972 through 1977. All participants were full-term infants, initially judged free from conditions of having known genetic or infection-related links to mental retardation. Families were identified through a screening of social service agencies and public health clinics. Study participants consisted of 111 children from 109 families, with 57 assigned to the preschool group, and 54 assigned to the control group. Ninety-eight percent of the participants were African American (Ramey & Campbell, 1984).

Development of program participants was significantly better than that of controls. Primary outcomes showed significance. Although there was no difference found at three-month-old infant test scores, there were differences found at eighteen-month-old and older. There was a significant advantage in IQ test scores, in which the Abecedarian preschool group outperformed the control group in both reading and math scores after three years in school.

The likelihood of a child being retained in a grade during the first three years of school was negatively and significantly related to the amount of educational intervention experienced by the child. The likelihood of being identified as needing special education during the first three years of elementary school was not significantly related to early treatment status (Ramey & Campbell, 1984).

Gaps Existing in Provision of Services and Research

The Abecedarian program was a demonstration program and is no longer in existence. However, Early Head Start is a federal program now serving approximately 90,000 low-income children under the age of three throughout the country (Administration for Children and Families, 2010). Early Head Start serves fewer than 10% of the children eligible for its services. Head Start by contrast serves about 50% of poverty-level four-year-olds.

Many states have begun programs for preschool age children so that a higher proportion of four and to some extent three-year-olds living in poverty receive early childhood services than was true several years ago (Barnett, 2010). However, very few states have programs in place for infants and toddlers today.   Nebraska Children and Families (2010) describes Nebraska as an exception that has passed legislation and funding to expand the number of children ages birth through three and living in poverty who are able to be served.

Sixpence: Early Learning Fund is the program that combines Early Head Start with additional resources, expanding early childhood services to children identified as at-risk in Nebraska. Research studying Sixpence's specific impacts on child-friendly environments demonstrated first year improvements.

 In 2009, Sixpence provided support to grantees so home visitation programs and center-based services were better equipped to create/sustain safe, responsive and stimulating environments for children. During the first year, the 2009 annual evaluation report identified that participating families demonstrated improvements in the cognitive and emotional quality of parent-child interactions (Jackson, Alvarez, & Zweiback, 2010).

Nebraska Sixpence Programs have demonstrated having positive results for children and families served and are therefore considered successful early childhood programs. Seeking to gain a perspective on how directors support the success which Sixpence demonstrates, I wanted to understand "what it takes to direct such a successful program." However, a lack of information regarding leadership specific to early childhood education was found.

Taba et al. (1999) identified an urgent need to develop leadership in early childhood education. Researchers state that early childhood educators have the power to change not only the future of the early childhood field, but also have the power to change the future success of our nation's children. Leadership requires the commitment and involvement of the entire early childhood community. Successful early childhood educators are those who strive towards effective leadership.

Overall, leadership in early childhood programming is an area of research that is relatively unexplored. This was demonstrated in a thorough review of literature by Dunlop (2008). This review of national and international studies showed that leaders in early childhood education were inconsistent in their views of the role of leadership, and that there is a lack of strategies specific to the training and development of leaders of successful early childhood settings. Therefore, the focus of the current paper is to study three Nebraska Sixpence program directors' experiences and perceptions in order to identify and describe their leadership characteristics and strategies.

Purpose

The first purpose of this study was to obtain a greater understanding of Nebraska Sixpence Programs. The second purpose was to obtain a greater understanding of

successful early childhood leadership characteristics and strategies. Specifically I wanted to identify themes, through a multiple case study, related to directors' perceived success of these programs.

Research Questions

There were two central research questions.

- What is the Nebraska Sixpence program?

- From the perspective of three Nebraska Sixpence directors, what goes into a successful program?

There were four sub-questions for the second central research question.

- Why do participants feel their programs are successful?

- What are participants' perceptions on needs/challenges of their programs?

- Who do participants see benefiting from their programs and how?

- What are participants' professional development experiences?

While there may be additional methods to learn about these programs, two approaches were used in this study. To identify characteristics of Sixpence programs, publicly-available information was accessed. To gain insight as to directors' interpretations of strengths and challenges of their programs (in order to learn about factors and processes which support success), three Sixpence directors were interviewed.

Research participants may benefit through having an opportunity to reflect on the work they have done to ensure their program is successful, and what they have learned from being in a leadership role in a Sixpence program. The study results may benefit those preparing to become future program directors and/or fill leadership roles within the early childhood education community. The strengths of high quality programming that

are identified may be utilized by existing programs/program directors seeking to reach a

higher level of quality, which would thus benefit the development and learning of the

children and families they serve.

Chapter 2 – Methods

Positioning Myself in the Research

Throughout my education I have had the opportunity to work closely with strong leaders in the early childhood field: people who are making a difference; people who work to strengthen the knowledge of the early childhood community. I have viewed those people as role models, and I strive to follow their paths in my professional career.

As my personal philosophies and beliefs of early childhood education developed, I saw the most beneficial characteristic held by those leaders was their desire to gain knowledge, having the perspective that the value on education and improvement is priceless. I viewed this as the most important aspect, because it appeared they could never know enough about early childhood development. I was able to observe their dedication firsthand.

It was through those observations that my interest in early childhood education really blossomed into a passion. I noticed strong leaders constantly and consistently revisiting and reflecting on situations/experiences/ideals, and I quickly developed the same desire to learn as much as possible. Each time I graduated and received early childhood development degrees (Associate of Science, Bachelor of Science), I felt I was far from being an "expert." If I were to know more, I could make differences in the lives of more children and families. I wanted to become a strong leader in the early childhood community.

I was employed six years at an agency, contracted through the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, which provided an array of more than 11 services to children and families involved with Child Protective Services. My positions

within the company matured from working one-on-one with children/families

(supervising visitation, teaching family support, mentoring children), and I eventually

supervised a caseload (ranging in size, averaging 35 families) and staff (ranging in size,

averaging ten employees). Families I observed throughout my work at the agency had

multiple barriers in their lives and they had many needs which were not met. During

these work experiences I developed an interest for helping children and families who are

considered at-risk. I found happiness providing families with the tools and resources they

needed to enhance their overall well-being.

I gained an abundance of information throughout my graduate education and

consider myself to be much more knowledgeable about early childhood development.

Each special topic I studied became especially interesting to me and had a powerful

influence on my development as a professional. I struggled to decide on a topic for my

thesis, having the mentality that I didn't want to place limits on any aspect of my

education. I wanted to research everything. I was passionate about all things which were

early childhood related.

Struggling to find my place within the community of early childhood, I began to

question where I wanted my career to be in the future. At the root of each of my passions

was my personal goal of making differences in the lives of as many children and families

as possible, as well as my special interest in infants and toddlers. My niche appeared to

be next to those strong leaders. I will find the most satisfaction in leadership

positions/roles.

Striving to become the best leader possible, I designed this research to assist

myself in learning more about programs for infants and toddlers at-risk and in identifying

what directors of successful programs (Sixpence) attribute to their programs' success.
Answering this question would provide an increased understanding of how I can lead a
successful program. I would learn the common characteristics of successful programs as
seen from the perspective of the three participating directors.

Method

Creswell (2007) wrote that when "the inquirer has clearly identifiable cases with
boundaries and seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the cases or a comparison
of several cases (p. 74)", a case study is suitable. I chose a qualitative research design
because I wanted to understand the experiences and perceptions of directors in the
Sixpence early childhood programs in Nebraska. A qualitative approach allowed me to
share the voices of the participants in the study through direct quotes and through a data
analysis process that allowed me to identify the key themes across the three interviews.

Sampling. For my first research question, I gathered information about Sixpence:
Early Learning Fund. Information was collected through the program's public website,
www.singasongofsixpence.org. The focus of the information gathered was about the
Sixpence program (overall) and also information including all 13 Sixpence program sites
in Nebraska.

For my second and primary research question, a criterion sampling method was
used. All participants were those in leadership positions at Nebraska Sixpence Programs.
Selection of participants was based on the different program characteristics, aiming for a
range in program types. Each program is individualized in order to meet the needs of the
community. For some this means providing center-based care for infants and toddlers.
For other communities it may mean providing care for the teen's child while the teen

receives individualized attention regarding his or her infant's developmental needs. Other communities may determine that working in homes (or home-like environments) teaching parent/child interactions may produce the best results. Programs selected are within a 70-mile radius of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

To gain insight as to directors' interpretations of strengths and challenges of their programs and in order to learn about factors and processes that support success, three Sixpence directors were interviewed. Interview participants' contact information was identified through the Sixpence website, www.singasongofsixpence.org. Participants received an email offering them the opportunity to participate in the study.

Two of the three participants contacted were willing and available to partake in the study. One of the three participants contacted was not available during collection of data, but made an appropriate referral to her co-worker, as directing and coordinating the Sixpence program is that co-worker's responsibility. This co-worker agreed to participate.

Fulfilling a requirement of the Institutional Review Board, I obtained a letter of approval of my research from the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (Appendix A). I interviewed three participants at three different Nebraska Sixpence sites. I traveled to all three of the site locations, and conducted each interview in private/quiet rooms. Participants signed the informed consent form (Appendix B), which was approved by the Institutional Review Board, before their interviews began. Before each interview began I reminded participants that they could choose not to participate and could withdraw from the interview at anytime without any repercussions as stated in the informed consent form.

Data collection procedures. Interviews were audio recorded onto micro-

cassettes (three total). The tape recorder used was battery operated, so I used new

batteries for each interview. Pseudonyms were used to label each micro-cassette. Any

identifying information directors discussed in interviews (such as characteristics specific

to their site, previous jobs/roles they were in, and/or names of any outside institutions

involved) was changed to protect the participants' anonymity. I took few notes during

the interviews, and used them as a reference point to ensure transcripts were accurate. I

developed my semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions, to avoid

leading the interview participants towards any preconceived biases of which I might not

be aware.

Interview questions (Appendix C). Each 60-90 minute interview was guided

by but not restricted to these ten main questions and potential follow-up questions.

1. Please describe your program.

2. Tell me about your own professional development.

Follow ups: What is your education level? What past jobs have helped you

prepare for this position? How do you learn from your program? Were there

areas that you did not feel your program of study prepared you for in this job?

How could that have been addressed in your college preparation?

3. What do you think makes your program successful?

Follow ups: What are the requirements for staff? Who is involved in your

program (community members, parents, etc)? What is your program philosophy?

How do you ensure the program philosophy is followed?

4. What is your perception on the needs/challenges of your program?

Follow ups: Are there needs which are not being met? Are there areas which need improvement? What strategies do you utilize to ensure your program needs are consistently met? What are the biggest challenges of your program? What are your biggest challenges as a director?

5. How do you promote ongoing learning and development with your staff?

Follow ups: Are staff provided ongoing training? Planning time?

6. Describe your involvement with program planning.

Follow ups: What are your roles and responsibilities? How is it ensured that the program is meeting goals/following guidelines? How long have you been in the role of director (here or elsewhere)?

7. Who do you see benefiting from your program?

Follow ups: How do you see this benefit? How does your program measure achievement? What are the common barriers to children/families of your program?

8. As a director, are you satisfied in your level of engagement with children and families?

Follow ups: What steps do you take to ensure you remain happy in your work? With such a demanding position, do you feel you often "take work home with you" including emotionally? What do you do to ensure this does not negatively affect you?

9. What advice would you have for new directors of early childhood programs?

Follow ups: Are there common mistakes often made by new directors? What

would you consider to be the best attitude to have going into an already existing

program?

10. What are your dreams for your program in the future?

Data analysis. Creswell (2007) uses the term "winnowing" to describe the

process of sorting and classifying qualitative data into categories and reducing the

information to five or six themes. I followed his general outline for case study data

analysis and interpretation (Creswell, 2003, pp. 191-195). I prepared the data for analysis

by editing the transcripts, inserting pseudonyms in place of all identifying information

that directors discussed in interviews (such as characteristics specific to their site,

previous jobs/roles they were in, and/or names of any outside institutions involved). I

then saved each document as a word document.

I read through each of the three transcripts, forming initial codes and highlighting

quotes which provided informative descriptions of the participants' views and

experiences, and I identified the context of the codes I was creating.

After coding all of the transcripts I reviewed my notes and added or revised some

of the codes to reflect any additional relevant information. I then aggregated the data into

45 codes, removing any connection between the data and the participants, and then sorted

the data from 45 codes into ten categories. Next, I reread the quotes within each of the

ten categories across the three transcripts, looking for themes and patterns. I tried to hear

what participants were saying created success in their programs. I then identified five

themes that answered the question, "What does it take to direct a successful program?"

After five themes were identified, I reviewed the interview transcripts to confirm

the themes reflected what the participants had said, and selected quotes to illustrate the themes. Each theme was apparent throughout each interview. There were no themes identified that were not supported by each participant. Next, I wrote a descriptive narrative, using the quotes from the transcripts and my notes. Finally, I interpreted the data using direct interpretations, and categorical aggregation.

Chapter 3 – Findings

The first purpose of this study was to obtain a greater understanding of Nebraska Sixpence Programs. The second purpose was to obtain a greater understanding of successful early childhood leadership characteristics and strategies. Specifically, I was interested in identifying themes, through a multiple case study, related to directors' perceived success of these programs.

Description of Nebraska Sixpence Programs

Sixpence, the Nebraska Early Childhood Education Endowment, is a $60 million public-private financing tool which funds early childhood programs and services offered to children (and their families) identified as at-risk, before birth through age three. Sixpence is grounded in the science of children's developmental needs, which demonstrate investing in early childhood yield the greatest return for families and society. Descriptive findings including information combine from the Sixpence website (www.singasongofsixpence.org), and from the interviews with directors.

Beginning in 2006, LB1256 was established aiming to reduce the achievement gap (at-risk children found to be behind their peers in standardized tests in elementary school) which becomes apparent early in children's development. The legislation was followed by a Constitutional Amendment which authorized the funds for this program to come from an endowment comprised of $40,000,000 in public funds and $20,000,000 in private funds.

Sixpence holds the philosophy that the years from birth through age three are critical to children's future success, and that this period holds a special window of

opportunity for intervention. Sixpence's program motto, derived from an old nursery rhyme, is: "We sing a song of Sixpence, a pocket full for life."

Sixpence works to ensure that children who are identified as at-risk in Nebraska are given the most optimal beginnings, preparing them for success throughout their lives. To reach this goal, Sixpence funds a range of services including either or both center-based and home visitation services. All participants in Sixpence programs meet at least one of the following risk factors: participation in the federal free or reduced lunch program, premature birth or low-birthweight, language other than English is spoken at home, parents who are younger than eighteen, or parents who have not completed high school. In the 2009-2010 program year, 61% of the children and their families were associated with three or more of those five and additional risk factors identified in the evaluation (Jackson et al., 2010).

Overseeing the administration of the Sixpence Early Learning Fund through Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, the Nebraska Early Childhood Education Endowment Board of Trustees represents both private and public interests. Grants are awarded to school districts in partnership with community-based programs meeting quality standards defined by the Board of Trustees. All recipients of grant monies are required to match 100% of the total state contribution with local funds.

Grantees work with an outside evaluator to measure program outcomes, to ensure accountability, and are provided with dedicated one-on-one support. In the 2009-2010 program year, a comprehensive evaluation process was implemented to measure the program outcomes. The results were provided in the 2009-2010 Sixpence Annual Evaluation Report (Jackson et al., 2010).

To evaluate the quality of center-based services, classrooms were assessed using the Infant-Toddler Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 2006) and the Teacher Interaction and Language Rating Scale (a subscale of this scale). The quality of the center-based services demonstrated positive results; 93% of the classrooms met the state standard for overall quality (a rating of good or higher), 50% of the classrooms met the state standard in personal care routines (an improvement from 22% in 2008-2009), and programs exhibited many strengths including: the classroom arrangement, teacher's interactions with children, and the program structure (Jackson et al., 2010).

Evaluation of child outcomes included several domains. The evaluation of children's language skills included parent report surveys using the MacArthur-Bases Communicative Development Index (Fenson et al., 1993) and direct assessment using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Dunn & Dunn, 1997). Receptive language skills were maintained during the year, with no significant differences between Fall and Spring standardized scores. Toddlers demonstrated significant increases in their expressive verbal skills (the number of words said increased) (Jackson et al., 2010).

Children's socio-emotional outcomes were evaluated using parent and teacher surveys through the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment for Infants and Toddlers (DECA-IT) (Mackrain, LeBuffe, Powell & Tenney-Blackwell, 2007). The Total Protective Factor category of the DECA-IT measures the child's initiative, attachment, and self-regulation. Significant gains were made across all categories. Improvement was observed by spring 2010, as an increasing percentage of children scored in the "strength" category within the social-emotional category (Jackson et al., 2010).

The philosophy held by Sixpence translates high quality standards into measurable outcomes. Trustees ensure accountability through investing in rigorous evaluation of the Sixpence programs. Accountability is critical to Sixpence, as the continuation of funding is contingent upon maintaining high standards.

Currently, Sixpence is supporting 13 programs across eleven school districts in Nebraska. Each program has the common goal of leveling the playing field for at-risk infants and toddlers. Children identified as at-risk are more apt to fail academically; Sixpence assists those children in hopes that when they enter kindergarten they will be closer in readiness to their peers, reducing the achievement gap. For the current project, three Nebraska Sixpence programs were visited.   The three program sites were selected were within a 70 mile radius of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Each program provided a different set of program characteristics to provide a range of program types including either or both center-based and home visitation services.

Themes that Emerged from Director Interviews

The second and primary purpose of this study was to investigate the strengths and challenges of high-quality early childhood programs, in order to identify factors and processes which support that success, through interviews with directors. Five themes, in response to questions about factors that support quality in Sixpence, emerged from my analysis of the interview transcripts and field notes for each interview: (1) empowering families, (2) individualization, (3) ongoing growth and development, (4) collaboration and partnering, and (5) balance. These themes are presented in the order that most effectively tells the story that emerged from the data.

Empowering families. Throughout the interviews participants addressed the significance of empowering families to address social support needs as well as to enhance parenting. In the field of early childhood education, specifically when working with children identified as at-risk, families need to be provided with the tools they need in order to succeed now as well as later in life. Services that are characterized as wrap-around services work to meet the needs of the whole child/family and are comprehensive.

Needs that are identified throughout the child/family involvement in the program may be addressed through multiple strategies. Referrals to outside resources may be made in addition to direct work with families provided by program.

Each director made statements during interviews that demonstrate their dedication to always focusing on the needs of the entire family and reflect a strengths-based approach to empowerment:

The wrap-around service is really what helps us be successful.

Another director described her approach:

…I just see them as mothers…I don't know a mom in the world who doesn't know what's best for their child. Some just don't have the same tool belt as the others do. My job is just to give them more tools. I support them and I see them from where they're at.

One participant addressed her program's wrap-around services:

The children benefit greatly because their parents are really getting the tools to work with them…

Directors stated it is important for programs to ensure they are empowering families rather than enabling them. They noted that when families are empowered they

are able to become motivated to become more educated parents, and learn how they can meet the needs of their child/family in the future without needing to rely on anyone else. Programs should view parents as the "first teacher" and recognize the role of the parent is the most crucial to early childhood success. As directors discussed their programs, each demonstrated having program practices that send a message about the value of early childhood education. One participant clearly articulated her belief in the value of empowering children and families:

> I've learned to say "we want them to learn how to fish, so that they can fish when they leave here. If we keep fishing for them, we're not doing any good for them." And then letting go of that. So, I think that's probably the most common (mistake made by new directors); that boundary of empowering versus enabling.
>
> In order for families to truly benefit, they need to first be engaged in the program. It is the responsibility of the program to ensure this engagement occurs throughout the families' enrollment. One strategy to engage families and ensure they remain engaged is having staff members who are authentic, passionate, and truly care about the work they are doing. Staff members should never judge children or families; they should always support them and partner with them.

Support to families is often demonstrated by programs working to ensure their needs are met, often times seeking out new information, strategies and/or resources. Partnering with families refers to valuing the family's positions, beliefs, and opinions, and continually working with the family as a team. One director summarized the importance the parent's role has on their child's development:

We know that 80% of children's success in their academic life stems from parent involvement. A lot of times I think we feel like we are the ones that make the difference and that's totally opposite. It's parents, and so we're truly invested, and believe in that. We are constantly exploring ways to engage parents. To bring that to the forefront. To really get parents to see that they are their child's first teacher and they are more important than they realize and than they will ever know.

Individualization. The individualization of programming was important to all participants. As a provider of early childhood educational services, you must meet the children and families where they are. Each child and family comes to the program at different levels of education, at different levels of development, and with different experiences. No two children or families are the same. Having the philosophy that there is never one solution is beneficial to ensure the program remains individualized. This individualization occurs through working directly with children and families but also throughout the program. One director described individualization for children and families beginning immediately upon entrance to the program:

From the moment families and children walk into the door, through the support that our leadership offers to staff, parents and families; we can ensure that kids are getting individualized instruction. We know that no two kids are the same. No two people are the same. Not everyone learns the same way, and not every child is at the same stage of learning as their peer.

Individualization applies to the program director's work with the centers as well as the children and families served by the centers:

I am at each of the individual centers at least once a week and we discuss things

that are happening in each of the centers. Some of it can't be implemented center-

wide; it is specific to that site.

A third director summarized her program's individualization:

It's important to ask "what's the family's whole experience?"

Children and families who are identified as at-risk often demonstrate a wide range

of needs, and every situation is different. Therefore, programs may need to frequently

seek out new information. In order to ensure that the program remains individualized, it

is the responsibility of the program to continually re-assess their strategies/goals (the

needs which they are seeking to meet), their purpose (how their strategies will support

meeting the need), and what the results actually are (identifying if the implementation

obtained the desired result). It is crucial that directors of early childhood programs put

thought into all of their work and decisions. One participant summarized her overall

program goal of continual individualization:

Every situation is different, and we really try and look at every person as an

individual, and not as "this is the way we're going to do it for everyone."

Everyone has different paths, and we need to meet them where they're at and help

them grow.

One director addressed the difficulties that arise when children and families'

needs that may not be met by community agencies:

The needs of this community are so unique. The needs that they have are just not

easily met. There are gaps that we're not able to bridge yet. We do have local

community agencies that can support some of that, but the need outweighs the

ability for them to provide the service. All of those carry over effects that come

from that are some of the major needs that we're seeing right now.

Ongoing growth and development. Every participant identified ongoing growth

and development (at both individual and program levels) being a key to their program's

success. This was often offered through formal settings such as trainings, which are

offered consistently and in abundance through the Sixpence program. Trainings offered

may be part of the curriculum, or may be incorporated when interest in the topic or the

need is identified. One participant discussed her program reaching out to support

interests held by staff:

> Any training that they really want to go to we try to always encourage that they go
>
> to.

> Another director highlighted the significant impact Sixpence trainings have on

staff members:

> Staff benefit (from the program) because it's something that they get to do that
>
> they enjoy and they receive training to better their own personal professional
>
> development.

> Sixpence requires staff to be highly educated, most often specifically majoring in

early childhood education or related fields. Participants in this study each obtained an

advanced education. All participating directors had master level educations, or were

currently working on obtaining degree(s) at the master level. All study participants

related their previous job experiences to their professional growth and development.

Each director held positions working both directly and indirectly with children/families,

ranging from one-on-one interaction with children to directing/supervising other

programs in early childhood or related fields. Program staff are trained and educated in topics specific to their jobs that can be incorporated directly into their work. One director emphasized that additional trainings are important because staff members come from a variety of professional disciplines and backgrounds:

> You also learn from formal trainings and (Sixpence is) very focused on having a very well-rounded staff so we have a lot of opportunities.

> Another director highlighted her confidence in staff members:

> We find that a lot of our teachers actually exceed those minimum requirements. We have highly qualified staff.

> Reflection and re-evaluation promote ongoing learning. Learning takes place in

context, and taking a step back often provides a new outlook on situations. Reflection is a time to re-think through what happened, process about the situation to identify why results occurred, and plan for future strategies. This is focusing on the process rather than the product; really identifying what is working as well as what is not meeting the needs of children/families and needs changed.

> We meet their individual needs, and consistently take a step back and look at why we're doing what we're doing and assess the situation.

> Reflection may sometimes occur daily, but should be allocated to a specific

time/day each week at minimum; to ensure consistency. Although reflection may occur individually, staff may also reflect with their co-workers/co-teachers or with their superiors/directors/coordinators. One director described her experience with reflection in her program:

We meet once a week for reflective supervision, really taking time to process. And then taking time to reflect, and think about "what is that like for the family? What is that like for you? How (will) this work next time? What (will) you do next time? Or how will you problem-solve in the future?"

Learning daily, continually and constantly was valued by all directors. Viewing everything as a learning opportunity supports this. As an early childhood education provider you never truly know everything you need to know, you should always be working on self-improvement. Experience is an opportune time for growth and development. Every director discussed ways they learned from their past experiences (prior to employment with Sixpence as well as during).

All three participants emphasized that if you fail to learn from past experiences improvement is nearly impossible, and you will often repeat the same thing over and over rather than improving:

I learn daily from the students, from the staff, from the children… it's pretty amazing.

Because the staff is so knowledgeable and diverse, we all learn from each other. You also learn from the families.

My past work experience helped me to learn as I was going.

The early childhood community is expanding and programs which utilize other programs offer a way to ensure consistent learning occurs. One participant expressed a high value for taking "field trips" to other Sixpence programs to understand how they operate, and then finding an appropriate way to incorporate and individualize things into her program. Successful programs could be considered a platform: driving change,

continually improving, and working to bridge the gaps that exist throughout the entire experience; giving work a purpose.

All directors said they have learned so much throughout their employment with Sixpence. With new challenges comes the need for new solutions. Programs that seek out new information are not only meeting the needs of the family, but strengthening themselves as well. One director specifically addressed a problem-solving strategy she has utilized to find needed answers: always recognizing that an answer is out there somewhere.

Being research-based appears to strengthen each of the three Sixpence programs. All participants reflected on their program's ability to identify new answers through research that has been based at their site. Two directors described their program as a learning lab. These sites' resources are open and available for the program's community partners, for example if a public school partner needed a meeting facility. The field of early childhood is continually changing as new information is discovered, and programs that reach outside their organization and into the larger community truly benefit.

Directors said that educational facilities and preparatory programs often utilize learning labs to provide students with experience; that experience that is difficult to teach in the classroom. In turn, the program benefits, as more individuals are present and create the opportunity for more one-on-one work with children/families. Typically those students are fulfilling their practicum experience requirements, and are immersed in the program for more than a short time period. This allows for successful relationship building, which then creates opportunities for progress to occur, benefiting all parties involved. This is also a way for the program itself to ensure awareness of the most

current topics/strategies/methods/theories in the early childhood education community.

Programs that partner with those outside their organization are supporting beliefs that everyone has something to bring to the table, and often times it is the director's responsibility to reach out and pull different perspectives into their program. One director discussed the impact of her program's partnerships:

The school (directly benefits from the program) by using it as a lab. I have teachers come up to me constantly and talk to me about opening up their eyes to what's going on and how great this is for their students. I think it definitely benefits them in that way, to see what's out there, and to see the importance of supporting kids in any way possible.

Directors all expressed a desire for more on-the-job practice included in their education; directors felt they would have benefited from more experiences. Although each participant discussed practicum experience benefitting their educational experience, they all addressed how many things cannot be learned in the classroom or in a book, but have to be experienced firsthand:

There's nothing you can learn in a book. You have to make that personal contact and really get to know (our children's and families') individual situations and realize that nothing is black and white.

One director described her experience with ongoing growth and development:

(My program) is very focused on interdisciplinary work. Coming from the social work background, I don't think there's enough discussion on how to do it. You talk about doing it, but what that looks like in practice is so different than in theory. Because you're talking about different fields, different ways of thinking,

coming together, and then trying to adopt each other. And if you're not mature enough, or you're not advanced enough in your professional development, it could be very easy to get discouraged or take it personal or feel attacked. (But that's) not what's happening at all; it's just all part of the process.

Collaboration and partnering. Teamwork was apparent throughout each interview, often addressed multiple times. As a director, you must recognize that you are not in control, but that you are leading the team. Each program has a "community" consisting of everyone involved: children, families, staff, advisory teams, committees, community partners, and the Early Childhood Education Community. No team member is more important or significant than any of the other team members; the partnership is balanced and equal. All team members have a voice, and provide value to the program.

Directors must accept decisions made by their co-workers as well as the community, even when the director would have done things completely different. The dynamics of this community offer support for team members; responsibilities are not solely on one person, and collaboration is always welcome. Having a well-rounded team, bringing together a variety of educations and experiences, provides additional support to and strengthens the team as a whole.

The importance of relationships was very apparent throughout the interviews. Every director discussed the significance of relationship building throughout their program. Relationships are central to many aspects of an early childhood program: relationships with children, families, and all team members. One director identified relationship building as a continual task, one that is not easy, and one that takes time to develop. Another director, when providing advice for future directors, highlighted the

need for relationship building to occur initially before making changes throughout the program:

> I think understanding that things are not going to automatically change and be done the way you want them done. Because it's not going to be successful; you need to learn to respect (staff) and (staff) need to trust you before you make the changes that you think need to be made. To really to be able to know exactly why you're changing something, or why it was in place in the first place, and then what's the purpose of changing it? Because people don't like change, and if you're going to change something, there needs to be a lot of thought in it, and you need to be able to provide a real reason why. Even the littlest things. Because those little things are probably huge to some of the people that you are making those changes about for.

Prior to the development of a strong relationship, directors said that trust must be built. In regards to children and families, trust can be built through showing them that first and foremost you value them, you are and will be here for them, you will never intentionally hurt them, and that your overarching goal is to empower them. Regarding team members or the program community, trust can be built through consistently demonstrating a value for all opinions, working together to solve problems, continually demonstrating improvement in your work, and including team members in important decision making. Regardless with whom the relationship, time appears to be the common denominator; and potentially relationships will not blossom if they are not given time to do so. One director described her challenges:

You'll have parents that (are) very hard to cherish, but it's easy to value a child. (It is important to recognize) that they go together. And I think that has to be every programs model; you have to truly, authentically care about those parents in order to make a change in that child's life. So in starting a program, that has to be your mentality and your focus.

Working together for a greater cause was important to all participants. Each director articulated that their program remains successful because of its dedication to meeting the needs of the children and families they serve. Taking a step back to see the bigger picture creates an opportunity for directors to be reminded that they are making a difference in the lives of the children and families in their program. Programs which work towards the greater good (focusing on the process rather than the product) consistently are improving and strengthening. Two participants discussed core components in their programs:

We are focused on getting children ready for kindergarten, as well as supporting their family, so that their needs are met, so the children can be successful in their learning environment and at home.

We focus on early learning, nurturing that, and sending a message about the value of investing in the first five years.

Balance. Finding a balance for director roles and responsibilities as well as home life and work life was identified in each interview. Time appeared to be a significant factor in this challenge of finding a balance. Program leaders oversee so many aspects of the program, and often are supervising many children and families. Along with all of those served exists many needs and challenges; often children and families indentified as

at-risk have had or are currently potentially experiencing multiple difficulties in any given moment. One director described this aspect of her program challenges:

A lot of (our children/families) have had many obstacles to go over to get where they're at, so a lot of times if something doesn't go right then they shut down. I think that's a huge barrier, as far as getting past that to see that you have to keep working and we are still going to still be here.

Another participant described this aspect of her program challenges:

A lot of times we want to be the motivator, we want to do everything for those students, and it's very hard to meet the needs of all of them, and to help them in so many ways.

Because there are constantly needs, directors may often feel they want to be more involved and want to do more for the families; however, a lot of the work directors are responsible for is indirect. One participant discussed her program having a goal for the upcoming school year being to balance some of the direct and indirect work and make a shift towards less indirect work and more direct work with children and families:

When you're in a leadership position, you're in an administrative role and so a lot of the meetings, policy writing, and sitting at your computer takes up a lot of the time unfortunately. So trying to balance, that's one of the goals for our program this year is to balance some of that and shift how much time we're spending in an office to how much time we're spending out with families.

Successful directors recognize that they can only do so much, and recognize that the work will always be here. The desire to make things better for each and every family is beneficial to and strengthens the program; however is not a realistic task. Finding a

balance between work and home was something each director described as something they had to learn through experience. Some participants characterized this as having a personal goal: to leave work at work. Ensuring things remain balanced consists of prioritizing and then "letting go" at appropriate times. One director articulated this as work having the capability of consuming her and at times absorbing every minute she allows it to:

> I think it's really important as a professional person, to balance home life and work. Because it can at times absorb every minute of my day, and I can't do that. Just for myself. Just to stay healthy and less stressed, and for my family too. But I need that balance in order to be able to do what I do professionally and personally.

Striving for improvement and seeking to gain a broader knowledge base, one strategy which each director addressed throughout interviews was being an active member of the early childhood education community; a role which the directors must also balance. All three directors serve or have served on early childhood committees and/or boards including but not limited to those which are specific to Sixpence.

Program directors who are active members of the early childhood education community progress development towards the greater good: program decisions are made by assessing how each choice would serve the greater good. This is accomplished through recognizing gaps which are not yet bridged, there's always room for improvement, and then seeking out new answers and methods. Another way this occurs is through directors recognizing things do not stop at their doorstep, but the early

childhood community is big and continues to increase. Successful directors work to balance this along with their other responsibilities.

Being flexible was addressed by one of the participants as being crucial to finding the balance needed for successful programming. She described her roles and responsibilities needing to consistently be met, and attempting to map out a schedule each week. Although she would like things to flow as planned, events arise almost daily which require her immediate attention, and so really having the ability to remain flexible alleviates stress in her work.

Directors are approached constantly by children, families, and members of the program community, all seeking to be assisted in some way (this might be a parent needing a shoulder to cry on, a child needing her individual support, or a staff member needing someone to reflect with, etc.). Prioritization is key to being flexible, many directors are faced with multiple challenges and must ensure their choice of actions (or order of actions) is truly what's best for the children and families involved, as well as what's best for the entire program.

When asked to provide advice for new program directors, one participant reviewed the ultimate program goal being to meet the needs of the children and families served. She stressed the importance of flexibility in work, and reiterated that as a director, the techniques/methods/strategies team members choose might differentiate from the director's first choice:

> The balance. Getting into that routine of your professional life and your personal life, is very important in keeping going. I think being flexible is huge. Being able to provide information for situations and how you feel things should go, but be

able to accept differences (from that of) what you expect, as long as the expectations are being met.

Summary of Findings

Descriptive information about Sixpence programs was obtained from the program's website and supplemented by the interviews. Grounded in the science of early childhood educational research, Sixpence demonstrates an example of investing in early childhood, when children are infants and toddlers. Nebraska children who are at-risk for failure in life are receiving valuable preparations for future life-success through the Sixpence program. Sixpence provides services in attempts to reduce the achievement gap, so that at-risk children are able to enter kindergarten closer in readiness to their peers, and provides considerable investment in supporting parents.

Through interviews with three Nebraska Sixpence Program directors (based on directors' experiences and perceptions) five themes emerged as factors and processes, according to directors, which support the program's success. The themes include: Empowering Families, Individualization, Ongoing Growth and Development, Collaboration and Partnering, and Balance. Each of these themes were identified by each participating director, and continued to be apparent throughout each of the three interviews. These themes were congruent with the Sixpence program policies and practices.

Chapter 4 – Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gather descriptive information about Nebraska Sixpence programs and about what directors of successful programs attribute to the success of programs, by interviewing directors of Sixpence programs.

I took a qualitative approach to this research, seeking an understanding of each director's perspective, and the meaning each attaches to her experiences. Through semi-structured interviews with three directors who were employed through Sixpence, I sought a deep understanding of what goes into a successful program, why they feel their programs are successful, the needs/challenges they see their program having, who they see benefiting from their program and how, and what professional development experiences they brought to their position.

An achievement gap exists whereby impoverished children begin school at an educational level behind their peers. In Nebraska, more than one-third of infants and toddlers live in conditions that are not conducive to early learning, putting them at-risk of failing in school and in life (Nebraska Children and Families, 2009).

Sixpence Programs

Sixpence is Nebraska's distinctive approach to meeting the needs of children and families identified as most at-risk. It is through Sixpence that Nebraska infants and toddlers identified as the most at-risk are offered a fair chance in school and throughout their lives. The program utilizes multiple techniques for improvement, so that the program is increasingly effective. An achievement gap exists which increases the odds of failure; by age four, impoverished children are behind their peers by an average of 18 months (Nebraska Children and Families, 2009).

In addition to the direct benefit to children and families, Sixpence programs provide valuable returns to society. When at-risk children enter school better prepared, their school achievement increases, so that when they enter society after high school they are more successful economically and they are more responsible citizens and more successful parents.

Sixpence promotes involvement in the early childhood community, a community that is growing in our country. The program materials express that there is opportunity to do more together, encouraging collaboration, to "raise the bar for highly effective early care and education for Nebraska's youngest and most vulnerable children."

Views from Leadership

The primary emphasis of my data collection was in interviewing three Sixpence directors and in obtaining their views of program successes and challenges. The director provides a unique eye-view of an early childhood program.

> "The significance of leadership in the context of early childhood services should not be underestimated given the documented importance of early childhood experience to later school success" (Dunlop, 2008).

Through my interviews with these leaders it was clear that the themes they expressed were deeply held values that contributed to the success of their programs. The congruence of the directors' values and the Sixpence program philosophies was an essential component of each program's success. The directors truly believe in the Sixpence program. Through their deep understanding and commitment to the program philosophies, the Sixpence values are manifested in all aspects of their work.

The congruence that I observed between the directors' values and the Sixpence program philosophies was an important insight for me. Program directors who truly believe in their program appear to lead the program to success. I found an additional area of inquiry: what is the relationship between congruence of program philosophies with leaders' personal beliefs and program success?

Limited research exists addressing leadership in early childhood education, so gaining the perspectives of three Sixpence program directors may provide an understanding of what is involved in directing successful programming for infant-toddler programs.

I feel my goal was attained, that I gained an understanding of each director's perspective, and relevant themes emerged in analysis of the interviews. From the directors' perspectives, optimal services provided to children and families identified as at-risk will do the following: work to empower the family by encouraging progress; help to individualize the program by meeting the needs of the community served; provide the mechanism for staff and the Sixpence program to continue to grow and develop by becoming increasingly educated about topics important to the program and to the children and families served; enable collaboration and the creation of partnerships within the program as well as members of the early childhood community; and help them to find a balance by constantly prioritizing needs as they arise.

I interpreted the themes to demonstrate that empowering families, a value of the Sixpence program, directly influences the families' ability to support their children's success. Through the support and education provided by an early childhood program, families can become more self-sufficient and more informed parents. Programs are

individualized in order to meet the needs of the many families they serve.

Individualization is especially important in programming for children and families identified as at-risk. Participants who qualify for Sixpence programs have multiple needs and no two family's needs will be the same. For example, the needs of teen parents may be very different from the needs of parents who don't speak English.

When working with children identified as at-risk, the directors emphasized families have multiple needs which must be addressed to allow progress to occur. In this programming, at times tasks can be overwhelming, especially when multiple factors are involved (serving a large number of children/families, multiple children/families experiencing crisis simultaneously, deadlines quickly approaching, etc.) As an early childhood professional, optimal progress is possible after finding a balance professionally (prioritizing responsibilities) and personally (separating home from work). Balance can be achieved through collaboration with team members whose skills and abilities adequately address program needs. Directors who appropriately delegate tasks may find achieving balance easier.

To me, the results of this study demonstrate a central theme: there is always more to learn, and as an early childhood educator it is crucial that I never stop learning. In fact, this point was emphasized by all the directors. It is my responsibility to explore the early childhood community; to not only learn from my own experiences, but to also partner with members of that community, and to reach out and continue to learn from my peers. For me, this research says that together a difference can be made for the children and families served.

Implications for Future Practice

The results from this study may have a positive influence on the field of early childhood education. As awareness of the importance of early childhood education increases, especially filling a void in the area of programming for infants and toddlers, the need for quality early childhood programs increases, which increases the need for successful/strong leaders/directors in the field. The early childhood community (having the overarching goal of improving early childhood as a whole) is growing in size, which increases need for understanding how to effectively fill leadership roles within that community.

Existing early childhood programs that are seeking to reach a higher level of quality, may utilize the characteristics, which successful Sixpence directors possess, identified in this study. For programs that choose to utilize the results of this study, the children and families whom they serve would thus benefit.

Members of the early childhood community training to fulfill leadership positions in the field (future directors, administrators, coordinators, etc) may benefit as well. With an increased understanding of the aspects of successfully leading an early childhood program, those future leaders may be better prepared to succeed professionally.

I personally benefited from this research, because for me, it created several affirmations. Throughout my undergraduate and graduate career, I was taught strategies to support ongoing learning in early childhood programs. In practicum work, however, I observed the use of those strategies in program leadership vary: some programs solely focus on having an individualized curriculum, while others have a pre-determined curriculum. I was fortunate to have experiences in early childhood programs that were successful in different ways, and gained an appreciation for many alternate methods.

Through this study I created an ideal, which affirmed what I learned throughout my education. The study results taught me that early childhood leadership techniques are observable. Leaders which to me were most influential taught me the same five themes identified in this study; which I plan to incorporate throughout my future career in early childhood education.

Implications for Future Research

The development and learning about characteristics which successful early childhood program directors and leaders demonstrate should not stop here; it is just beginning. With study results adding to the early childhood knowledge base, new unanswered questions arise. Would parents' experiences reflect the values of the directors? How would the findings change if all Sixpence program directors were interviewed? To what do program directors from other early childhood programs attribute their programs' success? What are the most effective strategies that can be utilized by early childhood programs to instill the characteristics identified in this study in their leaders?

Study Limitations

As a qualitative study, these results are not generalizable beyond the programs studied because of the limited number of participants and because I was seeking a deeper understanding of these three participants' experiences. I expect that if additional Sixpence directors were interviewed, emerging themes would be similar, because participating director's remarks were so congruent with the values stated in the Sixpence program materials.

Qualitative studies use processes such as triangulation and researcher journaling to address issues of validity. I maintained a researcher journal and reviewed it periodically for suggestions of bias on my part. I also used the Sixpence program data found for the first research question to triangulate the themes identified in my analysis of the directors' interviews. The results of case studies with small sample sizes are validated when no new themes emerge after reviewing the transcripts repeatedly, and saturation is achieved. This occurred after the third interview. Stronger validation may have been achieved if the directors of all Sixpence programs were interviewed.

The time I spent with each director was limited; I only met with each director once. Results of the study might have been different if I had been able to spend more time with participants, because I was not able to develop rapport or gain their trust before the interview, although I felt rapport was easily gained during our meeting. Meeting with directors multiple times might strengthen the research, as the interviewer would observe the director in different environments (many factors may be present; several may influence director responses to interview questions: stress level, health, energy level, different levels of focus, etc).

Additional data gathered from parents or staff members about their perceptions and experiences of the director's characteristics that enhance program success might have strengthened these findings. Triangulating data sources, such as director, staff, and parent interviews, may have resulted in different findings.

Participating directors were all women. Male directors may have different perceptions attributing to program success. Contextually placing participants might have

offered background information beneficial to identifying bias they might have. Additional demographic information about participants was not collected.

To protect the participants' anonymity I was not able to discuss specific characteristics of programs I visited. Since I was not able to provide a more detailed explanation of the programs, I was not able to incorporate examples of how directors put the themes into practice. Personal and specific examples which directors shared might have added to this research.

Despite study limitations, this research adds to the growing body of information available for early childhood education for infants and toddlers, and particularly by illuminating the directors' perspective, taking one step closer towards the goal of increasing knowledge which supports early childhood success.

References

Administration for Children and Families. (ACF; 2002, June). *Making a difference in the lives of infants and toddlers and their families: The impacts of Early Head Start*. Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Administration for Children and Families. (2010). *Head Start Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/about/fy2010.html.

Barnett, W.S., Epstein, D.J., Carolan, M.E., Fitzgerald, J….Friedman, A..H. (2010). *The State of Preschool 2010*. Rutgers, N.J.: The National Institute for Early Education Research.

Brooks-Gunn, J., Klebanov, P., Liaw, F., & Spiker, D. (1993). Enhancing the development of low-birthweight premature infants: Changes in cognition and behavior over the first three years. *Child Development, 64,* 736-753.

Caldwell, B., & Bradley (1984). *Home observation for measurement of the environment*. Little Rock: University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

Creswell, J. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Daro, D., & Harding, K. (1999). Healthy Families America: Using research to enhance practice. *Future of Children, 9,* 152-176.

Dunlop, A. (2010) A Literature Review on Leadership in the Early Years. (Unpublished literature review).

Dunn, L. M., & Dunn, L. M. (1997). *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test,* Third Edition. Examiner's manual and norms booklet. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service.

Fenson,L, Dale,P., Resnick, S., Thal, D., Bates, E., Hartung, J., Pethick, S., & Reilly, J. (1993). *MacArthur-Bases Communicative Development Index.* Baltimore: Brooks Publishing, Co.

Harms, T., Cryer, D., and Clifford, R.M. (2006). *Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised Edition.* New York: Teacher's College Press.

Hough, C. (2010). Every child/youth matters and government policy: Part 2. *Education Journal,* 123, 31-34.

Jackson, B., Alvarez, L., Zweiback, R. (2010). Sixpence Annual Evaluation Report 2009-10. Retrieved from http://www.singasongofsixpence.org/file_download/21db1bed-e2ea-470c-bf9c-e31b8a7aaf6c.

Martin, A., Brooks-Gunn, J., Klebanov, P., Buka, S. L., & McCormick, M. C. (2008). Long-term maternal effects of early childhood intervention: Findings from the Infant Health and Development Program (IHDP). *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 29(2), 101-117.

Martin, S. (2010). An Early Childhood Intervention Programme and the Long-term Outcomes for Students. *Child Care in Practice*. 16(3), 257-274.

Nebraska Children and Families (2009). *2008-2009 Sixpence Annual Repor*t. Retrieved from http://www.singasongofsixpence.org/about/.

Nebraska Children and Families (2010). *Who we are.* Retrieved from

http://www.nebraskachildren.org/who/.

Olds, D. (2006). Nurse family partnership. In N. F. Watt, C. Ayoub, R. H. Bradley, J.

Puma, & W. LeBoeuf (Eds.), *The crisis in youth mental health: Early intervention*

programs and policies (pp. 147-180). Westport, CT: Praeger.

Ramey, C. T., & Campbell, F. A. (1984). Preventive education for high-risk children:

Cognitive consequences of the Carolina Abecedarian Project. *American Journal*

of Mental Deficiency, 88, 515-523.

Ramey, C. T., & Ramey, S. L. (1998). Early intervention and early experience. *American*

Psychologist, 53(2), 109-120.

Seitz, V. (1990). Intervention programs for impoverished children: A comparison of

educational and family support models. *Annals of Child Development, 7*, 73-103.

Seitz, V., Rosenbaum, L. K., Apfel, N. H. (1985). Effects of family support intervention:

A ten-year follow up. *Child Development, 56*, 376-391.

Sweet, M. and Appelbaum, M.I. (2004). Is Home Visiting an Effective Strategy: A Meta-

Analytic Review of Home Visiting Programs for Families with Young Children.

Child Development, 75(5),1435-1456.

Taba, S., Castle, A., Vermeer, M., Hanchett, K., Flores, D., and Caulfield, R. (1999).

Lighting the Path: Developing Leadership in Early Education. *Early Childhood*

Education Journal. 26(3), 173-177.

Wagner, M., & Clayton, S. (1999). The Parents as Teachers program: Results from two

demonstrations. *Future of Children, 9,* 91-115.

Sixpence

early learning fund

July 6, 2011

To whom this may concern:

Nebraska Children and Families Foundation is supportive of Katie Hauptman's request to gather information about Sixpence sites (3) as she has specified. She has informed me that her purposes are to learn more about director qualifications and perceptions of preparation of the work force and to supplement by "telling the story" of 3 sites through photography documentation, following IRB rules.

The research procedures which we have agreed upon include the following: Information gathered will be reported in a thesis. It may also be utilized by future UNL students majoring in Child Youth and Family Studies. There may be no direct benefit to participants in this research; however the information provided will contribute to the improvement of gaining a deeper understanding of directing early childhood programs. Seeking to paint a detailed picture of the three programs, Katie Hauptman will visit the programs, observing the program as a whole. After gaining a deeper understanding of the programs, she will conduct interviews with the directors of each program.
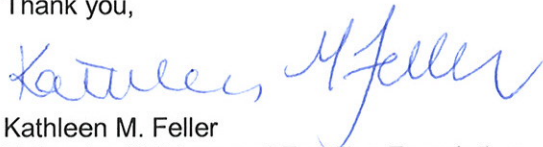
Each interview will require sixty to ninety minutes, and will include completion of an informed consent form. The location of this interview will be in a private office/room of each program. Katie will travel to each program to ensure this location is ideal and convenient for participants. The interview will be audio taped to ensure all responses are recorded appropriately. Interview questions will focus on director's memories of their experiences working as a director of a Sixpence program in Nebraska. Participants will not be asked to disclose information which may be detrimental. All responses will be kept in strict confidence. A pseudonym will be used in place of each director's name in transcripts of the interview. Their names will not be included in the thesis or other documents created thereafter. The audiotapes will be kept in a locked cabinet in Katie's advisor's office at UNL until transcription, and will be erased after transcription. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in Katie's advisor's office at UNL and will only be seen by Katie and her advisor during the study and for one year after the study is complete. The information obtained in this study will be reported as aggregated data. Photos of program sites will be taken during business hours, and will strictly follow the photo policy of the program; only children with signed releases will appear in photos. Photos will be kept and stored in strict confidence, located in a locked cabinet in Katie's advisor's office at UNL. Photos will be included in the thesis. Photos will be kept for one year after project completion, and then destroyed.

Participants will be informed that if they have any questions about this project they may call Katie at (402-499-6833). Participants may ask questions before or during the study. If participants have questions concerning their rights as a research subject that have not been answered by Katie or to report any concerns about the study, they should contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board, telephone (402-472-6965).

Participants are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting their relationship with Katie or the University of Nebraska. The decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which participants are otherwise entitled.

This will aide Katie in her understanding of preparation of the infant/toddler work force, if the directors are able to take the time to accommodate her, which would be their choice. In Nebraska early childhood personnel work together towards building a strong workforce so we believe the directors will want to do this.

Thank you,

Kathleen M. Feller
Nebraska Children and Families Foundation
Associate Vice President Early Childhood Programs

University **OF**
Nebraska
Lincoln

IRB# 20110711860EP
Date Approved: 07/11/2011
Valid Until: 07/10/2012

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
PERCEPTIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM DIRECTORS WORKING WITH AT-RISK CHILDREN BIRTH-THREE

The purpose of this research is to identify specific perceptions held by three directors of Sixpence programs in Nebraska, and will provide detailed information about each program. Information gathered will be reported in a thesis. It may also be utilized by future UNL students majoring in Child Youth and Family Studies. You were invited to participate in this research because you direct one of eleven Sixpence programs in Nebraska.

There may be no direct benefit to you as a participant in this research; however the information you provide will contribute to the improvement of gaining a deeper understanding of directing early childhood programs. Seeking to paint a detailed picture of the three programs, I will visit the programs, observing the program as a whole. After gaining a deeper understanding of the programs, I will conduct interviews with the directors of each program.

This interview will require sixty to ninety minutes of your time and will include completion of an informed consent form. The location of this interview will be in a private office/room of your program. I will travel to your program to ensure this location is ideal and convenient for you. The interview will be audio taped to ensure all responses are recorded appropriately. Interview questions will focus on your memories of your experiences working as a director of a Sixpence program in Nebraska. You will not be asked to disclose information which may be detrimental.

All responses will be kept in strict confidence. A pseudonym will be used in place of your name in transcripts of the interview. Your name will not be included in the thesis or other documents created thereafter. The audiotapes will be kept in a locked cabinet in the investigator's advisor's office at UNL until transcription, and will be erased after transcription. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the investigator's advisor's office at UNL and will only be seen by the investigator and her advisor during the study and for one year after the study is complete. The information obtained in this study will be reported as aggregated data.

There is a potential for some risk if your comments about a negative portion of your program was directly connected to you or your program. Therefore all data will be reported in aggregate form. Only the final thesis will be shared with the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation. The Nebraska Children and Families Foundation will only receive the aggregate report findings, which will not include the director's names, nor will any director's comments be connected in any way to make them identifiable.

If you have any questions about this project you may call the investigator at (402-499-6833). You may ask questions before or during the study. If you have questions concerning your rights as a research subject that have not been answered by the investigator or to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board, telephone (402-472-6965).

You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigator, the University of Nebraska, or the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

___ Check if you agree to be audio taped during the interview.

_____   _____
Signature of Research Participant   Date

Katie Hauptman, Primary Investigator   Phone: (402) 499-6833
Julia Torquati, Ph.D., Secondary Investigator   Phone: (402) 472-1674

Interview Questions

Thank you for meeting with me. If you choose to participate in this interview please sign the consent form. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with myself (the investigator) or the University of Nebraska. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

(Turn on tape recorder)

Thanks for agreeing to be interviewed for this research project. I'm hopeful that the information you and the other directors of Sixpence programs share with me will help provide insight as to what is involved in successful programming.

I understand the work you do is crucial to ensure children are provided with optimal conditions allowing them to flourish. Each program director brings with them different experiences, philosophies, and expectations. I hope to gain an understanding as to why you feel your program has been successful, and in what ways. Through questioning your perceptions on the needs of your program, I will gain insight as to difficulties which arise in programming. I hope to gain an understanding of how you personally see children and families benefiting from your program. I will also inquire about your professional development.

I have a set of questions to guide our conversation. I believe that a good interview is a partnership between us. I want to understand your experiences, feelings and thoughts about your role as a director. You are the expert on those experiences.

Do you have any questions about what I've said or about the purpose of this interview?

1. Please describe your program.

2. Tell me about your own professional development.

   Follow ups: What is your education level? What past jobs have helped you

   prepare for this position? How do you learn from your program? Were there

   areas that you did not feel your program of study prepared you for in this job?

   How could that have been addressed in your college preparation?

3. What do you think makes your program successful?

   Follow ups: What are the requirements for staff? Who is involved in your

   program (community members, parents, etc)? What is your program philosophy?

   How do you ensure the program philosophy is followed?

4. What is your perception on the needs/challenges of your program?

   Follow ups: Are there needs which are not being met? Are there areas which need

   improvement? What strategies do you utilize to ensure your program needs are

   consistently met? What are the biggest challenges of your program? What are

   your biggest challenges as a director?

5. How do you promote ongoing learning and development with your staff?

   Follow ups: Are staff provided ongoing training? Planning time?

6. Describe your involvement with program planning.

   Follow ups: What are your roles and responsibilities? How is it ensured that the

   program is meeting goals/following guidelines? How long have you been in the

   role of director (here or elsewhere)?

7. Who do you see benefiting from your program?

Follow ups: How do you see this benefit? How does your program measure

achievement? What are the barriers to children/families benefitting as intended?

8. As a director, are you satisfied in your level of engagement with children and

   families?

   Follow ups: What steps do you take to ensure you remain happy in your work?

   With such a demanding position, do you feel you often "take work home with

   you" including emotionally? What do you do to ensure this does not negatively

   effect you?

9. What advice would you have for new directors of early childhood programs?

   Follow ups: Are there common mistakes often made by new directors? What

   would you consider to be the best attitude to have going into an already existing

   program?

10. What are your dreams for your program in the future?

Thanks for talking with me. I appreciate your time and willingness to assist me in my

research. I enjoyed visiting your program, and gaining a deeper understanding of your

experiences.