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IMPROVING THE PRACTICE AND CULTURE OF EARLY LEARNING IN OHIO

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Education

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Education

By

Diana Morello-DeSerio

December 2017

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Diana Morello-DeSerio

2017

Duquesne University
School of Education
Ed.D. in Educational Leadership

Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Education (Ed.D.)

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ABSTRACT

IMPROVING THE PRACTICE AND CULTURE OF EARLY LEARNING IN OHIO

By

Diana Morello-DeSerio

December 2017

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Rick McCown

How can preschool programs situated in public schools “get better at getting better?” This dissertation suggests a framework based on the principles of Improvement Science as one-way school districts can include preschool in their continuous improvement efforts. Document Analysis, is the method used to examine a continuous improvement protocol used in Ohio school districts known as The Ohio Improvement Process (The OIP Guide was the document analyzed). Additionally, Portraiture as “lived” experiences including both early learning educators and traditional school age leaders were reflected upon. The following research questions guided the study: What are the key operational components of the Ohio Improvement Process? How can schools benefit from merging the cultures of early learning programming with the culture of public schools while acknowledging the unique needs of children during the preschool years? What type of Design-based framework can be developed to assist with awareness, inquiry and

implementation of services to align preschool with school-age programming? The findings suggest cultural awareness between preschool and school age program needs to be understood as it resides in the broader context of traditional public schooling. Additionally, assessment, dialogue and teaming are key components to consider in the inclusion of preschool in public school continuous improvement efforts.

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A Problem and a Problem of Practice

Introduction

As the title indicates, this dissertation seeks to improve both the practice and culture of early learning in the State of Ohio, more specifically, the dissertation seeks,

1. To understand how the traditional culture of public schooling has marginalized the practice of early learning professionals in Ohio;
2. To examine how that marginalization impacts extant efforts to improve early learning practice in Ohio schools;
3. To examine how current improvement processes do and do not align with the emergent approaches to Improvement Science in education; and
4. To offer recommendations of how the educators, throughout the early learning system, might get better at getting better.

Chapter I introduces the reader to the problems typically encountered by early learning professionals and early learning programs collectively, as they participate in school district continuous improvement efforts. Next, the complexity and chaos of “who” is leading early learning programming in general and specifically in public schools is discussed. The need for competently trained and experienced early learning leaders in public schools is framed as a critical need to improvement efforts. The topic of culture in early learning programming, specifically, early education culture as it compares to the more historically extant culture of K-12 schools, is highlighted to help the reader notice the historical and pedagogical differences between these often-amalgamated fields of learning. Finally, the problem, as it is experienced by some early learning professionals and programs in Ohio, is introduced along with the systems of improvement they may currently engage. These improvement frameworks are outlined to help the reader frame his or her thinking through the lens of early learning/public school culture, and provides background knowledge to help with understanding the opportunities and challenges that exist for Ohio early learning professionals in public schools engaged in school improvement efforts.

In Chapter II, the literature review will provide a cultural and historical overview of the field of early childhood education and share a few of the current state-wide attempts to develop a system of early learning accountability. A context review will outline the current framework used in some Ohio schools to support school improvement; a description of this framework’s relationship to early learning programs and professionals working in these districts will be highlighted. Additionally, an overview of Improvement Science will be provided to introduce an alternative to top-down accountability measures.

Chapter III outlines the methods used to support the qualitative research study. The qualitative research methods of document analysis and narrative inquiry as portraiture will be used to consider the current challenges and opportunities existing for early learning professionals situated in Ohio public schools. An advocacy/participatory approach will be the focus throughout the study as the following research questions are considered within the context of history, present conditions, and future possibilities. The research questions include: “What are the key operational components of the Ohio Improvement Process?” “How can schools benefit from merging the cultures of early learning programming with the culture of public schools while acknowledging the unique needs of children during the preschool years?” and “What type of design-based framework can be developed to assist with awareness, inquiry, and implementation of services to align preschool with school-age programming?” The emerging themes will be identified and shared as findings in Chapter IV.

Chapter IV provides a discussion of the themes emerging from the policy analysis and portraiture in the form of narrative inquiry through episodes, as I have chosen to call them, to describe the lived experiences of my own professional involvement with the topic as well as those shared with me by others in some very fortuitous ways.

Chapter V offers recommendations for early childhood educators, early childhood educational leaders, and school-age educators and leaders to “think” together and examine the realities of the current system for the results it is currently delivering. This is a first step in the development of a change theory of action used to identify what change needs to happen that will result in an improvement. Finally, a blueprint for action is suggested, to be developed by a community of learners to build a common understanding of programming that will advance early learning and bridge the gap between pre-K and K-3 at the classroom, program, state, and

hopefully the federal level. Starting small to make incremental change in local program practices, it is suggested in Chapter V that improvement science may be the catalyst needed to recognize early learning as the vital missing piece to school improvement.

It is the hope of this educational leader that individuals will continue to collaborate to develop a systematic approach to challenge the social justice implications of early learning educators working in public schools, network to improve the teaching profession, and improve the experiences of children and families in the communities where they live. In one of his last interviews, Paulo Freire shared, “Social reality is not natural reality, but historically induced reality” (Rossatto, 2008, p. 151). We must remember to look back as we think forward.

General Overview

The purpose of this study is to examine and acknowledge the current landscape early learning professionals working in public schools typically must navigate as they struggle to exist in the traditional culture of public schooling. The need to identify ways to improve the existing continuous improvement processes used in Ohio as well as other school districts across the nation to encompass early learning programming is an essential school improvement measure, rather than an “add-on” or something to be considered “if need be” is not only supported by a multitude of research in both the fields of early learning, literacy, and economics, but imperative if we believe children to be one of our most important national resources.

The literature review will provide a cultural and historical overview of the field of early childhood education (ECE) and share a few of the current state-wide attempts to develop a system of early learning accountability. A context review will outline the current framework used in some Ohio schools to support school improvement; a description of this framework’s relationship to early learning programs and professionals working in these districts will be

highlighted. Additionally, an overview of Improvement Science will be provided to introduce an alternative to top-down accountability measures.

The qualitative research methods document analysis and narrative inquiry as portraiture will be used to consider the current challenges and opportunities existing for early learning professionals situated in public schools. An advocacy/participatory approach will be the focus throughout the study as the following research questions are considered within the context of history, present conditions, and future possibilities. The research questions include: What are the key operational components of the Ohio Improvement Process? How can schools benefit from merging the cultures of early learning programming with the culture of public schools while acknowledging the unique needs of children during the preschool years? What type of design-based framework can be developed to assist with awareness, inquiry, and implementation of services to align preschool with school-age programming? As themes emerge, it is the hope of the researcher that individuals will continue to collaborate to develop a systematic approach to challenge the social justice implications of early learning educators working in public schools, network to improve the teaching profession and improve the experiences of children and families in the communities where they live. In one of his last interviews, Paulo Freire shared, “Social reality is not natural reality, but historically induced reality” (Rossatto, 2008, p. 151). We must remember to look back as we think forward.

Accountability for student success happens long before kindergarten screening. Hart & Risely (2003) suggests at 18 months of age, a time of rapid word growth in children is when the achievement gap becomes evident. As the United States embraces the reality of living in a global and technological economy, there is no time like the present to design and provide quality early learning programs that support the growing needs of children on the path to healthy and

productive lives. Early learning must be recognized by school districts and become a meaningful part of strategic planning, executed as a viable approach to close the achievement gap (Takanishi, 2017). In the current early learning landscape, preschool programming remains separate from elementary school systems. There have been some attempts to narrow the gap between these two learning institutions, but because of limited funding, contrasting cultural and political norms, and a history of fragmented services of childcare, preschool, and parents' rights, early learning continues to exist more as a small business venue rather than an important aspect of educating our youngest citizens (Takanishi, 2017).

In the United States, preschool programming exists in a fragmented system of varying state licensing regulations, early learning development and content standards, varied and sometimes limited curriculum, professional development with a narrow focus, and at times, non-existent or limited assessment practices. The result of these fragmented practices is the inability for a systematic approach to be designed that will result in successful outcomes for the field. Without seeing the system where early learning currently resides, individuals continue to question why we are not experiencing the positive outcomes that the plethora of early learning research suggests we should be experiencing.

Another by-product of this current “unsystem” is that access to school for preschool children remains fragmented. Unless you “qualify” for a specific program, most families will not be able to afford a quality early learning experience. If your child has been identified with a disability at age three or four, center-based or home-based preschool and support services are typically available and children are entitled by federal law under the Individuals with Disabilities Entitlement Act (IDEA) to school-specific services as outlined in their Individualized Education Program (IEP); it is the responsibility of the Local Education Agency (LEA) or school district to

provide these services either through program-based or itinerant services. Additional funding for children to access preschool services include federal Head Start services provided to children and families at 100% of the poverty level, and the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), providing childcare money to families who qualify under Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF); these are the predominate federal funds available to serve children from birth to age five in the United States. Most of the funding is limited to a specific qualification such as having a disability or living at or below a specific percent of the poverty level. This leaves children and families who are lower-middle to upper-middle class with the challenge of finding quality early learning programs, including both childcare and preschool for their young children. Interestingly, information exists to suggest even the programs that children in poverty can access may or may not meet the criteria or benchmarks that would be considered quality by most experts (Espinosa, 2002). The lack of quality programming and restrictions concerning access are serious matters which often go unrecognized by individuals who are not directly affiliated with the field of early learning. What makes this even more concerning is that brain research over the past ten years complements the findings of seminal early learning case studies, suggesting stimulating classroom environments, teachers who probe student learning and health and family services promote a child's learning and development throughout the age spans (Hart & Risley, 2003; Mustard, J.F., 2006; Neuman, 2009; Shonkoff, 2012). It is for many of these reasons that various school districts need to make a commitment with stakeholders to develop quality early learning classrooms and centers; this can only be accomplished when local school improvement efforts are implemented. Knowing what needs to improve locally is a first step in system design and improvement.

A few early learning studies suggest young children's preschool gains wane by early elementary school. Elango, Garcia, Heckman, & Hojman (2015) provide "push back" on research studies suggesting such developmental gains "fade-out" by third grade. They suggest these studies put too much emphasis on measuring children's IQ scores and results from standardized third grade tests. They propose what should be analyzed is the social-emotional, life-skills, or what some call "soft skills," that remain strong throughout a child's life span. Elango et. al (2015) note that children who participated in the seminal early learning research projects such as the Abecedarian Study and the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project continued to make gains throughout their lifetime as measured by less need for special education, minimal incarcerations, and higher employment rates. These factors alone, in Heckman's opinion, are what indicates a child's success over a life span. Biology, neuroscience, economics, education, and psychological research all converge on one important finding—early experience impacts everyone, community and nation (Knudsen, Heckman, Cameron, & Shonkoff, 2006; Neuman, 2009). Quality early learning programs are fiscally sound investments and raise student test scores throughout a lifetime (Heckman, 2011). When the brain is properly stimulated and is designed effectively during the early years of childhood, the individual is set on a path for a healthier future, and will be more likely to do better in school and be a productive contributor to society (Shonkoff, 2012).

The factors that contribute to favorable brain architecture include caring and nurturing human relationships (Hart & Risley, 2003; Mustard, J.F., 2006; Neuman, 2009; Shonkoff, 2012), as well as:

- Language opportunities to expand vocabulary/concept development
- Literacy experiences that include reading and writing

- Natural and interesting resources that children can explore through play
- Access to health care (mental and physical)

These are a few factors that parents and district systems supporting young children can foster through environments and interactions with young children. Therefore, it is evident that young children should have access to quality developmental and learning experiences.

Leadership Gaps

I would like to suggest another reason why preschool children's gains wane or are not always evident during the time children spend in early learning programs. The issue, from my experience, resides in the lack of leadership of early learning professionals—more specifically, their lack of knowledge in the area of school improvement. Currently in the United States, early learning systems are victims of poor and misinformed leadership and underfunding, and are basically ignored by the more understood and acknowledged K-12 education system (Goffin, 2013). Because of its roots as a social reform program or to provide childcare to mothers who work, early learning and development programs have never achieved the status of being an important and indispensable part of an individual's education experience in the United States (Cannella, 2002). Even more concerning, in some states, kindergarten has yet to be a mandatory requirement of entrance into child group learning and experience (Compulsory School Age, n.d.).

Three factors affect the quality of early learning programs (Goffin, 2013, Neuman, 2009, Rodd, 2006):

- Multiple funding streams
- Varied and limited service delivery options
- Ill-prepared teachers and leaders

To advance their ability to lead early learning programs and professional development programming, some educators enroll in higher education programs that focus on education administration. Unfortunately, these leadership programs lack the components and criteria to support the development of early learning training and leadership. Additionally, as more and more programs specialized in early learning are created in school districts, these organizations need competently trained leaders. Unfortunately, and too often, early childhood education is neglectfully assigned as a generalized area of supervision within schools. Subsequently, early learning programs suffer.

Goffin (2013) in her discussion of unprepared leadership notes, as the public's appreciation for ECE expanded in response to growing awareness of early brain development and persuasive educational and financial results obtained from effective ECE programs, the field's disunity paved the way for caring and impatient philanthropists, business leaders, and federal and state policymakers to take the lead in finding ways to address the need for high-quality ECE programs. In the process, the field's contribution of specialized knowledge and practitioner expertise to program and systems development is being sidelined. ECE increasingly is the recipient of others' decisions, leaving it reactive to others' "change agenda" (p.10).

Children deserve quality early learning programs and we can only provide these programs when individuals are formally trained and have had experience in child development, instruction and educational leadership.

Early Learning Culture

Early learning as a cultural issue can be framed through the lens of power and socio-economic disparity. It is the intention of the author to suggest, in addition to power and poverty,

that race and gender are also critical areas that need to be addressed when considering barriers to early learning system development in school districts. Cannella (2002) writes,

Early childhood has virtually always been a two-tiered system in which one form of education is provided to the poor, to children of color, and to immigrants while another form of education is provided to children of privilege. Further, the curriculum has been and is viewed as designed to eliminate deficiency in one group and to develop potential in the other (p. 114).

It is also common knowledge that most early childhood teachers are women. Per the 2015 count of men in teaching positions on MenTeach.com, only 3.2% of the preschool and kindergarten teacher profession is staffed by men. Additionally, those working in the field of early learning often hear their profession or work referred to as “baby sitting” or simply “playing.” These comments and references, whether intentional or not, are reasons the teachers working in early learning are marginalized, minimized, and disrespected by the greater society, and sometimes even by early learning teachers themselves. My personal experience has included individuals suggesting to me what I may need to do when I become the principal of a “real” school. After attending a district training, a colleague for all intended purposes suggested I may want to take additional training when I become a “real” school principal. After all, Canella (2002) asks in a “tongue in cheek way,” “How difficult can it be to play with or read stories to children?” I, too, would question this mindset often. I was an early learning professional who did not want to identify to “others” what I did or for whom I worked. Not because I was ashamed of my performance as a teacher or as a leader of early learning, but because I knew I would be judged and perceived as “less than” when compared to teachers who worked in the elementary grades with “formal” or “real” educators. It is shameful to think of my limiting

behavior and how I allowed “others” thinking to frame my behavior. It took me too long to realize the entire profession is marginalized, and by acting in such a way, I disrespected the children and families who taught me to follow my passion and contribute to the work to which I am dedicated. In behaving this way, I also marginalized and disrespected myself.

When considering the aspect of power in early learning communities, Dahl’s Theory of Community Power resonated with situations I have found myself in when dealing with early learning leaders who have limited backgrounds and experience with leading early learning systems. Robert Dahl (2005) suggests that one person who is perceived by others as being practical, is limiting or does not permit others in the group to exercise their ideas. The power is practiced to cause the individuals who are subject to it, to follow the personal preferences of those in power. Obedience is the outcome of this type of regulating power and it is a way to coerce and dominate the practices within a group. This theory has multiple implications in early learning, resulting in the idea of early learning contributing to school district continuous improvement to either never occur or cease to exist. This practice of community power inhibits multiple possibilities for change and limits transformation from occurring. When this type of power imbalance is allowed to continue, the degree of trust within a system cripples the advancement of inquiry and collective learning by staff (Covey, 2006).

Since most would consider education an important right of children, it should be the responsibility of those trained and responsible for leadership in school districts to embrace all the families in their communities—starting with the youngest children and transitioning them through the grades to graduation. Bogard & Takanishi (2005) sums it up well by saying,

Children’s experiences from pre-K to kindergarten and kindergarten experiences to first through third grades should be linked. Transition activities are not sufficient. Pre-K to K

transition activities are usually one-time events such as teachers exchanging student records and classes visiting kindergarten classrooms (p. 10).

Alignment practices, on the other hand, involve an intentional organization of educational experiences that will enable children to advance to the next level in school. Alignment involves a master plan or system of early learning developed by a cadre of early learning professionals, community partners, and families, to provide the benefits for all community stakeholders—most importantly the children. When multiple sources of data and evidence-based practices are the basis for decision making, it assures that group that professional development offerings are intentionally planned to complement the common goals that teams determined essential for quality programming and child growth (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000). Neuman (2009) reminds us, “High-quality programs are not only defined by the services delivered but by the staff that delivers them” (p.63).

It is the intent of this paper to address the need for alignment of continuous improvement between district-supported early learning programs and school building/district goals for improvement. The rationale for this work is supported in the literature review and reiterates the crucial need for early learning programs to not only be situated in public school buildings, but to be active participants in school improvement efforts.

Problem of Practice in Ohio Public School Systems

Early childhood classrooms/programs are usually not included in school district continuous improvement efforts. Whether only one classroom, a cluster of classrooms, or entire school buildings consisting of many classrooms of preschool children situated in a school district, there is typically little representation of teachers and/or early childhood leaders partaking in data analysis strategies used to make high-leveraged programmatic decisions. In Ohio, this is

also the case. One reason is the dual systems that exist within most schools. These dual systems reside in two different state government agencies; the state Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS, a framework for quality preschool in Ohio known as Step Up To Quality (SUTQ)), is led by the Department of Job and Family Services (with some input from preschool consultants at the Department of Education), and the Ohio Department of Education, which advocates for the use of the Ohio Improvement System (OIP) as a framework of continuous improvement in public schools.

Two Systems of Improvement?

Just prior to the federal awards of the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant (RTT-ELCG), school districts who were being identified in Ohio with a determination of needing school improvement, were being introduced to a process called OIP (Ohio Improvement Process). The OIP supports the use of multiple data points to help develop two to three main goals; one in reading, one in math, and an optional climate goal. This process was developed to create school-wide data-driven teams known as TBT's (Teacher Based Teams), BLT's (Building Level Teams), and DLT's (District Level Teams). These teams are charged with looking at data to determine the highest district need in each area, and to create goals, action steps, both adult and student implementation strategies, and a monitoring plan. It was quickly identified by consultants, district personnel, and state department consultants that this process would be an ideal avenue to continue bridging pre-K with school age programming. Discussions occurred and a few preliminary documents were written; but this soon changed when the federal RTT-ELG grant was awarded to the state.

At this same time, Quality Rating Systems (QRS) emerged across the nation as a framework to define and promote quality early learning programming in community-based

preschool programs. Although the process and frameworks were not mandatory, similar from state to state or proven effective through research, states chose to base the design of RTT-ELCG rating systems on the existing QRS protocols as they attempted to define quality in early learning systems across multiple venues (Kirby, Caronongan, Malone, & Boller, 2015). As a result of QRS being a focal point of the RTT-ELCG, the federal government catapulted QRS protocols in some states to the forefront (Kirby et al. 2015). With little thought of existing frameworks or continuous improvement processes already in place, states (including Ohio) went to work to develop a new QRS framework to define quality across childcare (both private and public), public preschool programs, and preschool special education classrooms. Overnight, state QRS morphed from a market-based policy developed to help parents make informed choices about childcare to a state-wide accountability system, now with the new identifier of improvement; QRIS (Quality Rating and Improvement System) was designed as an attempt to create, promote, and sustain quality and now improvement in early learning programs.

Prior to being awarded the federal RTT-ELCG, the state Department of Education monitored preschool programs through a process called IMPACT in programs where they provided funding and the state social services department (Jobs and Family Services) monitored childcare programs through daycare licensing and the existing QRS. After the RTT-ELCG was awarded, all programs providing preschool and/or childcare and also receiving public funding were required to participate in the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS); in Ohio, this is called Step Up To Quality (SUTQ). This meant school district preschool programs had to abandon their previous monitoring system and adapt to the new process. Most district preschool supervisors had had little, if any, experience with QRIS's or the agency (Job and Family Services) where they were mostly developed. Program assessments were predominately

from the childcare sector, and forms were vetted through the social services department, causing change and surmounting confusion to public school preschool programming; the differing cultures of the two agencies were seldom addressed (personal experience). The QRIS process became the most important new learning protocol for district administrators who found themselves responsible for implementing the new SUTQ process and the importance of bridging of pre-K - K-3 was discussed less and less in lieu of learning this new process. Both the OIP and QRIS have a continuous improvement process imbedded; however, they are not linked and in some cases, districts have never even seen the preschool goals and action steps. It is not unusual for most schools to use specific forms to help outline their continuous improvement efforts; but when programming such as QRIS is part of a district system of education, yet has its own process of implementation and completely different forms that are not linked to the existing district plan, this contributes to the historical problem of early learning being alienated from K-12 schooling. This disconnect between pre-K district improvement and overall K-12 district-wide improvement continues to be a barrier to seamless services for children ages three to eight—the years of human growth that brain research tells us are the most formidable. It is the intent of this author to investigate the current opportunities available to Ohio school district pre-K to grade three programming as the following questions are considered: What are the key operational components of the Ohio Improvement Process? How can schools benefit from merging the cultures of early learning programming with the culture of public schools while acknowledging the unique needs of children during the preschool years? What type of design-based framework can be developed to assist with awareness, inquiry, and implementation of services to align preschool with school-age programming?

As one reads this study, the historical implications of early learning programs in the United States and lack of professional development across the field of education specifically focused on early learning systems development in public schools, will help the reader understand why we are currently asking these systems questions pertaining to early education. To be able to change a current system, it is imperative that we “see” and understand the current reality of the present system (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & Mahieu, 2015). Chapter II’s literature review and context review will provide the reader with an expansive lens to examine the historical and contextual issues affecting early learning in public schools as a system improvement issue.

REVIEW OF ACTIONABLE KNOWLEDGE

Literature Review

The topic of educational leadership specific to the field of early childhood education is as complex and diverse as the field of early childhood itself. This literature review is an attempt to explore the complex topic of leadership and early learning accountability as it pertains to individuals who are responsible for leading early learning programs and systems. For this reason, the literature review will explore how early childhood professionals, school-age personnel, and society as a whole experience early childhood education and how leadership influences the settings or systems where early learning professionals are called to teach, manage, and lead; this includes engaging stakeholders in curriculum development, assessment practices, and professional learning determined through current data and research to be best suited for a particular early learning setting. Originally, the intent was to focus on one particular setting, the public school systems of the United States; but because of the limited studies specific to early learning leadership situated within public schools, the review was expanded to include both public and private childcare and preschool programs.

Key words used to find peer-reviewed journal articles of research studies specific to all early learning leadership topics include, “early learning leadership,” “early childhood,” “leadership,” “preschool leadership,” “early learning pre-K - grade three systems,” “early learning leadership,” “public schools,” “early childhood,” “administration,” “distributive leadership,” “adaptive,” and “shared leadership.” Additional areas specific to the context of the study include, “early learning professional development,” “constructivist approach to learning,” “professional learning communities,” “continuous improvement in early learning,” and “Improvement Science.” Of the studies chosen for this review, most were qualitative with a few using a mixed methodology. Because the topic of leadership in early learning has very few associated research studies, references from those found and analyzed were used to find additional sources. This literature review consists of predominately peer-reviewed journal articles; a few books and reports were referenced in order to provide a deeper context of the subject. Past and current themes related to the topic of leadership and learning specific to early childhood will be discussed. Although some information shared will be specific to childcare programs, it is the author’s intent to focus on the early learning leadership found in state and federal early learning programs, specifically those situated in public school systems in the United States.

It is almost impossible to discuss and understand quality early childhood systems without considering two of the most influential early learning longitudinal studies in the United States. These programs, the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project and the Abecedarian Study, are commonly referenced when early learning leaders advocate for quality programs and services that yield long-term social, education, and overall financial benefits.

The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project was effective from 1962 until 1967 in Ypsilanti, Michigan, as an experiment to determine if quality early learning services for children living in poverty ages three and four could yield long-term gains in academic, social-emotional, and community outcomes (Parks, 2000). The Abecedarian Study, which was implemented in 1978 by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center in North Carolina, was similar but provided services to children birth through age five (Campbell & Ramey, 1994). Both program participants were low-income, predominately African-American families whose children were assumed to be at risk for school failure; approximately 120-123 families participated in each project respectively.

The cost-analysis details of both of these programs show that both were expensive yet beneficial, and had high return rates in multiple areas including reduced special education services, higher graduation rates, higher college education rates, and reduced reports of crime in adulthood (Masse & Barnett, 2002). There are several reasons for the high cost to implement these programs. The learning environment was equipped with developmentally appropriate materials spanning several age groups, most of the staff had college degrees, and medical and nutritional supports were also provided. The most celebrated outcome of both of these studies is the cognitive gains the children made as measured by IQ scores (Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Currie, 2001). Even though the Abecedarian Study yielded the highest degree of sustained learning, the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project longitudinal outcomes reveal that children continued to show social and societal gains comparative to the control group. Economically speaking, it is estimated that the return per dollar of cost of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project was in excess of 14%. Stock Market equity is usually around 7.2%, indicating the return rate is substantial; this is even without factoring in the returns generated from future health and

mental health costs (Heckman, 2011). Post adolescent or adult remediation for disadvantaged adults produces low economic returns. Even for those studies showing benefits from later intervention, the performance of disadvantaged children continues to lag behind those who received early intervention during the preschool years (Heckman, 2011).

There are many articles that have been written about the success of these two programs and those similar; but one thing that is usually not emphasized in the research is the system that cradles such high-quality early learning programs. Campbell & Ramey (1994) mentions the location of the childcare center in the Abecedarian Study being in a building owned by the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The center director had a graduate degree in early childhood education, and there were also curriculum developers who worked closely with teachers to develop emergent curriculum with the infants and toddlers. Emergent curriculum is a cyclical process that evolves in response to the changing needs and interests of the child, the family and community's interests and concerns, as well as the teacher's inquiry of the child's learning. The framework of observation and inquiry drives the future learning of each child while considering the needs of the whole classroom as a thriving community of learners (Queensland Studies Authority, 2013). The program worked closely with the local school districts to assure child growth and learning would continue as children entered the public school. The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project was also led by qualified staff, connected to local school districts, and provided high-quality learning environments (Currie, 2001).

Chicago Parent Centers

The Chicago Parent Centers were created in 1967 using federal Title I dollars. These preschool/childcare centers were located within the existing primary schools and provided comprehensive educational and family supports to economically disadvantaged children and

families (Reynolds, 2000). In a study of how the home environment combined with a quality preschool center-based experience influences literacy and mathematical development through the primary grade, researchers found the home learning environment (HLE) consisting of adult/child interactions (listening and being responsive), being read to aloud, playing/learning with numbers and letters, singing songs, chanting finger plays, and painting and drawing, had substantial influence on child outcomes on tests of reading and math (Melhuish, Phan, Sammon, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2008). The school-based child development center provided a stable learning environment where children engaged and explored and where parents discovered and enhanced their ability to interact and respond to their children in ways that enhanced attachment and cognitive growth. Because the Chicago Parent Centers were located in public schools, the program easily provided supports and services to families as their children transitioned between and within the elementary grades (Reynolds & Niles, 2004).

In a study by Graue, Clements, Reynolds, & Niles (2004), the curriculum developed in the various classrooms of the Chicago Parent Centers was described as being either high in child-initiated activities (e.g., learning centers, small group activities) or high in teacher-directed activities (e.g., larger group activities, basic skills emphasis). Four curriculum groups emerged from the two major descriptors and it was noted the majority of the children participated in classrooms referred to as high child-initiated and also high teacher-directed strategies. Additionally, parents participated in the centers where more child-initiated strategies occurred. Overall results indicated high teacher-directed and high child-initiated classrooms were significantly and positively associated with children's school readiness indicators at the end of the preschool year. High teacher-directed and low child-initiated classrooms had a negative association with children's school readiness. High teacher-directed and high child-initiated are

what come to mind when considering a child's "zone-of-proximal development." Vygotskian Constructivism suggests children gain knowledge through social interactions involving language, concepts mapped to prior knowledge and cultural experiences, and interactions with adults and more advanced peers. This type of learning in preschool typically occurs when children are highly engaged in experiences facilitated by adults and provide opportunities for children to build on their existing knowledge and lead the experience in a direction that engages their interests. Some early learning professionals refer to this as the "Project Approach" to curriculum and others will recognize elements of the internationally-known preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. More than likely, this is the type of learning environments found within the early Chicago Parent Centers which yielded the highest outcomes for children.

The Chicago Parent Centers still exist today but not with the same emphasis as in the sixties because of budget restraints over the years. Recently, through the federal i3 grants (Investing in Innovation Grant), federal dollars have again allowed for program expansion and enhancement—but only for the four-year grant period. Research studies that include preschool cost-analysis reports and child-outcome studies all include the Chicago Parent Centers when emphasizing early learning programs that have proven to have short- and long-term benefits to children living in poverty.

Although child outcomes are extremely important, it is the intent of this paper to highlight the systems that allowed for such positive outcomes for children and families. Reynolds & Niles (2004) explains the system of early childhood supports in the Chicago Parent Centers includes teachers who all have a bachelor's degree and are certified in early childhood education. In addition, they receive regular staff development and are employees of the Chicago Public School system, implying they are on a relatively well-paid salary scale. This information

also suggests leaders of the early learning systems in these model programs are highly credentialed in educational leadership as well as early childhood education.

The three studies mentioned, the Abecedarian Study, the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, and the Chicago Parent Centers, are those which are typically used to describe the positive outcomes of a quality early childhood program. Although some of the studies are small and dated, the common factor outlying each one is the connection to the public school system. This factor is not always an emphasis of research studies and not always a known fact in early learning circles. It is, however, important to the consistency, professionalism, and quality of services that need to be available to young children in each community.

Leadership, connection to public schooling, developmentally appropriate learning environments, and parent involvement are the essential ingredients mentioned in the longitudinal studies which yield high returns on early learning investments. Early learning advocates are quick to mention the need for more fiscal support for quality early learning systems, yet fail to mention the importance of having a quality early learning leader to lead the system who is fiscally responsible and can use appropriate data to make informed decisions. There is a critical need in the profession of early childhood for competent leaders who have early childhood and leadership credentials, as well as experience in early learning pedagogy (Goffin, 2013). Early learning advocates need to highlight why quality leadership is linked to the education and development outcomes of young children as a critical, connected, and crucial piece to the education and care needs of working families and the achievement of each child. If we have learned anything from the historical longitudinal studies, the impact of such educational systems cannot be ignored.

Hood, Hunt, Tozer, & Perone (2011) comment,

That while the literature defines theories and structural practices around creating a continuum of learning between early learning and K-12 schools, the literature neglects to consider the human capital supports needed to develop and sustain connections between the two sectors, especially with the role of school principals (p. 6).

The review of the literature will outline the potential that exists when principals who have knowledge leading school improvement efforts and an early learning background in school districts use multiple sources of data to drive continuous improvement. First, the definition of “system” will be introduced, and then the relationship of this concept to early learning will be revisited to introduce how a “Comprehensive Early Learning” system impacts educators’ professional growth and student outcomes.

What is considered a system of early learning that supports positive outcomes for all children? The dictionary definition of a system is defined as a set of connected things or parts forming a complex whole (Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary, n.d.). In education, systems are often described in terms of alignment, suggesting that what informs certain pre-determined criteria needs to complement or inform another area of the system (California Education Policy Convening, 2007). The success of a system is usually measured through student growth and adult behavior indicators. Through the use of specific assessment tools, the growth and learning that is expected to occur within or over grade bands is typically described in terms of learning outcomes. Learning outcomes, specifically in reading and math, are used to analyze and describe the achievement gap that exists between groups of students who identify with specific demographic characteristics. Educational Leaders are all too familiar with what is considered the “achievement gap”—the gap that describes the academic achievement disparities that exist between various groups of children (Ed Week, 2013). Poverty is one of the biggest factors

contributing to the “gap” that creates the huge chasm between economically disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers. The cognitive scores of four-year-old children living in poverty are approximately 60% lower than children who are not economically disadvantaged (Neuman, 2006). The problem of how preschool children are cared for and by whom is an international issue, especially for low- and middle-income families (Heyman, 2006). Heyman (2006) notes that less affluent families continue to search for childcare that is safe and nurturing, and provides cognitive support to their young children; they understand that the teacher needs to have training and the facilities must be equipped with adequate resources for learning and development. Hart & Risley (2003) notes that children who live in families that are exposed to print-rich resources, have meaningful exchanges of conversation and experience a high degree of social emotional support start their lives developing *schemas* or “patterns in the brain” that contribute to the ability to think in complex ways. These *schemas* collectively allow children to make sense of incoming information in ways that cause them to think critically about the world in which they live (Rumelhart, 1980). By providing families of young children (birth to age five) access to resources and human capital to support learning and development, it is my belief that public schools, who make a concerted effort to develop comprehensive early learning systems through continuous improvement inquiry, are in positions that could narrow the “achievement gap.”

Educational Leaders can no longer ignore the impact quality early learning systems have on the lives of children and families. The implications of supporting children as our most vulnerable citizens and aiding their development of critical habits of mind are crucial to approaching the world through a lens of social justice.

Early Childhood: Historical Perspective

Historically, in the United States, compulsory school age has ranged in ages five through eight, depending on the state of residence (Info please online, n.d). Some states in the nation still consider first grade as the entry point for “formal” schooling with kindergarten remaining as an optional family decision. When children reach the compulsory age of schooling, it is the legal responsibility of parents to send their children to school (ESC online, n.d.). The earliest schools in America were created by the Puritans to assure that children were indoctrinated with the values that they hoped would be passed down through the generations (Herring, 2003). Next, Thomas Jefferson suggested that the new nation needed some type of public education system. Finally, and approximately 60 years after Jefferson’s suggestion, a few public schools had popped up around the more affluent parts of the new nation (Smith, 2013). However, that small sprinkling of schools wasn't good enough for education crusaders Horace Mann of Massachusetts and Henry Barnard of Connecticut. They advocated for free, compulsory school for every child in the nation. In 1852, Massachusetts passed the first compulsory school law. The following year, the state of New York did the same and by 1918, it was a requirement for all American children to at least attend elementary school (Spring, 2011). As a result, public education, typically defined as beginning at grade one, was established to allow all children to learn to read, write, and become productive in the newly established lands of America.

In stark contrast, kindergarten and preschool in the United States were developed predominately as a social reform effort to ameliorate the health, behavior, and overall culture of the poor families who had immigrated to the United States, and those families that didn’t quite fit the “normal” qualities of white middle/upper class America (Cannella, 2002). Cannella (2002) continues by saying that the early efforts to establish group nursery schools to “fix” or “adjust”

the ills of society through remediating the children of the poor were in direct conflict with the values and beliefs of middle and upper class families who believed the “home” to be the proper place for young children to grow and learn. Salman, as noted in Spring (2011), mentions that in the early 1800’s as the reform of poor young children began in the early infant schools, some affluent parents began to take note of the innovative methods being used and thought it may be a good idea for mothers to share information and develop enrichment groups for their young as well. However, critics in the 1840’s, mostly those in more influential professional roles such as pediatricians, proposed that education outside of the home would harm the young child, possibly causing epilepsy or even insanity (Winterer, 1992). Society at this time suggested that families with mothers who needed to work and would need childcare during this time, were more often than not pathological (Cannella, 2002). The Webster Dictionary online defines “pathological” as extreme, in a way that is not normal or that shows an illness or mental problem. This paper suggests that this type of thinking still exists in society today and affects and informs the policies and funding that tend to marginalize early learning systems.

For more than a century, multitudes of children have been subjected to either early learning programs that have considered children from disadvantaged homes subordinate to their more affluent counterparts, or have suggested that it wasn’t necessary or safe for their more affluent peers to participate in group learning experiences outside of the home (Winterer, 1992). The reality, or maybe comedy, of the 21st century is that we are living in a time where women make up approximately 47% of the workforce (Women in the Labor Force: A Databook, 2013). Many of these women are single parents, “breadwinner” moms, or traditional family moms and lesbian couples who choose to work. If the 19th century opinions of pediatrician and mental health practitioners were operable today, a large number of women and children from all socio-

economic levels would need mental health support. Fortunately, recent advances in neuroscience are now providing profound evidence of how the early experiences of young children have lasting effects on future cognitive, social, and physical health (Shonkoff, 2012).

Leading Early Learning Communities, What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do (2005), is quoted as saying,

Recent brain research makes it clear that children's learning is enhanced by their early childhood experiences. Therefore, educators are shifting their approach to support children's learning well before they arrive at elementary school.

Research shows that children who finish pre-K programs are half as likely to need special education services in later grades. Other studies have found that children from low-income families who graduate high school and attend college are less likely to go to jail, become teen parents, or qualify for welfare. (p. 4)

The infant brain is highly complex and is constructing meaning and learning even prior to conception. This new evidence has multiple implications for how environments and experiences during the first five years of life impact the way children will respond and use knowledge to navigate the world in which they live (Gopnik, 2011).

All young children should have access to quality early learning programs. This message is touted consistently in early learning circles, backed by the science of economics, and is a concept that is beginning to "make sense" to most individuals regardless of profession or background. James Heckman, Nobel laureate in economics at the University of Chicago, has been a proponent of early learning for many years. He urges parents to have greater awareness of the most important influences on a child's development, family, home, and immediate social circles (Maeroff, 2006). Yet, every day in almost all communities throughout the United States,

a young child who could benefit from participating in a quality early learning experience is not able to access a program because of income or poor programming, or because there are limited early learning systems in their demographic area that provide centralized services. Worst yet, children who do participate in early learning programs are not experiencing quality because of ill-prepared leaders, haphazard curriculum implementation, and a lack of community partnerships (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012).

This brings us back to the question of, “What is a comprehensive system of Early Learning?”, “Why should it be the school district’s responsibility to assure that all children have access to quality early learning experiences?” and “What can be done to align continuous improvement efforts between pre-K – K-12 classrooms?” It is important for the reader to remember that in both the Perry Preschool Project and the Abecedarian Longitudinal study, as well as in other long-term early learning program examples that have touted long-term gains in student successes, such as the Chicago Parent Schools, all have had ties to highly-qualified individuals with early learning backgrounds and worked closely with the local school district. A comprehensive system of early learning must consider the following components: Leadership, multiple access and entry points, a continuum of learning, team work (network communities) both within the district and with the community, staff development, and multiple family partnerships and services (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012).

Leadership

In the Executive Summary of, *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do* (2005), there are six standards of practice outlined to assist principals in developing and implementing their policies and practices around early learning systems. It is the opinion of this paper that few principals/directors know of the

guidebook published by the National Association of Elementary Principals. The reason is simple; most individuals working in education today typically focus on issues that they are held accountable for through compliance measures, or those that provide relatively quick and essentially easy outcome data (Mead, 2011). Although district early learning programs are accountable to state or/and federal compliance measures, the results are not typically shared publicly like their K-12 counterparts (Gruendel & Stedron, as cited in Kagan, 2012).

Maeroff (2006) reminds us that “Critics of American education cite lagging test scores, high dropout rates, and the need for remedial courses in college as signs of the deficiencies of public schools” (p.2). He then notes that critics who reiterate this information, including educational leaders, seldom pay close enough attention to what is happening in the early learning years, the years that are the foundation of a child’s life (Maeroff, 2006).

Although the information in the principal guidebook is excellent and research based, I would like to suggest that there is another important element that is currently missing—direct experience and knowledge of early learning curriculum and assessment. It is suggested, to be an administrator in a district early learning program, one should have prior experience administrating early learning programs or have early learning classroom experience or at least have additional education in early learning and development. Ebbeck & Waniganayake (2003) clearly articulates the typical practice found throughout the early learning profession of permitting those in social services or "other" fields to assume leadership roles in government, program leadership, and sometimes even classroom oversight. Ebbeck & Waniganayake (2013) start with a statement, "Medical practitioners perform tasks related to people's health and well-being and do not advise you on accounting or doing your taxes" (pg. 5), then leads into another, "Secondary teachers of science do not front up to their students doing an examination and start

teaching them history" (p.6); the question is then asked, "Why is it ok and acceptable for early learning leaders to come from various disciplines outside of early learning?" I have experienced this phenomenon time and time again in various early learning sectors. I myself was educated as a primary teacher during my undergraduate studies, but quickly recognized after spending some time in an early learning classroom, that the field was specific and unique to children ages birth to eight; therefore, I pursued a master's degree in early childhood. As I transitioned into a leadership position, I sought more training in leading school systems and completed a master's degree in educational leadership.

This paper proposes the need for definitive and qualified early learning leaders to take the role as instructional leaders in district early childhood programs. The challenge of leading a school building with multiple grade levels in addition to pre-K is defined by the six standards outlined in the book, *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities*, which identifies the skills that principals should have to understand and support quality early learning systems. It is a daunting undertaking for even the most seasoned school leader to manage the daily tasks of running a school building, supporting teachers K-3 and also overseeing early learning programming. Early learning leadership is complex; not only does the individual need to understand child learning and development, but also how to connect with mental health, dieticians, and other medical professionals. Even when considering the oversight of one classroom in a school building, administrators at the building and district level often forget about their responsibility to children and families before ages three and four, or what has typically been considered the years building upon the "transition to kindergarten." It is simpler to be responsible for 20 preschoolers who participate in state pre-K services, a special education classroom, or a Title I early learning program, then to look beyond the classroom walls and

consider the foundational learning that could be taking place with children younger than age five. Considering the existing research, the longitudinal studies which had sustained child outcomes did just that, and these are the programs that will forever be noted as changing an approach to services, and changing the life of a child and his/her family. Interestingly, many state departments of education guidelines do not specify that individuals who lead early learning programs need to have a degree or previous experience in early childhood (Buysee & Wesley, 2010).

It is time to identify individuals with knowledge and experience in early learning to lead district programs. Time needs to be dedicated to developing leaders that have the experience, passion, and time to implement innovative systems that support early childhood learning and development, both within and connected to the school district.

Early Learning Programs in Public School Districts

District early learning programs usually define their early learning program as either one or two classrooms of children that are physically located in one of the school buildings; and this fulfills the district's belief that they are meeting the need to enhance the lives of either a young child with special needs or those who are living in poverty. The question that lingers is, "What about all of the other children who will soon be entering the district as a kindergarten child?"

This includes children who are in community preschool programs, childcare, Head Start, Family Home Childcare, or at home with a parent or family member. It is a rare opportunity, except for the most affluent, to have access to high-quality and affordable childcare or preschool (Neuman, 2006).

Families who are not of the most affluent socioeconomic status need quality early learning programs that support children holistically and are both affordable and easy to

demographically access (Heyman, 2006). In rural areas, early learning programs are not always in close proximity to a child's home; many are found to be located in a home-base program or a relative's home that has limited or no state/federal oversight (Neuman, 2009).

Is it the responsibility of the local school district to provide or join in the effort of supporting the experiences of future students, especially those living in poverty, with a quality early learning program? A few school districts have assumed this responsibility and the results have been very promising. In their work, *Making a Difference* (2010), Sullivan-Dudzic, Gearn, & Leavell remind us that pre-K to elementary school alignment is not a new idea. Since the early 1970's, efforts, mostly through large programs such as Head Start, have been initiated to develop strategies to connect practices or transition children from pre-K into kindergarten. Many of these efforts were designed as research projects that provided evidence suggesting that although two years of preschool is beneficial, it is even more important for quality instruction to be sustained as children pass through early elementary grades.

A seldom acknowledged and little discussed school-based comprehensive early childhood program was developed in the 1970's in the Brookline Community near Boston, Massachusetts. The Brookline City Schools project, the Brookline Early Education Program (BEEP), differed significantly from other early learning demonstration projects because it was initiated entirely by school district personnel and was not the conception of a child development research project. This unique endeavor was originated to assist families from the birth of their child through kindergarten age to provide a quality home environment and prepare children for a successful school experience in the Brookline School District. The vision of investing early to eliminate or reduce the need for special services later compliments the findings of Elango et al. (2015), Neuman (2009), Shonkoff (2012) and many other leading early childhood researchers

that have shown since the inception of BEEP, that investing early does provide a return on investment.

In 1972, Brookline School District was led by a superintendent and visionary leader named Robert I. Sperber. Sperber developed a comprehensive team of professionals who would work together over several years to develop a program that would reap substantial benefits to the Brookline community. Sperber and the team used the early childhood research existing at this time from the Harvard Preschool Project, Head Start and other developmental research to frame a program that included education, health, and family supports. The Brookline community was diverse and could be described as an urban setting. Demographically, approximately 33% disclosed on an annual census that the family spoke a language other than English, almost 20% of the families were single parent households, and the socioeconomics of the families varied; most families living closet to the Boston City limits were usually the poorest. Not surprising, most of the children living in homes where parents were college graduates usually attended some type of private preschool; on the contrary, less than 50% of the children from families with parents with minimal education attended a private preschool, a daycare center, or Head Start. The program stressed that the overarching goal was not to accelerate or force development, but to facilitate the competence of the child through effective home environments, enriching school experiences, and adequate health care, all within accessible and supportive networks. The role the public school had in the early implementation of BEEP was to help with the coordination of programs and services to families, not to replace the family decisions or suggest that professionals could to a better job with child rearing. The parent component was a partnership, and the family unit was consistently placed at the foreground of the education process. The concept of parents as the child's first teacher was upheld, with the added benefit of a community

willing to assist in areas that families may find challenging. The knowledge of parents was the foundation for further assistance by the school district; just like individualizing for each child, each family worked with the family service coordinator as a partnership to strengthen the existing unit. Funding for BEEP was a concern. Collaboration between the Boston Children's Hospital and other local services eased some of the cost, and other funding was provided by private foundations. Another unique feature of the BEEP program is that it serviced all families of young children in Brookline and the Metro Boston area. It did not come with the stigma that some social service programs are stereotyped with, and therefore, it did not inherit a stigma itself. Because the BEEP program was education-based with coordination of health, mental health, and family programming, the social workers assigned to various projects did not provide direct services, but instead acted as a connector, helping parents and guiding them to the appropriate services. While the success of BEEP is remarkable, it is a community success story that is seldom shared with early learning or elementary educators as a model to advance the early childhood agenda. It is recommended that more individuals investigate its past and current programs for ideas on how to develop and implement a model comprehensive birth to primary school program that is a component of a public school.

Sullivan-Dudzic et al. (2010) introduces the Bremerton case to illustrate a framework for creating a systemic approach to early learning. Bremerton Local Schools began by creating an early learning team that asked the question, "Do we know where our children are prior to attending this school district?" The answer was, "not really." They came to a collective agreement through the process of inquiry and publicly acknowledged that learning does not begin in kindergarten. They then set out to develop partnerships with a wide-variety of private community preschools, childcare, and local Head Start grantees to discuss what measures could

be taken to engage in common professional development, alignment of curriculum and assessment, and other activities that would benefit the community as a whole. By aligning philosophy and curriculum, parents, teachers, and children benefited from a common language and common expectations. The district expansion that occurred by inviting preschool partners to be equal members of the Bremerton early learning team provided a voice for preschool programs, not embedded within the district, to work closely with those within the district to become more strategic and intentional concerning quality and continuity for children and families. The reading achievement and behavior data of the Bremerton Schools reflects the benefits of this type of thinking and planning. Only 4% of the 2001 kindergarten class in the Bremerton School District had the knowledge and skills that would determine their readiness to read by the third grade. This information suggests that most children scored below benchmark on the DIBELS assessment of literacy. After implementing the Early Childhood Care and Education Partnership, this is what they had to say:

Our Early Childhood Care and Education Partnership with our community's preschools and childcare centers costs approximately \$35,000.00 a year plus the initial cost of curriculum or about \$117.00 per student. This small investment has yielded an almost doubling of the reading readiness skills children bring to kindergarten (Hyde, Jenkins, & Sullivan-Dudzic, PowerPoint slide p.11-12, 2009).

Not only have the combined efforts of the Bremerton Locals School's Early Childhood Care and Education Partnership and all-day kindergarten saved the district thousands of dollars, in 2007 these combined strategies resulted in 92.3% of kindergarten children scoring at benchmark for early literacy skills as measured by DIBELS, an 88% increase from 2001 (Hyde et al. ppt, p.11-12, 2009).

Tulsa, Oklahoma, provides a model universal preschool program that has been the focus of national attention. The public school partners with the local community action Head Start program to provide comprehensive services to children ages three and four. Barnett & Frede (2010) explains how Tulsa meets the ten benchmarks of a quality early learning program as outlined by the National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER). The first four benchmarks outline teacher credentials and support; for example, all teachers are required to have a bachelor's degree in early learning and development as well as assistant teachers have either a Child Development Credential (CDA) or some course work in child development. Benchmarks five and six outline the child to adult ratio and discuss how it is maintained at a one-adult-to-ten-children ratio. The last four benchmarks outline the program curriculum and assessment and the example of how the program is being guided by early learning standards. These benchmarks, coupled with the partnership with Head Start, allow Tulsa to provide free and quality universal preschool to a large percentage of children. Research is also noting the cognitive gains children have made from attending this program (Johnson, Markowitz, Hill, & Phillips, 2016).

Some of the reasons school districts fail to provide aligned and comprehensive early learning programming to preschool children who live within the boundaries of school districts include leaders who have limited knowledge of early learning system development, misunderstanding of funding sources that are perceived to be specific to narrowly defined groups of children, and the perception of central office personnel that early learning is only a small fraction of what is important in the entire scheme of what impacts district outcomes (Neuman, 2009).

Birth to Third Grade Continuum

Birth to third grade continuum, for the purpose of this paper, refers to defining and acknowledging the inter-connectedness between birth to five programs and services and the pedagogy of the early elementary years, specifically kindergarten through grade three. Maeroff (2006) reminds us that, “Historically, Americans have largely viewed these efforts as separate places to sojourn along the educational journey, each level having little more to do with the other than through which a vacationer might pass during a grand tour of European capitals.” He goes on to say that for too many American children, their early years tend to be a dead end journey, resulting in an attempt to navigate through a confusing jumble of services, similar to stumbling through the house of mirrors in a carnival fun house. Birth to third grade continuum seems like a reasonable concept that should be relatively easy to accept by most. However, the suggestion of linking the preschool years of children three and four with kindergarten sometimes causes program leaders of all early learning programs to become uneasy. Questions from community daycares such as, “Is the district trying to take our kids?” or “Who decides on what curriculum to follow?” and possibly, “We are completely satisfied with how we operate; why would we want to change what we are doing?” emerge and the issues of power and control follow.

There is sometimes a dramatic difference between the instructional strategies of elementary school teachers and early childhood teachers. Elementary schools typically take a more didactic approach to instruction and rely heavily on the use of worksheets and teacher-directed activities, and “teacher talk” prevails (Maeroff, 2006). Staff is usually more rigid in their daily schedule, and assessment procedures tend to be formal and standardized. Early childhood educators tend to take a more integrated approach to curriculum. The environment is usually center based and supports exploration and play for individual children and small groups.

Choice for each child is emphasized and the classroom is promoted as a community that supports each child holistically. Teachers are facilitators that extend the thinking of each child and provide activities to promote both development and learning. These pedagogical differences are what sometimes prevent the connection between the two worlds of early learning. Some fear that if public schools implement early learning programs, the child-centered approach to learning will be abandoned for more academic curriculum. Politically, it is paradoxical that the same individuals who support private community preschool and childcare and are against public schools assuming responsibility for preschoolers, are the same who object to private school vouchers and charter schools for K-12th grade (Maeroff, 2006).

The Foundation for Child Development Pre-K to 3 Policy to Action Brief # 7, *PreK-3: Principals as Crucial Instructional Leaders* (2010), outlines the points for creating a pre-K–3 school culture, one of the most important ones being the alignment of curriculum and assessment across programs and grade bands. This alignment process is important for both student outcomes and adult behaviors that provide quality programming. It assures that children and families who will attend both pre-K programs and elementary schools that operate from a common base are familiar and informed about children throughout this unique time of accelerated growth.

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems were designed and developed as a result of multiple research studies indicating the subprime quality of for-profit market rate childcare centers in the United States. In the United States, there is minimal federal policy outlining standards of quality for early learning programs; Head Start is the only federally funded institution where policy provides program standards or policy outlining the administration of a

national early learning program; Head Start serves less than 10% of all U.S. children (Connors & Morris, 2014). Connor & Morris (2014) describes this as a “non-system” that is open to state, county, or city interpretation. The intention of QRIS was to create a framework outlining the indicators of quality so that programs could rate themselves against indicators proven to promote environments for optimal child development (Sabol, Soliday Hong, Pianta, & Burchinal, 2013). Childcare programs could choose to participate and received “perks” if they achieved a particular star rating indicating their functioning within particular standards of quality. Some QRIS’s have morphed into state-wide initiatives as a way to create integrated and systemic programs that align a state-wide system of quality indicators with funding sources, state agencies, and technical assistance supports. This mission is relatively new and to date, there has been little in terms of evaluation of this approach to state-wide quality enhancement (Goffin, 2013). Many states have embedded QRIS efforts within their Early Learning Challenge Grant proposals (Sabol et al., 2013). This is an aggressive way to develop new early learning systems considering the limited evaluation information available. In Ohio, the Early Learning Challenge Grant has mandated the use of “Step-Up to Quality,” Ohio’s QRIS for all early learning programs receiving state money (Ohio Department of Education, n.d.). This includes for-profit childcare, both center-based and family-home providers, receiving subsidized state dollars and public preschool, as well as special education Part B classrooms. This new approach to define quality, at least in Ohio, does not outline specific and explicit connections with elementary schools. The only requirement of linking to elementary education in some districts is a transition form that must be completed for each child. Considering the intentional emphasis on the alignment and support of elementary schools in the three previously discussed model programs, it seems appropriate that this would be a more critical piece when determining the elements that promote program quality.

When systems are parallel yet not congruent, there may be an unintentional misalignment of services. QRIS may be one of these situations. These original quality enhancement systems work for the originally intended audience, for-profit childcare looking for ways to improve their business, educate their cliental, and advocate for state and federal funds, but may do little for programs that already exist within other education systems. As Holcomb (2001) suggests, asking the question, “Did it make sense then?” – “Does it make sense now?” just may be an exercise that leaders should consider when QRIS operates within the already highly structured public school system. This is not to suggest that public school preschool programs are quality institutions that have no need for improvement. It simply suggests that leaders need to reflect on how a system that originated from the social service platform of childcare only a decade ago “fits” or defines the needs of preschool programs that exist within the century-old system of education.

Improvement Science

For change to occur, schools cannot afford to wait months or even years to design programs to support both teacher and child learning and development. Improvement Science offers a way for schools to acknowledge the system currently in operation. Plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycles provide a framework for the development of quick analysis while inquiring about identified problem areas (Lewis, 2016). Improvement Science suggests knowledge of two different types is needed to support change through this type of lens; the two different types include basic education knowledge, or in this case early childhood education, and “a system of profound knowledge.” The “system of profound knowledge” is necessary when considering systems, variation, psychology, and understanding knowledge growth (Lewis, 2016; Deming as

cited in Langley, Moen, Nolan, Nolan, Norman, & Provost, 2009 p. 75). Three questions frame inquiry of Improvement Science; they are:

What are we trying to accomplish?

How will we know that a change is an improvement?

What change will result in an improvement?

These three questions, accompanied with tools and other resources provided in *The Improvement Guide* (Langley, Moen, Nolan, Nolan, Norman & Provost, 2009), can provide a process for addressing areas in question in school curriculum and program design. Improvement Science empowers communities of learners to address the current system and use data to pinpoint areas within the system where change needs to happen. The community of learners then tests specific areas with ideas created through curriculum and research knowledge to help determine what implementation will lead to the best outcome for sustained growth and development.

Protocol for discussion and dialogue is a tool highly regarded by adult learning experts to bring clarity and growth to the school teaming culture. Drago-Severson (2009) describes a protocol as guiding questions used to structure team conversations. By promoting inquiry and self-reflection, teachers begin to consider long-held assumptions about their own teaching practices as well as their work with colleagues and families. Dufour, Eaker, & DuFour (2005) reminds us historically, school teachers in the United States have worked in isolation, attending individual professional development or seeking a higher education degree. The team approach to learning has not been promoted or offered as a means to professional growth and learning. Even with the volumes of studies suggesting school culture improves when teachers work in collaborative teams or networked communities, very few groups are developed and if

they are, maintaining is another challenge. In early learning, pre-K, PLC's (Professional Learning Communities) have just recently been considered as a venue for adult learning and school culture change.

The idea of appropriate roles and networked community membership is intertwined with the understanding of the importance of relational trust. Bryk & Schneider (2003) identify four criteria necessary to be present in communities if trust is expected to survive. These include respect, personal regard, competence in core role responsibilities, and personal integrity. If these factors are not evident in a school culture, the outcome is quite possibly a decay in the overall learning and growth of everyone involved. They note the interdependence of the various roles functioning in a school lends itself to personal vulnerability in various ways to peers and stakeholders. If relational trust diminishes, learning decreases and a constant state of chaos and fear prevails. Bryk & Schneider (2003) suggests relational trust is crucial to the school community; when school professionals trust one another and sense support from parents, they feel safe to experiment with new practices. The factor of safety as it relates to taking a risk is evidence of the importance of trust to the culture of inquiry. You cannot promote inquiry without trust; and without inquiry, experimentation in the form of PDSA cycles cannot promote overall school improvement. Trust provides the safety net for experimentation (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

Team work allows all programs involved to consider the current needs of children and families; it also helps to guarantee that intentional goals are continually being considered and implemented to assure the needs of all children are being met as they continue their journey through the early years of life.

Staff development needs to be complementary of a networked communities inquiry, data analysis, and decision-making process. When multiple sources of data and evidence-based practices are the basis for decision making, it assures that group professional development offerings are intentionally planned to complement the common goals that teams determined essential for quality programming and child growth (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000). Professional development needs to be a joint effort and used to build relationships and the professional behaviors of everyone involved in the support of young children and their families. Power relationships need to be considered in this area because of the tendency for school districts to narrow instruction to only two broad content areas, reading and math. Although both of these areas are extremely important for all children's ability to survive in the world, other areas of curriculum, including social-emotional, physical health and well-being, and the arts all meld together to enhance each child's quality of life (Noddings, 2005).

A design-based framework, used to probe the inquiry process and develop site-based methods for the alignment of instruction and learning, could be a potential way to acknowledge early learning professionals and create a culture of inclusion between pre-K and grades K-3 in Ohio elementary schools. The following questions will be used to guide the research of this study of the OIP Guide in Ohio: "To what extent does the OIP recognize early learning practices as integral to the school improvement process?" "How can schools benefit from merging the cultures of early learning programming with the culture of public schools while acknowledging the unique needs of children during the preschool years?" and "What type of design-based framework can be developed to assist with awareness, inquiry, and implementation of services to align preschool with school-age programming?"

Context Review

In Ohio, school district preschool classrooms situated in public schools, more often than not, are lost in a quagmire of top-down accountability initiatives. Two of these initiatives, Step Up To Quality (SUTQ) and the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP), have similar goal-oriented, outcomes-quality programming and overall school improvement. Since school districts are historically the institution created to provide educational services to all children in the United States, I will first introduce the reader to the Ohio Improvement Process, and then use an example of a personal account to help describe the cultural context that currently exists for many preschool teachers residing in elementary schools.

The Ohio Improvement Process is a framework for continuous improvement and is promoted through a partnership between the Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio Leadership Advisory Council as, "...Ohio's foundation for establishing a common and consistent vocabulary and set of protocols for use by Ohio's more than 450 regional providers from educational service centers (ESCs) and state support teams (SSTs) in facilitating and supporting the improvement efforts of districts, schools, and community schools around the state (OLAC website, n.d.). The process is organized into five distinct stages intended to assist school districts in creating and implementing a system intended to impact adult learning and instruction and student learning and achievement.

In Ohio, each school district is issued a district report card intended to provide the community with an understanding of how each school and the overall district is progressing toward achievement for all students. The areas of testing, specifically English Language Arts and Mathematics, are those areas of learning targeted and suggested by research to be the most critical for success in learning and life. Additional data, such as graduation rate, and equity

indicators, such as poverty index and race, are also aggregated and reported in the overall yearly report. The overall grade score for each district provides quantitative data for districts to consider in their continuous improvement plans and framework; the test scores that contribute to the report card rating are also used as a summative data source typically included in the Decision Framework (needs explained) analysis used in the Ohio Improvement Process. As districts embark on implementing the Ohio Improvement Process, much of the data used in the goal determination rubric known as the Decision Framework, is used to identify need, and then develop succinct SMART (Short, Measurable, Attainable, Rigorous, Timely) goals; these goals are used as aims intended to be mapped to strategies and action steps that are then implemented across a multiple team framework that includes the TBT (Teacher-Based Team), BLT (Building Level Team), and DLT (District Level Team). These district-wide teams are charged with implementation and monitoring of the two district-wide SMART goals. At the BLT level, teams are responsible for writing action steps, typically written as instructional strategies, that will move the district closer to the aim or overall goal; at the TBT level, these adult instructional strategies and the resulting student learning evidence collected after the instructional strategy is implemented, are collected, analyzed, and then used to monitor change. It is at the TBT level where the iterative cycle of improvement used in the OIP process, known as the 5 Step Process, is most likely to be affective as a change agent or where implementing a change will result in an improvement.

As an early learning consultant uniquely situated between the culture of early learning and K-12 education, I have witnessed how preschool personnel in public schools are typically misrepresented on district level teams, or simply left out of the entire school improvement process. This marginalization of early learning programming and leadership is a national issue

and not simply found in school districts in Ohio. Wilinski (2017) captures the voice of a pre-K teacher situated in a public school in Wisconsin. The teacher, whom she calls Grace, shares her experience: “It is frustrating to be in a building and feel like you’re not really a part of it. You’re there, you’re taking up space, Kinda like....you gotta be someplace, so there you are. (p. 91). This quote captures the frustration of trying to explain the void that is felt by preschool professionals as they attempt to fit into the K-12 school culture. This is just one example of feeling as if you have fallen down the “rabbit hole,” trying to make sense of something that seems familiar, yet you can’t quite understand why or how to “fit” in.

These “stories,” anecdotes, episodes, narratives, or life experiences of individuals, either in the role of preschool teacher, administrator, or consultant, play a prominent role in illustrating the need for early learning services in public schools to be re-designed and re-developed to promote how early learning research suggests environments, curriculum, and programs for young children should operate to promote development and learning through third grade.

The literature review contains “episodes” from current school districts, specifically, Bremerton, Washington, and Boston, Massachusetts. These two very large and diverse urban school districts embraced early learning through dialogue and staff learning, and were able to create learning hubs focusing on young children prior to and throughout compulsory school age.

Narrative accounts from preschool educators in Ohio will provide insight into how they currently experience continuous improvement processes in their district, as well as help to inform the development of a framework that will establish intentional communication and understanding between preschool and compulsory school programming.

From my experience as a consultant working in Ohio public schools where the OIP framework and other school improvement efforts are implemented, it seems as if data from

district-administered preschool classrooms—or that of community-based preschool programs—are seldom if ever used to help make programmatic decisions. This leaves a gap in the informed and intentional evidence/research-based decisions and outcomes linked to appropriate instructional strategies related to pre-K – 3 outcomes for school-wide continuous improvement efforts. Ironically, and in Ohio, while elementary and school district leaders are busy implementing the OIP framework, preschool teachers and/or leaders are working to meet the indicators outlined in the SUTQ-QRIS framework. Both of the accountability frameworks, OIP and SUTQ, are present in most Ohio school districts, but the data and processes that are components of each are rarely synthesized together to inform program design or instructional practice; each is separately queried, communicated, and individually become the basis of decisions that may or may not be research-based and contribute to the continuum of learning from preschool to grade three. This creates an understanding gap for each component—preschool teachers’ need to understand school-age learning, and elementary teachers’ need to understand the learning that has taken place prior to entering their classrooms. It is important for preschool programming to intersect with school-age instruction and learning. Moss (2014) suggests the need for a “Pedagogical Meeting place,” where the preschool educators and compulsory school-age personnel come together “...in equal status and dialogic in the true sense of the democratic process” (p.180). This, he proposes, is the only way to “reimagine,” rather than one imposing on the other, a new and restructured way to educate and care for young children. This is important to assure the assessment and instruction that happens across this continuum is evidence- and research-based to provide the highest quality programs for all young children.

As a method to address the need to narrow the “understanding gap” between the cultures of preschool and compulsory school age, I will conduct a document analysis of the existing guidebook for Ohio’s continuous improvement process called the Ohio Improvement Guide for Facilitators. In addition to the document analysis, narrative inquiry and portraiture as lived experience will be used to further illustrate the need for cultural awareness and continued dialogue to help redesign the worlds between preschool and compulsory school-age programming in public schools. The analysis will provide a way to examine the opportunities and challenges contributing to the linkage of pre-K – 3 programming in school districts in Ohio who are currently implementing the OIP process. The findings will be used in the development of a framework to probe the current and future variables used by research to describe early learning culture and pedagogy, intentional pre-K teaching strategies, and current preschool assessments essential to supporting both preschool programs (including teachers) and children as they progress along the pre-K – 3 learning continuum. Finally, the findings will assist in the liberation of preschool teachers who reside in public schools from feeling disenfranchised. The analysis of both of these processes will follow in Chapter III.

METHODS

Statement of the Problem of Practice

Early learning programs exist in a fragmented system of funding, services, and overall professional activities including curriculum, assessment, and staff professional development (Goffin, 2013). Typically, educational reform efforts are “top-down.” Problems are identified at district, state, and/or federal levels and solutions are imposed. These top-down improvement efforts are becoming increasingly prevalent in early learning circles; yet, unfortunately, most do not result in system improvement. In Ohio, this is also the case. In most school districts, two

frameworks for improvement exist and operate as separate entities, perpetuating the alienation between pre-K and grade three curriculums.

I have been inspired by early learning leaders such as Ruby Takanishi (2017) to “join” with her in “‘reimagining’ how American children are to be educated during the first decade of their lives” (p. 1). This chapter will outline the methods chosen to illustrate and identify the current reality of early learning professionals as they navigate the current systems of education they encounter daily.

The qualitative research methods, document analysis and portraiture as narrative inquiry, will be used to help understand and advocate for improvement of the current landscape of early learning programming situated in a public school setting. These methods, document analysis and narrative inquiry, will be used to help identify current barriers and inform future opportunities to narrow the “opportunity gap” currently affecting the teaching practice and educational aspects of individuals participating in early learning programming in Ohio public schools.

Qualitative data from document analysis and narrative inquiry will be used to inform the following questions: “What are the key operational components of the Ohio Improvement Process?” “How can schools benefit from merging the cultures of early learning programming with the culture of public schools while acknowledging the unique needs of children during the preschool years?” and “What type of design-based framework can be developed to assist with awareness, inquiry, and implementation of services to align preschool with school-age programming?”

The document analysis will provide data focused on language, processes, and procedures currently described in one of the continuous improvement tools used in Ohio public schools, the Ohio Improvement Process Guide for Facilitators. The narrative inquiry will include personal

experience of the researcher and vignettes shared with the researcher by various colleagues working in school-based institutions throughout Ohio. The vignettes are occurrences that have been shared with the researcher by colleagues during formal and informal meetings. At various times, the researcher scribed the vignettes to use in workshop presentations, consulting purposes, and now as a data point for this study.

Document Analysis

Document Analysis is a qualitative approach that allows the researcher to examine current artifacts existing in the context of real life. For this study, the context is the public school district and the artifact to be examined is a tool/protocol used for continuous improvement. Documents reveal what is valued in the organization and what people do in relation to the document. An interpretive analysis will be conducted and filtered through the lens of early learning programming and the six principles of Improvement Science as promulgated by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Mintrop, 2016).

The document analysis consisted of four coded sweeps through the Ohio Improvement Process guidance document. Using the six principles of Improvement Science, promulgated by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching: 1.) Making the work problem-specific and user-centered, 2.) Variation in performance is the core problem to address, 3.) See the system that produces the current outcomes, 4.) We cannot improve at scale what we cannot measure, 5.) Anchor practice improvement in disciplined inquiry, and 6.) Accelerate improvement through networked communities. After completion of the four coded sweeps, three broad themes emerged including: 1.) Partnership and teaming (sub-theme a: community of learners; sub-theme b: absence of informed early learning teams), 2.) Assessment and monitoring (sub-theme a: student assessment; sub-theme b: adult/program monitoring), and 3.)

Culture: finding common ground (sub-theme a: language; sub-theme b: dialogue and inquiry).

The next section describes the four coded sweeps and the findings that emerged.

Early Learning

The first coded sweep consisted of coding all references made specifically to early learning programming or those implied. Across 126 pages of the Ohio Improvement Process Facilitators Guide (appendix II), there were seven specific references to early childhood education and six implied references. An example of a specific reference is, “Other program directors or supervisors (e.g. preschool, health and nutrition, safety, family, and civic engagement coordinator). It goes on to read, “The Family and Civic Engagement Team representing parents, local businesses, health and human services, and community organizations, such as Head Start director, education manager, or community preschool program director.” These sentences are references to suggested members of the District Leadership Team and can be found in Stage 0: Preparing for the OIP, in the guidance document. There were six implied references to early childhood education in the guidance document and this was coded if the word “all” was used, such as in the first paragraph below the heading, **Seven Principles of the OIP**, which reads, “All students start ready for kindergarten, actively engaged in learning, and graduate ready for college and careers.” Additional paragraphs reference the “whole” district being involved and the leadership roles who are responsible for having key individuals participate on district teams to assure all aspects of the district education system are represented. Unfortunately, at the time of this analysis, the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) Guide references state-wide early learning assessments that are currently obsolete and have been replaced with newly designed tools.

Teams

The second coded sweep focused on collaborative teams in the OIP process. This sweep collected items from the document specific to district and school-wide teams, their members, and function. A reference is made several times throughout the document about the membership of, the purpose of, and the function of the following school district teams: The District Leadership Team (DLT), the Building Leadership Team (BLT), and the Teacher Based Teams (TBT). The entire OIP process depends on whether the teams have purposeful membership of both school and community stakeholders, and how the teams use data-based decision making to improve the overall school district. Communication between these teams is critical for the decision-making process and will directly affect the success of the agreed upon outcomes.

Assessment

The third coded sweep focused on selecting items in the document that referenced early learning assessments, while at the same time focusing on the improvement principles: We cannot improve to scale what we cannot measure, and variation in performance is the core problem to address. There was little to no selections focused on the collection of early learning program data necessary to inform school improvement efforts. However, there was reference made to four types of data that should be included; they were: 1.) Achievement or student performance, 2). Perception, 3). Program, and 4). Demographic. Of the sections in the document chosen for coding, the following assessment-related themes emerged: Data used to inform instruction, data to change adult behavior and student performance, data sharing across teams, and using data to monitor the continuous improvement process. There were also “how to” sections related to data collection, analysis, and use. Examples include, “how to” organize data, “how to” share data effectively, and “how to” know who to share data with and when. There are

accompanying resources that can be used by teams to organize the data collection process if necessary; these documents were not analyzed, but it is important to mention that they are made available to teams if they determine there is a need to use them during the process.

Strategy

The fourth coded sweep was focused on collecting selections from the document specific to strategies for improvement. The improvement principles used to make these selections were, “See the system that produces the current outcomes,” and “Anchor practice improvement in disciplined inquiry” (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015). During this sweep, I began to wrestle with the meaning of strategy as it relates to this specific continuous improvement framework. It was evident throughout the selected and analyzed sections that most of the strategy emerging from this document was “how to”: How to collect purposeful data, how to choose team members, and how to organize and analyze the collected data. This approach, for the intended purposes of the OIP Facilitators Guide, was exactly the way the authors wanted the document to read. This intentional “how to” manual would then inform the prescribed manner of implementing a district-wide improvement process. The following example from the documents is evidence of the prescribed manner of the intended implementation; the document reads, “...Goal work groups will need to review the final draft of the strategies. All data applicable to the goal and strategy should be made available to the group. The groups should work on the same strategies they developed and devise baseline and progress measures by responding to the following baseline and progress questions....” The questions are then provided. The following pages of the document provide methods of teaming as a strategy, data communication as a strategy, meeting structure as a strategy, etc.

A Method of Inquiry: Portraiture

The type of narrative inquiry used to support this study is known as portraiture. Portraiture is the name coined by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot to describe the qualitative and inquiry-based type of research she executes to reach a multitude of individuals she believes may have a vested interest in improving or understanding how context and personal experience provide a way to describe the rich cultural experiences that allow the researcher to discover how individuals navigate and experience chaotic and complex settings and situations (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) suggests portraiture is a way to “...combine systematic, empirical description with aesthetic expression, blending art and science, humanistic sensibilities and scientific rigor” (p. 3). I will use this method to discover how individuals experience real-life situations and the space in which these stories have emerged. The vignettes will provide a way to study the past, explain current reality, and design new ways of thinking about how individuals can learn and work. This rationale is borrowed from Deweyan ideas of experience (situation, continuity, and interaction), and described by Clandinin & Connelly (2008) as, “...a framework that allows our inquires to travel inward, outward, backward, forward, and situated within place” (p.50).

Three types of narrative, personal experience, questions/communication from consulting, and shared experience with colleagues, will be analyzed. The research questions, “What are the key operational components of the Ohio Improvement Process?” “How can schools benefit from merging the cultures of early learning programming with the culture of public schools while acknowledging the unique needs of children during the preschool years?” and, “What type of design-based framework can be developed to assist with awareness, inquiry, and implementation of services to align preschool with school-age programming?”—along with the themes emerging

from the document analysis, partnership/teaming, assessment, and culture—were considered during each re-read through the collected narratives.

Selected Episodes

There are six lived episodes chosen and considered for this research project. All of the narratives were lived experiences of the researcher. The experience and role of the researcher, that of an early learning professional working in predominately school-age institutions, have provided a unique perspective on how early learning programming is experienced by both school-age and preschool professionals. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) discuss how narratives provide us with another way of inquiry, a way to think about people, places, and actions. This type of thinking allowed me to look at personal experience—not as a victim of early learning as some have in the past, but to take a closer look at how each experience provided a new space for me to think more intentionally about what gaps need to be addressed and filled from each “school” culture’s contribution to the solution of aligning preschool with school-age programming.

Considerations

Each vignette was recorded and read in its entirety four distinct times. The first read was a quick “get acquainted” read through. During the second read, notes were recorded in the left margin of the paper. The first notes were specific to location, role of the individual, and emotion the message evoked. The third read was intentionally read through the lens of the themes from the Ohio Improvement Process document analysis: Partnership/teaming, assessment, and culture. The emerging themes were as follows, first, and in each narrative, there was a link between pre-K – school-age personnel. This link included either an individual in a school-age role, such as principal, coach, or consultant, and another in an early learning position—these

individuals were collaborating in some way in the public school. The second theme included across all six narratives was the use, need, or development of some type of student assessment data, and the third theme included one group trying to figure out something unfamiliar to them about how the other group functioned—either why the group needed to be included, why the members of a specific group behaved a certain way, or what they each needed to know about the other. As I looked at the notes, it was clear that the themes could easily support those findings of the document analysis, partnership/teaming, assessment, and culture.

The documents analysis and episodes examined as portraiture provided insight focused on the current reality of how many early learning professionals experience school improvement systems, as well as shedding some light on how they are situated within the current public-school system. Chapter IV will expand the reader’s understanding, through the sharing of the qualitative data from the document analysis and narrative inquiry as portraiture, of how a current system of school improvement as well as the overall experience of historical school culture is experienced by many early learning professionals.

FINDINGS

Overview of Findings

The findings of the document analysis and narrative inquiry as portraiture provide both opportunities and challenges for early learning professionals working in public school districts. The analysis is a way to examine how a state policy along with historical research and episodes in the form of “lived” experiences from preschool teachers and administrators currently working in public school settings experience the continuous improvement efforts implemented by school districts. The questions guiding the study and used to support the findings are as follows: “What are the key operational components of the Ohio Improvement Process?” “How can schools

benefit from merging the cultures of early learning programming with the culture of public schools while acknowledging the unique needs of children during the preschool years?” “What type of design-based framework can be developed to assist with awareness, inquiry, and implementation of services to align preschool with compulsory school-age programming?

The answers to the first research question (RQ#1), “What are the key operational components of the Ohio Improvement Process?” were derived by making multiple sweeps through the OIP Facilitators Guide using the six core principles of improvement promulgated by the Carnegie Institute for Teaching to extract the key components of improvement. An additional sweep through the document was made to identify sections of the document specific to early learning.

The results of RQ#1 are significant because they are directly associated with question three of Carnegie’s Six Core Principles of Improvement, “See the system that produces the current outcomes” (Bryk et al. 2015). The necessity of seeing and attempting to understand the local conditions of policy implementation are critical to understanding culture and defining the problem to solve. In the case of this study, the findings suggest a process for school improvement exists and the improvement process contains many key features that when implemented with fidelity, should result in an improvement. However, further examination of the findings also suggests the culture in which you reside within the public school, preschool, or school-age has an impact on how educators experience the overall school improvement process.

Findings: Document Analysis

RQ#1: What Are the Key Operational Components of the Ohio Improvement Process?

The Ohio Improvement Process as a continuous improvement framework was developed to address large-scale change in school districts and community schools (OIP Guidance, 2012).

It is based on seven principles designed to guide district-wide school improvement focused on improving instructional practice to impact higher achievement for all students. The seven OIP principles include:

- 1.) Aligns vision, mission and philosophy.
- 2.) Is continuous and recursive.
- 3.) Relies on quality data interpretation.
- 4.) Is collaborative and collegial.
- 5.) Ensures communication with those who are affected by the success of the district or community school at each stage.
- 6.) Produces one focused, integrated plan that directs all district or community school work and resources.
- 7.) Establishes the expectation for substantive changes in student performance and adult practices.

The plan is aligned to Ohio's vision for all students, and is stated as follows: "All students start ready for kindergarten, actively engaged in learning, and graduate ready for college and careers," regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, limited English proficiency, disability, gift, or talent (OIP, 2012).

The OIP process includes five distinct stages: Stage 0: Preparing for the OIP; Stage 1: Identifying Critical Needs; Stage 2: Developing a Focused Plan; Stage 3: Implementing and Monitoring the Focused Plan; and Stage 4: Evaluating the Improvement Process.

In this document analysis, the components selected from the OIP guidance document were chosen to be coded if they had some similarity to the six principles of the Carnegie Institutes Foundation for Teaching; evidence of early learning programming linked to the overall

school improvement process was also collected and coded. The following represent the key operational components of the initial data collection sweeps as collected and coded based on their similarity to each of the **six principles of the Carnegie Foundation: P1-Make the work problem-specific and user centered; P2-Variation in performance is the core problem to address; P3-See the system that produces the current outcomes; P4-We cannot improve at scale what we cannot measure; P5-Anchor practice improvement in disciplined inquiry; and P6-Accelerate improvements through networked communities:**

Stage 0 Key operational components:

- Collaborative structures to promote shared leadership—DLT (District Leadership Team), BLT (Building Leadership Teams), and TBT (Teacher Based Teams)—member role, and responsibility (P2, P6)

Stage 1 Key operational components:

- Data collection needs to reflect the information necessary to make informed decisions across the district (P1, P2, P3, P4)

Stage 2 Key operational components:

- Large-Scale change based on one focused district-wide plan that includes, SMART goals, strategies and indicators (P4)
- Research-based or evidence-based actions-tasking district plan with school improvement plan (for alignment)
- Plan adoption

Stage 3 Key operational components:

- Culture of inquiry (P5)
- Balanced assessment system

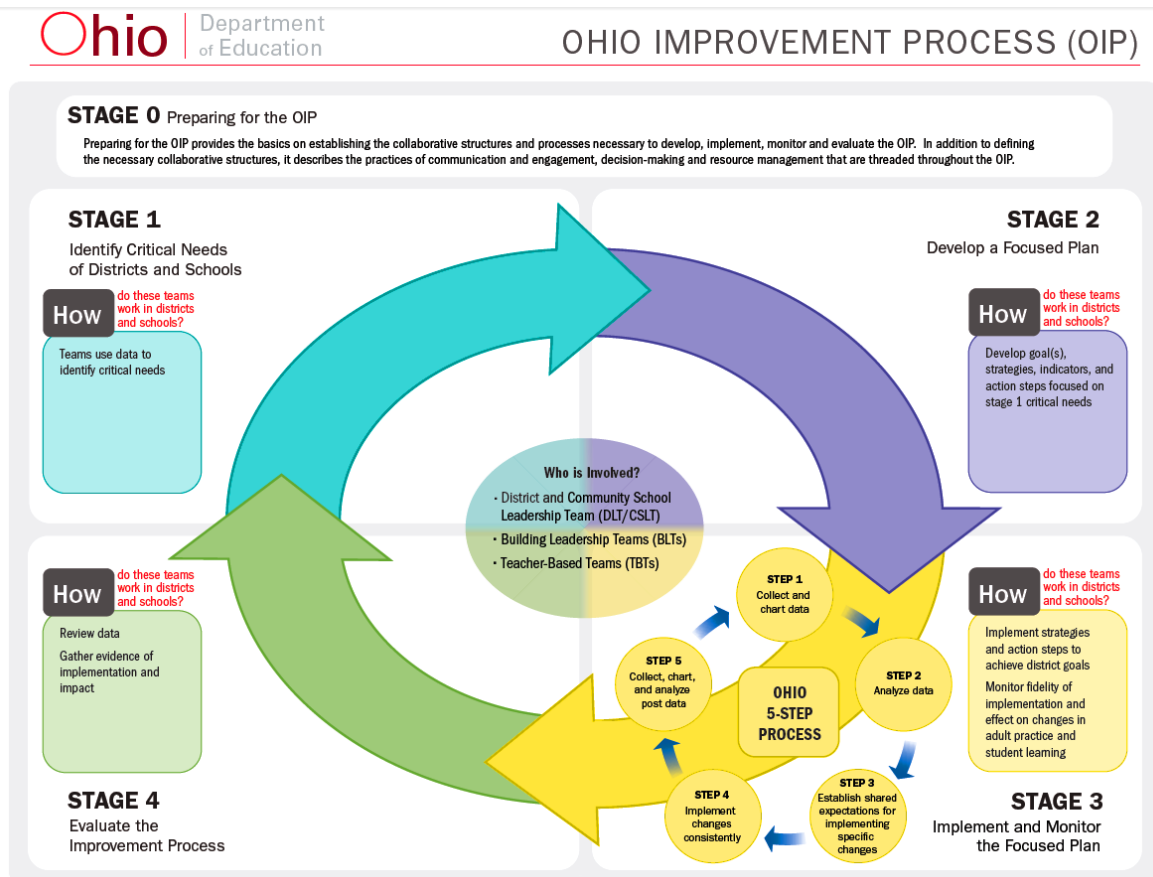
- Monitoring and analyzing change (P4, P5)

Stage 4 Key operational components:

- Impact of plan (P3, P4)
- On-going plan monitoring (P5)

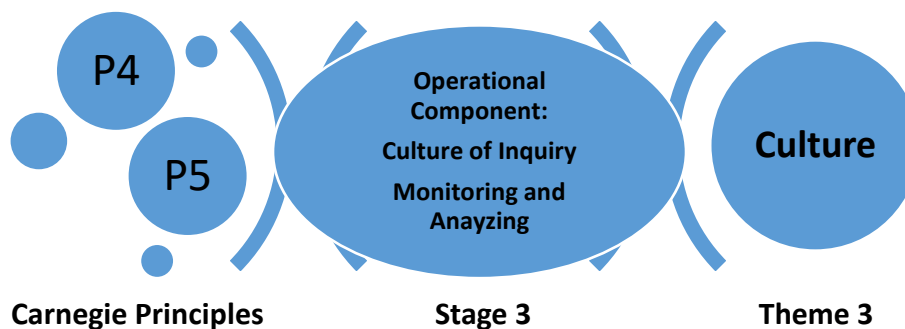
The following represents the Ohio Improvement process, including the 5 Step Process (stage 3):

Figure 1: Ohio Improvement Process



The following graphics show the relationship between Carnegie’s Six Core Principles of Improvement, The 5 Stages of the OIP process, and the resulting themes of the document analysis:

Figure 2: Relationship of Carnegie Principles to OIP Stages and emerging themes



Next, I will explain the resulting themes and their implications for early learning educators working in Ohio public schools.

Theme 1: Partnership and Teaming

The role individuals have both within and outside a school district and how and what the individual brings to the collective or collaborative team structure is stressed in the Introduction, Stage 0, and Stage 1 of the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) Guide. The guide provides information about who the superintendent should consider as a member of the DLT. There is an entire section dedicated to DLT, BLT, and TBT membership and roles and responsibilities (OIP Guide, 2012, p. 3). “One of the most important decisions the district or community school and building will make in the improvement process is selecting the right people for the work” (p.3). It goes on to stress the importance these individuals play in the ability to communicate and influence others (p. 3). The collaborative teaming of the OIP process is confirmed in the

anecdotal narratives shared with me by various colleagues and of my own experiences; this is a finding emerging from the narrative inquiry. Without early learning representatives on all three of the district-wide teams, valuable historical information about early learning programming is missing and present day information is also excluded. Classroom information shared by early learning teachers could play a major role in student achievement across the pre-K to 3rd grade learning curriculum; this finding suggests this information is seldom, if ever, used to make informed curriculum or assessment issues in the foundational years of early schooling. This finding also suggests early learning information is missing because of lack of representation of preschool and possibly kindergarten through 3rd grade representatives in public school improvement efforts.

Sub-theme 1: communities of learners. It is noted in the OIP guidance document the process is dedicated to large scale change. Large scale change means across a three- to five-year timespan, resulting in the improvement of student outcomes respectively in the areas of English language arts and math. One of the strategies to obtain the goals of the written plan is collaborative teaming. The OIP process supports both large-scale teaming (across district or DLT) and smaller teams (Teacher Based Teams, TBT). It is the smaller collaborative teams, or TBT's, that have a few similarities to Improvement Science's description of networked improvement communities. In Stage 3 of the OIP process, the iterative cycle called the 5 Step Process is introduced. The 5 Step Process is similar to the PDSA cycles described in Improvement Science and includes: Step 1 collect and chart data, Step 2 analyze data, Step 3 establish shared expectations for implementing specific changes, Step 4 implement changes consistently, and Step 5 collect, chart, and analyze post data. Use of this iterative cycle is encouraged across all three collaborative teams; but because the DLT and BLT do not meet on a

weekly basis like the TBT, it can be assumed that rapid action steps resulting in a change to support improvement most likely will only occur at the teacher level. For this reason, the collaborative team membership at the TBT level is imperative to support both short-term student goals and long-term district goals. One barrier to the change process and collaborative team structure is teachers typically only gather and collaborate in horizontal or grade-level teams and this configuration can limit the inquiry process. Although vertical teaming is encouraged in the OIP process, it has been the experience of myself and fellow colleagues, because of time and scheduling, the grade-level teaming approach (horizontal) is still the most prominent.

Homogenous grouping of teacher discussion and decisions may seem reasonable if you are looking at progress monitoring students in reading and math, but consider the rich inquiry-driven conversations that could emerge from a group that include multiple members of the school teams who bring different perspectives and ideas; this is what occurs in a network community configuration. The other difference is the goals of the OIP process are determined at the district level. Although teachers address learning and instruction at the student level during TBT's, their aim is on evaluating instruction and implementing the agreed upon group instructional strategies intended to bring the entire district closer to the district improvement goal, typically in reading and math. This finding suggests, because the OIP Guide is laid out in a scripted manner, the level of inquiry, as described by Improvement Science, seems to be at best superficial. I have heard it said by some OIP facilitators that during scheduled meeting times, most teams usually never get through the entire 5 Step Process; if this is the case, then the questions asked are not being tasked to action steps that are clear and intended to promote change and the ability to monitor the change is a mute cause. Jim Knight (2011) makes this clear when he notes:

Traditional school improvement plans are often very complex, and because they focus on literacy and mathematics to meet the demands of No Child Left Behind, they frequently overlook core instructional practices. That complexity makes it difficult for everyone in the school to have a shared understanding of the plan, and that lack of understanding leads to a lack of implementation” (p. 9).

As I considered the who, what, and where of the suggested collaborative team members, the “why” seemed to be missing. Although early learning roles are mentioned in the OIP guidance document, the reason to have them on the team is not clear. It seems as if the following questions and statements may have been considered as the only purpose or reasons for having preschool directors, teachers, or this sort of representative participate on the collaborative teams: Should we have early learning represented so we do not get accused of leaving a group out? (Does this address equity?) If we have a preschool person, then we can say they were invited to the “table.” These seem like silly or petty statements to make about team configuration, but I have witnessed this in real-life situations. Another example is starting the beginning of a written district goal with pre-K rather than K and other team members looking toward me and saying, “Look, we included you!” I always found it quite amusing yet concerning that if I were in the meeting, then I became synonymous with anything to do with early learning.

Jim Collins (2001) in his book *Good to Great* stresses the importance of having the right people on the bus. Who is on the bus is just as important as why we need them on the bus. In schools we cannot assume because someone holds a title they have the necessary background to address the issues through the lens of change. When there is a gap in who is represented at the District Level Team (DLT), this creates the possibility of information relevant to an entire group of students, in this case preschool through grade three, will never be addressed; and when goals

are written for a three- to five-year period, this can have huge implications for overall school improvement outcomes. This finding suggests, because early learning is often represented as an “add-on” to many district initiatives (because in most states it is either an entitlement grant or funded through special education), early learning experts are either missing because they are not invited to be on OIP teams or ignored in the overall process because they are not seen as necessary since preschool, in most states, is not by law a part of compulsory school age.

Sub-theme 2: absence of informed early learning teams. The concept of teaming is outlined well in the OIP guidance document and the importance of shared leadership across the teams, including documentation, multiple communication methods, and focused goals, are well established. This does not account for the absence of preschool members who represent both internal early learning programs as well as community partners at-large. Very simply put, one of the opportunity gaps for improving school improvement efforts is including informed early learning personnel on all district improvement teams. This finding suggests, without early learning at the table from the beginning of the process, the entire data-driven decision-making process promoting the continuum of learning across the early grades begins to break down or simply is never ignited.

Theme 2: Assessment and Monitoring

The model questions that are the central theme of Improvement Science include, “What are we trying to accomplish?” “How will we know that a change is an improvement?” and “What change can we make that will result in improvement?” These questions integrated with the framework that guides improvement and includes forming the team, setting aims, establishing measures, selecting changes, testing changes, implementing changes, and spreading changes, are

the key components of establishing an organizational change agenda (Langley, G., Nolan, K. Nolan, T., Norman, C. & Provost, L, 2009).

The role of assessments, both child/student and adult (teacher), is central to a school's framework of continuous improvement and the most widely addressed component in the OIP guidance document (2012). The following definition is used in the OIP Guide to provide a common understanding of assessment: The term 'assessment' refers to all those activities undertaken by teachers, and by their students in assessing themselves, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Each stage of the OIP process delineates the actions teams should take to assure appropriate data is being collected, analyzed, and used to evaluate and monitor change. Teams are encouraged to use four types of data to drive decisions, which include: 1) achievement or student performance, 2) perception, 3) program, and 4) demographic. Throughout the OIP Guide, the multiple layers of "what" data to collect, "how" various data can be analyzed, and the recommended ways for communicating are overwhelming and convoluted. There are "how to" steps to be considered in many of the stages of the process and this can unintentionally lead to the document having a feel of compliance that might possibly be transferred to adult behaviors causing more didactic rather than creative action steps. This finding suggests, decisions seem prescribed rather than those fostering a spirit of inquiry that usually lead to improved instruction. When working in complex institutions with complex data, we need to remember, the simpler the plan, the clearer the goals and the easier it is for people to collaborate (Knight, 2011).

Sub-theme 1: student assessment Student assessments in the form of achievement data are typically reviewed at the DLT and BLT team meetings. At the Teacher Based Team level of collaboration is where progress monitoring data, work sampling, attendance data, short

cycle assessments, etc. are analyzed through the 5 Step Process iterative cycle and where change can occur more rapidly and improvement measured effectively. It is at the TBT level where necessary change needs to occur; recognizing the importance of having conversations between grade levels, across grade levels, with specialist and early learning teachers can expedite the process. Preschool has a tremendous amount of data to be shared, but it is not always as easily quantifiable as school-age data. Quantifying preschool data can be done with the appropriate tools and skills; at the time of this analysis, most of the early learning assessment tools identified in the OIP guidance document glossary are obsolete. This finding suggests that early learning data is usually not included or considered in school district school improvement plans.

Sub-theme 2: adult/program monitoring. Adult instructional behaviors are typically collected through some type of classroom walk-through form that is usually collected by the building principal. Other types of adult implementation data can be collected through state teacher evaluation system rubrics. In early childhood, adult instructional tools such as CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) and ECERS-R (Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised) are used to help teachers develop professional development goals as well as monitor program progress. Not surprising, and what typically occurs in most schools, is the preschool tools for measuring adult behaviors are used to meet the necessary requirements of the state QRIS but are never used as a resource for the OIP process or other school improvement efforts; in my experience, I have found most principals or school-age administrators would not know them by name. This finding suggests that adult implementation data from the preschool classroom may be missing from school improvement monitoring.

Without early learning information, in the form of both student and adult data available in all the OIP stages, an entire group of teachers and students is misrepresented in this school-wide process.

Theme 3: Culture: Finding Common Ground

The sum of the following parts is what contributes to the different aspects of an educator group culture—history, artifacts, symbols, language, values, and norms. These groups, for example, could be called physical education teachers, art educators, or special education teachers; but for these results, I will discuss the culture of early learning educators in comparison to their school-age counterparts. The sub-themes used to describe these findings will be language and values.

Sub-theme 1: language. Language is a tool used by groups of individuals to communicate their needs, express understandings, and initiate actions for everyday living and change. The culture differences between preschool educators and public school compulsory K-12 educators are evident in the written language found in the OIP document. The following words and phrases are an example of the language used in the OIP document that may be unknown or misunderstood by most early learning teachers or administrators:

Predominate K-12 words found in OIP guidance document:

Achievement data	Elementary Building
Achievement Gap	Grade-level Indicators
Adult Implementation	Instructional Strategies
Common Core Standards	Post-assessment
Common Formative Assessment	Pre-assessment
Comprehensive Continual Improvement Plan (CCIP)	Proficiency Level

Comprehensive School Climate Inventory	Schoolwide Information System
Data-driven	State Performance Plan
Decision Framework	Student Performance
District	Superintendent
District-wide	Value-added Reports

Just as language can cause a barrier between various ethnic groups, it can also be a barrier in educational workplace settings. I will use one particular acronym, DAP, as an example. The acronym DAP (Developmentally Appropriate Practice) has been used extensively and almost exclusively in early learning settings as an attempt to preserve and describe the complex activity occurring in early learning classrooms. However, on numerous occasions, this term is taken way out of context by both early learning and “other” professionals. For some, the term is used to defend children’s play in general and by others to inappropriately describe and suggest what takes place in many early learning settings as simply a “free for all” with little emphasis on enhancing learning. For example, in a workshop focused on early literacy learning I recently attended, I believe the message resonating from the speaker was that many devout early learning professionals in the audience would not be pleased with what she would be sharing about the need for intentional and explicit literacy instruction for three- and four-year-olds in the areas of phonological awareness. Admittedly, I must say I almost immediately started to feel my heart beating faster as I considered the points the speaker was trying to make. The questions in my head ranged from, “Why is she assuming we (early learning professionals) are anti-explicit instruction?” to “Is she defining DAP as a free-for-all?” Then the judge in me started to come out, “She is saying play is important; then why is it only discussed in one appendix in the back of the book she keeps stressing to us she authored?” There were many

other quick thoughts fleeting around in my head, and this all occurred within seconds. I then remembered to simply listen, without judgement. She was providing her view and it was my job to simply listen and consider what I would need to take from the presentation. I did not need to defend the field, but I do feel this is another example of a top-down professional development using mostly school-age research to explain how young children learn and develop. I wasn't alone in my questioning; at the break, the professionals who worked predominately in early learning walked by each other to confirm they were feeling a bit marginalized, but did not feel as if they could voice their opinions. After a few videos of literacy instruction in the classroom were shown to the group, there were a few text messages fleeting around, questioning the proposed instructional strategies. This brings us back to the term, Developmentally Appropriate Practice. This phrase simply reminds educators to focus on the theory and research about how children learn and develop. This term is not exclusive of those working in birth to grade three institutions, but it is a social construct that needs to be considered when planning environments, learning activities, using strategies, and interacting with individuals across the age spans. It does not exclude or promote play, but considers how young children use play as a vehicle for learning at many different times in their lives. Unfortunately, because some individuals are not able to use the language of their profession, such as Developmentally Appropriate Practice, in the way it was intended in the research, it becomes a barrier to inquiry and change conversations between pre-K and school-age educators. This finding suggests language in the OIP document may be a barrier to achieving inquiry-based dialogue between preschool educators and compulsory school-age professionals. Language engages our thoughts and actions, and having a common understanding between two disciplines does not mean giving one up for the other; it simply

means to use open dialogue to gain a common understanding of what each needs to succeed and complement the other.

Sub-theme 2: dialogue and inquiry. The finding related to dialogue and inquiry seems like an obvious opportunity when considering the teaming approach saturating the OIP process. However, when looking at it as a finding related to culture, more specifically, the culture of preschool as it is situated in Ohio public schools, barriers begin to surface. It is a barrier because most district teams do not have a preschool professional on all three district level teams; for those who do, the language and pedagogical differences existing between team members break down or limit the dialogue and inquiry process between preschool and school-age members. This finding suggests, for preschool educators and school-age members on the same teams, a dialogue for understanding and change needs to occur. William Isaacs (1999) in *The Art of Thinking Together* states:

Dialogue... is a conversation with a center, not sides. It is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before. It lifts us out of polarization and into a greater common sense, and is thereby a means for accessing the intelligence and coordinated power of groups of people (pg. 19).

I turn to present day early learning leaders to suggest how culture differences can become an opportunity for the current landscape of early learning professionals. The fragmentation existing in the field of early learning in the United States is well documented and described throughout the study. This fragmentation provides early learning professionals in public schools the opportunity to create their own and new reality. Wilinski (2017), Takanishi (2017), Morgan (1999), and Moss (2014) all encourage early learning professionals to learn from the past, but move into a new space that creates opportune learning experiences for preschool children in

public schools. Moss (2014), in *Transformative Change and Real Utopias in Early Learning*, uses examples of post-structural philosophy, without seeming too radical, to harness change ideas as a way to disrupt the current field of early learning: Proposing the need for creating new understandings and programming by acknowledging the history of education, and using early learning research as a basis of dialogue and inquiry; and creating enriching experiences rather than power relationships between preschool and school-age professionals.

Portraiture: Narrative Inquiry

The findings of the narrative inquiry provided similar results as the document analysis; emerging themes included partnerships/teaming, assessment, and culture. In each sketch, an individual from compulsory school-age education and early learning were either having a dialogue, trying to understand each other's perspective, or attempting to merge programming in a way that rendered the other harmless. Having an authentic dialogue emerged as a way to promote understanding and programming that could benefit all members of the team. Assessment or a way to help measure progress was present in almost all of the sketches. Professionals collaborated with the goal to improve both child and adult outcomes. These outcomes were both qualitative and quantitative in nature, including both social emotional and cognitive dimensions of being.

These results will inform the design of a template shared in the next chapter. The findings suggest, when the cultural aspects of collaboration and teaming are present, learning outcomes improve. The framework will use the following three areas, teaming, assessment, and cultural awareness, to design a way to provide a new space for pre-K to school-age inquiry and learning.

The following table illustrates how the Six Principles of Improvement as promulgated by the Carnegie Foundation are present in the described “lived” experiences shared through each cultural episode.

Table 1: Improvement Principles (Carnegie, P1, P2,...and “lived” episodes)

	P 1	P 2	P 3	P 4	P5	P 6
Early Literacy	y es	y es	y es	y es	Y es	y es
Team Builder	y es	y es	y es	y es	Y es	y es
Professional Growth	n o	n o	y es	n o	N o	n o
What data?	y es	y es	y es	y es	Y es	y es
Play and Leadership	y es	n o	y es	n o	N o	y es
Common Understanding	y es	y es	y es	n o	Y es	y es

Principle 1 (P1): Make the Work Problem-Specific and User-Friendly

Principle 2 (P2): Focus on Variation in Performance

Principle 3 (P3): See the System That Produces the Current Outcomes

Principle 4 (P4): We Cannot Improve at Scale What We Cannot Measure

Principle 5 (P5): Use Disciplined Inquiry to Drive Improvement

Principle 6 (P6): Accelerate Learning Through Networked Communities

Episodes

The following are examples of the six literary episodes of early learning “lived” experience I have chosen to illustrate. The following episodes are the lived experiences used by the researcher to explore and describe the current themes contributing to the phenomenon of early learning professionals situated in public schools.

The Early Literacy Episodes:

Setting: Head Start Program and Public School

Participants: Public School Literacy Coaches/Kindergarten Teachers

Head Start Administrators, Head Start Teachers

Several years ago, in the role of Early Childhood Educational Coordinator for a small urban Head Start program, I found myself absorbed with the importance, excitement, and challenge of creating optimal learning spaces and opportunities for the three- and four-year-old children enrolled in our local program. As a program, we were fortunate to have purchased a vacant middle school with lots of classroom space and to also have additional rented space in a vacant catholic school just down the road. Both locations were at full capacity and were bustling with young children who would move into the local public school system within a two-year time span.

During this time, the local school district, after analyzing their reading achievement test scores, decided it was time to make a connection with the largest preschool program serving the children who would eventually enter kindergarten in their district. This large preschool program was a Head Start program where I worked at the time. The first reaction by some of my colleagues was skepticism mixed with a little paranoia. Comments such as, “What do they ‘really’ want?” and “Can we really trust what they are saying” or “Maybe they are trying to get the federal grant back,” were many first reactions. To those of us who were relatively new to the Head Start program, we listened to our more seasoned colleagues talk about how things were when the same school district used to hold and facilitate the Head Start grant. With much persuasion, we convinced each other it would be a good collaboration, if it worked, and collaboration with a local school district is something the federal Head Start program

encouraged. Educational leadership from both programs sat down and decided what the job-embedded professional development would look like, and how it would be presented to the teachers. Careful consideration was made about content and process of what the topics would be and how they would be presented to all teachers. Many conversations about honoring the current expertise of the teachers occurred during these planning sessions. The collaboration between Head Start and the local school district existed over a two-year time span during the late 1990's. During this time, preschool teachers had access to high-quality and job-embedded professional development focused on language and literacy, and developed new and life-long relationships with local kindergarten teachers and the school district. Regular, on-going, data-driven meetings took place between teachers, teachers and administrators, and between administrators of both programs. By the time the partnership ended (only because a new superintendent was hired), the comments heard from both the Head Start program and the school district contained these phrases, "...now we understand where they are coming from...", "... I understand the purpose of intentional play...", and "...we now have a common assessment that will help us share information between programs...." I hold this experience near and dear and reference it often as I reflect on new experiences. Soon after the partnership dissolved, I left my administrative position with Head Start to become an early learning consultant for a regional special education entity. I left Head Start with a plethora of professional learning and real-life experiences which would serve me well as my new story began to develop.

The initial skepticism became a distant memory as both pre-K and K teachers worked together to support the same children and families. More than anything else, lack of understanding between the two cultures began to dissipate. Without too much compromise from each group, trusting relationships and a common language were beginning to emerge. Pre-K

teachers gained valuable information about supporting children's literacy development, what it meant to be coached by a professional, and the importance of being open to new ideas. The kindergarten teachers gained a more intentional understanding of what play in the preschool classroom "looked like" and what it provided to young child both cognitively, socially, and physically; all teachers gained respect for each other and the work each did for the school and community. Many of the preschool teachers who were a part of this collaboration now work for the local school district. Administration in both programs has changed since this initiative; the school district has received funding to develop their own preschool program; but because of the original outreach, and the authenticity of the individuals who decided to "give it a go," the current school district administration still collaborates from time to time with the local Head Start program.

Reflection 1: the early literacy episode. Filtering the first episode through the Six Principles of the Carnegie Foundation resulted in the following: The problem identified by the school district was how to improve the reading achievement scores of third grade students. The literacy specialists in the district, after examining their current data and programming, decided to find out if starting earlier with children, for instance, preschool children, would improve reading scores across grade levels and result in higher achievement scores in third grade. Making the work problem-specific and user-centered, they choose to collaborate with the preschool program having the greatest number of children who would eventually "feed" into their school district's Head Start. This created what Carnegie would describe as a networked improvement community. This community was comprised of preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers, school district literacy specialists, and Head Start education coordinators. Together, they would meet and learn from each other through job-embedded professional development and as

questions to help determine what each group needed to know about each other, the curriculum, assessments, and the children and families they collectively served. Data was collected and analyzed by teachers and administrators. Changes were made to both classroom practice and professional development offerings; these changes made significant improvement to classroom practice, assessment, and student achievement. The literacy specialists were able to “see the system” that was producing the current outcomes and make changes that resulted in big improvements for both programs involved.

This episode also helps to illustrate the findings from the document analysis. The first theme to emerge from the document analysis, partnership and teaming, is represented in the first sketch by the partnership between the Head Start program and the public school literacy team. The partnership bonds developed during the time of the collaboration created long-term relationships impacting the short- and long-term learning and personal growth of many of the individuals. The document analysis suggests the configuration of collaborative teaming is essential to the school improvement process. It is therefore essential for early learning leaders and representatives to be included in all aspects of the teaming process; this is what gives shared leadership its impact, and provides a case for including the expertise of early learning research in public school learning communities. When individuals engage in dialogue for the purpose of understanding, and are able to suspend judgement in order to consider the perspective of the “others” view point, new and creative ways of developing and discovering elements of programming can emerge.

Assessment and monitoring, the second theme emerging from the document analysis, reminds us of the importance of visiting the system of improvement often. Looking at both student and adult behavior through specific criteria, such as learning goals or standards (student

and professional development), can help all team members decide if what is being implemented is helping everyone improve. In the literacy episode, almost all of the educators involved analyzed multiple data points during regularly scheduled meetings to decide what and how the process of collaboration and instruction could be improved to achieve the intended outcomes.

The third theme emerging from the document analysis, culture, is also evident in the literacy episode. This episode provides evidence of two groups of educators—what I will call school-age and preschool for the lack of another description—deciding to collaborate and consider together, the educational practices and strategies that have or have not worked or been instituted in their programs that would ultimately, and hopefully, have a positive effect on the children and families they serve through a continuum of educational services. They recognized the cultural differences between preschool and school-age services, such as terminology, funding sources, learning standards, and instructional strategies; and also discovered similarities such as emergent literacy outcomes, behavior strategies, and family involvement. They learned how to listen to the needs of each program and attempt to merge practices rather than impose practices for reasons of simple familiarity.

The Team Builder Episode:

Participants: School Improvement Consultant, Early Learning Consultant

A school improvement colleague was excited to share with me the membership of their preschool teachers on the OIP District Leader Team (DLT) and Building Leadership Team (BLT), but he told how they just sit there and “don’t contribute much.”

Consultant: “I am excited the early learning teachers are in our District Leadership Team (DLT) meeting, but they don’t contribute much...don’t they assess the kids? Do they know what to share?”

Me: “Yes, they assess the children. They have a lot of data.”

Consultant: “Then I need some help understanding why they don’t share during the meeting.”

Me: “Well, you do know they have never been trained in the process.”

Consultant: “No, why have they never been trained?”

Me: “The supervisor decided that it wasn’t necessary for the preschool.”

Consultant: “Well, if I suggest they be trained, can you work with them and train them in the process? Can you help them organize the data?”

Me: “Of course I can; but you do realize after the training, they will need continued support because they are dispersed across the district elementary schools and the supervisors will need to create time for them to meet as a group. But yes, I will do this.”

Consultant: “Okay, this will definitely help.”

Reflection 2: the team builder episode. The system of school improvement was not working for the preschool teachers on the school district school improvement team. The school improvement consultant identified a problem affecting both the preschool teachers and the school improvement team. Each needed to understand the value of what the other could bring to the group. The consultant understood things could improve for all involved, so he started by asking questions, or inquiring about why, how, and what could improve the overall functioning of the preschool teachers on this particular team. This is an example of the consultant “seeing the system” that produces the current outcomes and using disciplined inquiry to drive improvement. The consultant posed the question to our consultant team, the team directly responsible for providing leadership support to this district’s school improvement team. Since I was the designated early learning consultant, he directed the question to me, in hopes of

“thinking” together for a solution that will benefit all involved. Considering all the elements taking place in this vignette, we had a networked community of education consultants working together to help find an outcome that was timely, could be measured, and would result in a positive outcome for both teams.

Considering this episode through the lens of the document analysis, we again discover the need for teaming and partnership, not only at the district level, but between consultants and facilitators. Each consultant had a role in supporting this particular district; without a venue for collaboration at both the consultant and district level, the cultural differences would have continued to be misunderstood, and the valuable district early learning assessment information would still be missing from the overall school improvement process. It all started with a question or an inquiry about how something could be improved.

The Professional Growth Episode:

Moving from pre-K to school-age and back again, as I prepared to move from an administrator role to consultant, I had no idea of the adventures awaiting me: The excitement of learning new things, the advocacy role I would need to step into for my own professional gains and for the individuals I left behind at the Head Start program, and the many feelings of confidence and uncertainty that sometimes occurred at the same time. I found myself in a world full of new acronyms, definitions, and bias. The bias I had about being a preschool teacher and feeling “not good enough,” and the bias held by my colleagues of “anyone can play with ‘babies’ all day.” This is where I learned my profession more deeply than ever before because, on occasion, I had to defend and explain what it meant to be an early learning professional. This is difficult when there is such a vast array of qualifications for what an early learning professional is; most individuals have only had experience with daycare or special education preschool units,

and it was very difficult at the beginning of my new position as a consultant to “paint” a picture for others of what and how a typical preschool classroom should function. I went to work diligently, trying to not “feel” defensive, but to help those who have never had my experience with three- and four-year-olds learn and discover as much as they could. Part advocate, part survivalist, I have also had the opportunity to lead an all pre-K building as a principal. One of my favorite examples of social justice is when after attending a half-day training for a district used software program, one of the individuals working in the school’s central office offered me this small tidbit of advice: “You may want to consider taking the all-day training when you become a ‘real’ principal.” She did not say this sarcastically or in a demeaning way. I just shook my head and said, “Okay.” When I got back to the school, I couldn’t help but to tell some of my staff about the comment and finished it off with, “Did you guys realize we have been ‘faking’ it around here all of this time?” Preschool teachers understood what I was communicating because from their own experiences, they know; the life of pre-K in a public school building is, more often than not, one of marginalization in some way or another.

Reflection 3: professional growth episode. Of all the reflections shared, this one is the most personal. It involves the struggle within, the struggle with history, and the motivation to keep moving forward, when it seems the field of early learning either lays dormant, is forgotten, or slips backward on most occasions, depending on the topic of the day. It is this type of scenario that keeps you inquiring about the importance of early learning, but also reminds you that inquiring by yourself will most likely get you nowhere. It makes you think about who should be in your network learning community, and to not have doubts about whether or not it is important for young children to be provided free schooling, including preschool. It also forces you to “see the system” that produces the current outcomes, even if you feel powerless to do

something about it, or you get so angry because it seems so simple; but do we really want to know why free preschool is not a part of our current school district infra-structure? Although the six principles for improvement were not formally processed in this scenario, as I reflected, it allowed me to see the need to move forward to develop pre-K learning communities that will address the current needs, and measure their ideas to help inform the existence and importance of providing preschool to all children in our local school districts.

This particular episode suggests the cultural differences that exist between preschool and school-age programming, even when they exist in the same space or school district. It also speaks to the importance of collaborative inquiry processes. Understanding the function and role of each component of the team helps to strengthen the entire organization. Many school improvement frameworks, such as the Ohio Improvement Process, are designed around the principles of shared leadership. To share leadership, inclusionary leadership must also exist. Preschool, an important component of the early learning continuum, must be included and supported throughout the school district decision-making process.

The “What Data?” Episode:

Preschool has no data? Once when we were provided time for sharing during a professional development offering, a colleague shared how excited she was concerning the preschool teachers participating in the Ohio Improvement Process at the school she was supporting. She opened the conversation by saying, “You know they have no data.” As I heard this comment, my head swung around because at the time, I may have been having a small side-bar conversation but tried to listen to both. I clarified, “Who has no data?”—which was a rhetorical question for me at the time. I wanted her to say preschool, so I could begin my familiar advocacy campaign. She played right along by stating, “Preschool,” with a leery look

on her face. She realized this comment immediately switched me from literacy consultant to early learning consultant as the words came presumptuously from my mouth, “What do you mean they have no data?” She said, “Well, what do they have?” I replied, “They have lots of data,” and I rattled off a few tools used to collect classroom information and measure student growth, and finished it off with, “What they are missing is the guidance and leadership to help them organize the data and use it to make changes.” She said, “Yes, and we are helping them do this.” I said, “This is great; I would like to learn more about how they are supporting the preschool team.” She then shared with me that the early learning consultant from her office was helping her understand the early childhood information, and she was helping them learn the literacy content. I immediately thought about my earlier days in Head Start and had some background knowledge to support what she was communicating. She then said in a somewhat quiet tone, “The preschool teachers are so receptive to anything we share with them; they love to learn.” I said, “Of course, they love to have someone notice and respect their work. Your support and help are most valuable to them,” ending with a very large smile as I thought about how lucky the teachers are to have my colleague in their buildings and how I felt somewhat sad for those who are not noticed throughout an entire school year.

Reflection 4: the “what data?” episode. The school improvement team comprised of preschool teachers was not familiar with the iterative cycle of improvement. They were void a designated assessment coordinator, and looking at aggregate data to inform classroom and program data is an area where most early learning professionals have had little training. The literacy specialist assigned to work with the preschool teachers identified the need to help preschool teachers find a common assessment that would be appropriate to the age of the children they were teaching, and be useful when making instructional decisions. She called upon

an early learning consultant to assist her in this task. This is an example of “seeing the system” that currently produces the intended outcome. Although the district school improvement team identified a need to improve the literacy scores across the district, information specific to preschool literacy was missing. The team, comprised of preschool teachers, a literacy specialist, and an early learning consultant, inquired together about what the current research provides around preschool literacy and what information they could gather from the children and their own behaviors to improve outcomes. This is evidence of a networked learning community meeting on a regular basis to inquire about data and using an iterative cycle of improvement to make decisions that could result in an improvement. The work was problem and user-specific because the preschool teachers were identified as needing training and a common assessment to help them improve instruction and student outcomes.

This episode is another illustration of an identified need between preschool and school-age programming. The preschool teachers were unfamiliar with the iterative 5 Step Process of data collection and analysis utilized by the school improvement teams. They are district personnel who are typically not included in the school improvement processes, but because of a current state literacy initiative and the insight of two consultants, they were introduced to a collaborative data-driven teaming process. The cultural consideration in this sketch represents the lack of understanding about preschool data. Data in most preschools, because of the age of the children, tends to be qualitative in nature—observations, checklists, work samples, etc. This type of data is sometimes “written off” by professionals who value more “quantitative-like” testing procedures such as direct questioning with right or wrong answers. Both types of data are important to monitor and improve preschool programming; but more often than not, the

qualitative data in preschool classrooms is collected and lays dormant because many educators have been socialized to disregard its value.

The “Play and Leadership” Episode

Just the other day in an early learning workshop, the presenter was implying that Developmentally Appropriate Practice and Play were topics that required difficult conversations with which many in the room may disagree. As soon as she suggested, without more explanation, that some may not appreciate her take on the previous mentioned subject, I waited a bit longer to hear what was being said and the comments from the group before I felt the need to interject. Most times, when I can feel my heart beating a little faster, I know that it is a sure sign that I need to speak up for the good of the field of early learning. I raised my hand and made a comment about how my position is less of one concerned about Developmentally Appropriate Practice and Play, and more about the need for leaders in early learning to be called upon to help other leaders understand this vital part of childhood and interpret and facilitate it in ways that involve classroom instruction that will impact student outcomes. I sort of saw a few nods, and then the presenter dismissed us for a ten-minute break. During break, as I sat wondering if what I just said would be received by my colleagues, did anyone “get” what I was trying to advocate for, and if I just looked like a radical, a consultant who I had never met came to me, and in a small and quiet voice, thanked me for what I just said. She then told the story of how before becoming a consultant, she was a kindergarten teacher and then a district leader. She said she was the only one in the district central office who had an early learning background and she felt misunderstood by many of her colleagues. While she was with this particular district, she started a mentoring group for kindergarten teachers who often felt their voice in district matters was never heard. She shared that they were so concerned when she left about who would advocate

for them in the district and what they would do without her. You could hear the conflict in her voice as she shared and tried to suppress the guilt bubbles emerging from her thoughts of yesterdays.

Reflection 5: the play and leadership episode. This episode shows evidence of the need for network improvement communities. The principal was summoned by the preschool teachers to help them become a voice within their current school building and district. Since the principal had also been a kindergarten teacher, the level of trust in the group was high and teachers felt understood. They expressed the feeling of not being understood and feeling devalued by educators who taught higher grade levels. Meeting together with the principal and having their identified needs met was a way to alleviate stress and help the kindergarten teacher feel as if they were contributing to the school environment. Although it was not evident whether or not they were looking at student or adult data, the need for a meeting venue was evidence of the need to look at the current system and the outcome it is producing for kindergarten teachers.

This episode captures the cultural differences existing between early learning and school-age personnel. It is a reminder of the value judgement that is so often placed on teachers who educate younger children. It is important to remember that kindergarten was once an “add-on” to traditional schooling and the approach to educating young children through play-based learning was different from the status-quo (typically didactic learning) and often frowned upon. The kindergarten teachers in this episode recognized the need to organize and share their concerns and celebrations. They mourned the loss of their administrative leader. This speaks to the need of a collaborative teaming process being implemented in the district that is inclusive of all teachers and administrators regardless of who or what they teach.

The Common Understanding Episode:

One amusing story is when a new Director came to work in our consulting office. He had no background in Early Learning and at first did not take the time to ask me what the role of Early Learning was in our office. As I went about my work of supporting preschool teachers and administrators in various school districts, it was very different from my colleagues who were usually assigned to one or two districts and provided school improvement supports throughout the school year with mostly the same individuals. The Director would enter my office and say, “Tell me, what district are you working in?” and I would smile and say, “I’m not”. He would then turn and walk out, no other questions, just look at me in a puzzling way and walk into the corridor. He must have done this a dozen times until I was finally finished amusing myself and decided I would begin what seemed to me, the tedious process of trying to help him understand the world of Early Learning as it relates to school improvement. Much to my surprise, he was intently interested and was excited to hear how we were providing professional development to many of our districts around early literacy, using assessments to inform instruction, and helping preschool teachers with many of the diverse issues they were facing. In the end, he listened and learned about Pre-K and became one of our biggest champions at the regional level. I learned so much from him about leadership and listening.

Reflection 6: the common understanding episode. This episode serves as another personal experience of living in the sub-culture of early learning while existing in the broader school age environment. It is another reminder of the importance of dialogue that leads to understanding between two groups who may seem familiar because they exist in the same space but function differently. There was a need identified by the director; to understand how I was using my time and how it would ultimately impact our mission of school district support and

improvement. We were able to “see the system” as it existed, collaborate and inquire to improve how early learning contributed to school improvement efforts and help me learn and understand how to support other consultants who would encounter early learning issues when working with school districts.

This sketch is a “lived” experience that speaks to both the collaborative teaming and culture theme from the document analysis findings. The director was uniformed of my work; if there had been a regularly occurring meeting encouraging the inquiry process to learn, network and improve our individual contributions to the district work, then through dialogue, we would have had a quicker process to gain mutual understanding. This sketch, like many of the others, suggests a collaborative teaming process based in trust and ongoing dialogue, contributes to understanding and respect when dealing with cultural differences.

Other Implications

School Improvement themes are not the only themes that connect the six episodes, there are unspoken elements found within each and the minority voice of the early learning professional resonates in some capacity. The Institutional boundaries that separate early learning professionals from collaborating or integrating with their school-age peers are evident in each of the shared vignettes. Whether it is the historical perspective of what preschool is or is not, or simply an oversight by administration because of lack of familiarity or understanding, it still remains, linking preschool to school-age school will result in better schools for children, families, and educators.

Chapter V will discuss the idea of a blueprint for action in the form of a framework of improvement to assist in merging the two historically separate systems of early childhood education (preschool) and school-age programming (K-3).

A BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION AND A LEADERSHIP AGENDA

Professional Implications

Early learning research suggests the need to provide quality programs. Some such as Dr. Ruby Takanishi (2016) discuss the need for early learning programs to be situated in existing public school systems; in Chapter V, I will discuss how and why this study supports both of these recommendations and suggest an improvement framework to assist with those early learning classrooms who currently find themselves situated in public schools in retaining their necessary identity as they link their curriculum and services with the primary grades.

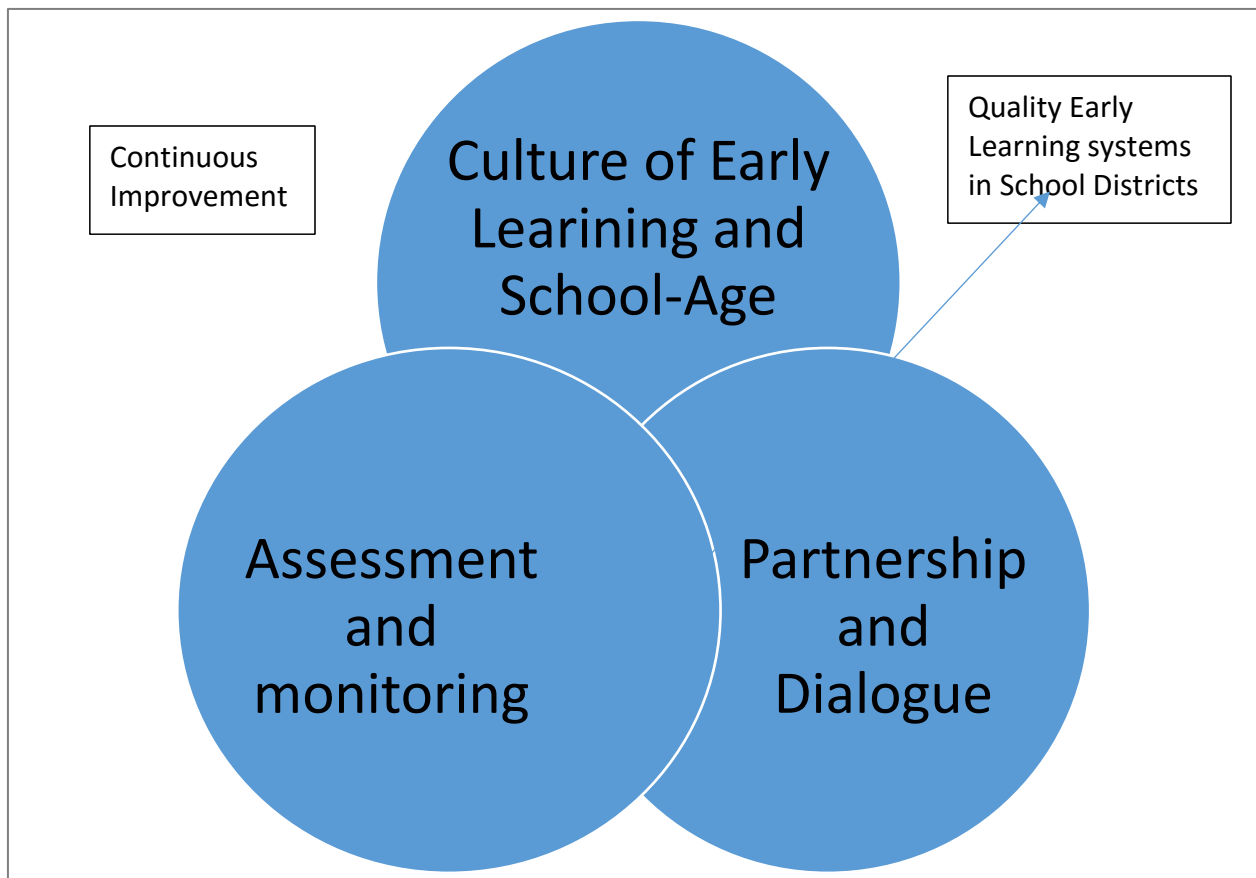
Currently, because of the origin of its historical roots, early learning as a profession continues to remain stagnated and stifled, especially in the area of leadership. Underfunded, misunderstood, and unsure of whether or not it is a business or educational right for all children in America, the field itself is left underdeveloped and prey to individuals who are uninformed and lack experience in the field. Leaders emerge out of necessity or entrepreneur reasons and find themselves positioned to lead early learning programs with little to no knowledge of early learning systems or curriculum. This cycle of “just okay” services is the cause of why many research endeavors in the field have subpar findings and early learning is struggling to prove its true worth in the field of education.

The findings of this research suggest the potential to provide high-quality preschool programs exists when classrooms are positioned in school districts. When classrooms are adequately funded and supported by various leaders, including some who have an understanding of early learning systems and curriculum, as well as an understanding of quality improvement processes, school leaders can work alongside of each other to provide a seamless system of services for children from preschool to third grade.

Blue Print for Action

The findings from this qualitative study suggest three constructs of interaction need to be strengthened in order for early learning classrooms situated in public schools to become a more viable and impactful presence in the public school quality improvement system. I am suggesting if these three areas were examined, exercised, and implemented more often in a systemic and systematic process of improvement, the results would be positive for both children and adults. The three areas of improvement include: creating a space for partnership and dialogue between early learning and school-age leaders, assessment/monitoring of early learning programs, and understanding early learning culture and history. Focusing on these three areas within a working system of improvement, are first steps in improving early learning systems in public schools and breaking down existing barriers to sustainable system improvement.

Figure 3: The intersection of quality early learning programming in public schools



Partnership and Dialogue

Dialogue is more than having a conversation about an issue effecting those involved; it is a process that can lead to change and is closely linked with the other two concepts of interaction, assessment/monitoring, and culture.

William Isaacs, in his book, *Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together* (1999), states:

Dialogue...is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before. It lifts us out of polarization and into a greater common sense, and is thereby a means for accepting the intelligence and coordinated power of groups of people (p.19).

Dialogue is the “talking-together” process that provides a space for change. It is the process that allows the shift from top-down communication of telling “to understand my agenda” to the understanding and partnership conversation where issues that affect those living in the context of the situation are permitted to share their current reality; and it is acknowledged and discussed in a place where ideas for change can lead to an improvement. Jim Knight (2016) calls dialogue, “a learning conversation.” Top-down conversations are usually trying to force an idea or agenda onto the group; it rarely takes into account the context of the situation, the appropriateness for individuals involved, or the learning outcomes (Knight, 2016). They tend to be conflict ridden in either a passive-aggressive manner or explosive, leaving those who are marginalized in the decision-making process either extremely upset or disengaged.

Dialogue is difficult because more times than not, individuals have not had enough time to understand each other’s position and hold preconceived notions and assumptions. This is why cultural awareness and assessing both student and adult learning are also essential to the change agenda. Knight (2016) shares several strategies for developing a space in educational settings

for dialogue to take place. The strategies include, 1) Consider other's thoughts and feelings, 2) Clarify the meaning of words and concepts, 3) Provide contextual information, 4) Identify your false assumptions about knowledge, 5) Address false clarity (knowing the subject matter well), 6) Consider the curse of knowledge (difficulty of sharing knowledge with others), and 7) Use stories and analogies. I will not address these strategies individually, but will continue to refer to them as they relate to the working theory of improvement.

The last point I will make about dialogue, also borrowed from William Isaacs (1999) is the place "inquiry" has as it relates to dialogical conversations:

Advocacy means speaking what you think, speaking from a point of view. Inquiry means looking into what you do not yet understand, or seeking to discover what others see and understand that may be different from your point of view...balancing advocacy and inquiry means stating clearly and confidently what one thinks and why one thinks it, while at the same time being open to being wrong. It means encouraging others to challenge our views, and to explore what might stop them from doing so (p.188).

Assessment and Monitoring

Assessment and monitoring is an ongoing process that can be both qualitative and quantitative. This is important to the theory of improvement because it allows everyone involved to analyze multiple sources of data in an effort to pinpoint areas that need improved. Using researched-based strategies to develop a theory of improvement, such as a fishbone diagram, along with the use of iterative impact cycles, such a PDSA or the 5 Step Process of the Ohio Improvement Process, allows everyone to make informed decisions about what really needs to change. Data can be used as a taking point during dialogue and helps to address/identify areas of need as groups engage in the learning process.

Culture

Culture as it relates to early learning is complex and layered. There is the culture of childcare, the culture of early learning special education. Head Start seems to have its own culture as it pertains to early childhood education; and now there is a school-based early learning culture. For the purpose of this finding, I will only address early learning culture as those individuals who either teach/lead in early learning programs from birth to age five (not yet kindergarten) and those who have been embedded into the traditional school-age culture for decades and teach/lead early learning programs (K – 3rd grade).

In school districts, there are multiple school cultures existing in a common system. This paper has discussed a few of the differences between early learning and school-age classrooms and systems as they exist parallel to each other in the same district. As the findings suggest the beliefs and assumptions of each of these cultures, the need for understanding between both is what is necessary to improve the outcomes of both collectively. Children and families operate and function within and along the continuum of birth to grade three services, and multiple studies suggest, when alignment occurs between early learning programming and school-age services, the children experience more positive outcomes, especially in the areas of social emotional and literacy development (Takanishi, 2014).

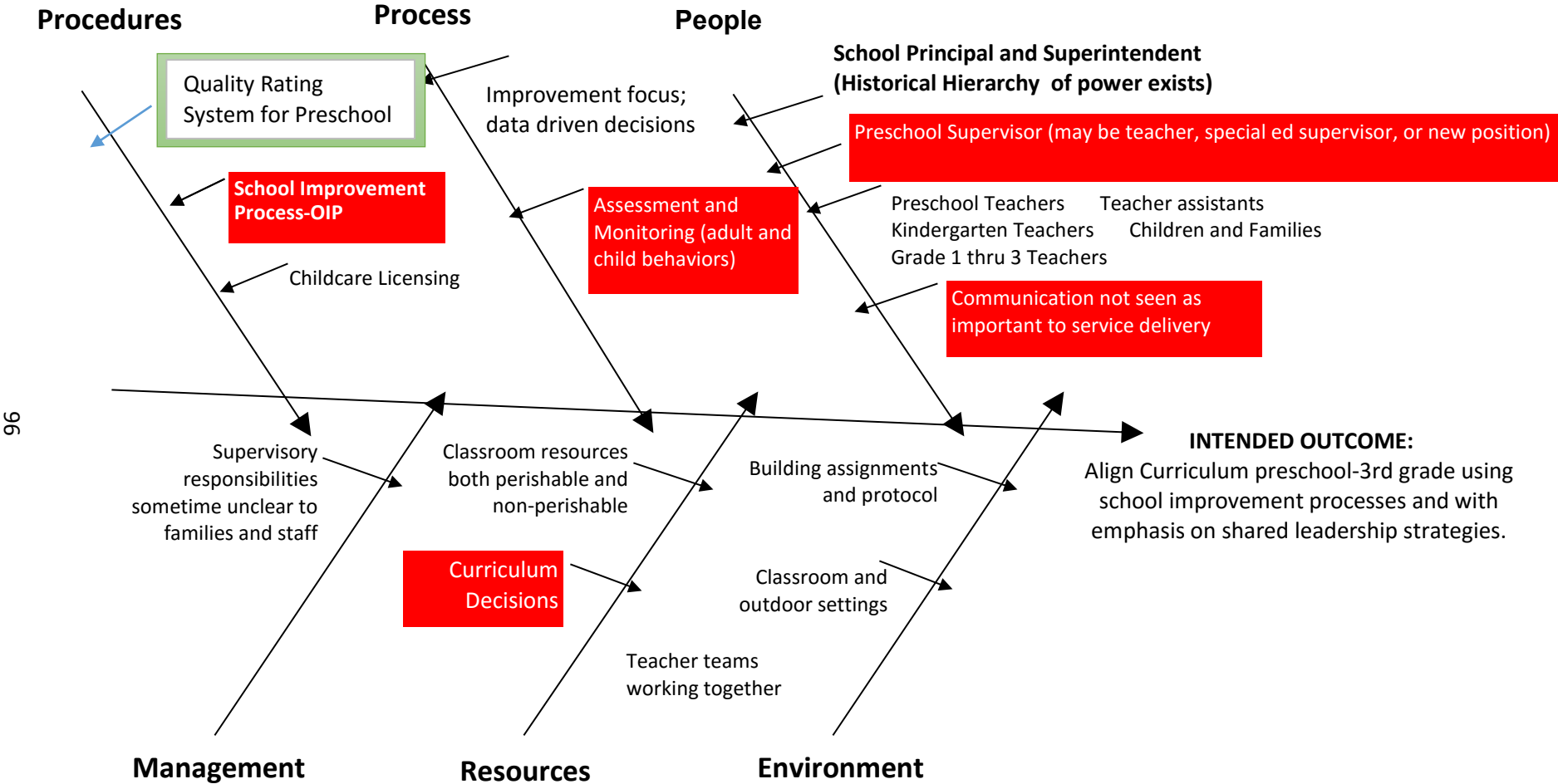
Dialogue and assessment, as mentioned in the previous paragraphs, are two ways to support an individual's understanding of the at times, "discrepant educational systems."

The following is an example of how using a fishbone diagram could assist individuals in school districts in developing a space for learning and addressing issues that relate to both early learning and school-age programming; more information about how to use this as a "thinking tool" will be discussed below the diagram. The fishbone diagram helps to identify problems or

root causes and also develops solutions that everyone involved can agree upon—a shared decision.

This example addresses the need for shared leadership between the two systems and is an attempt to begin to eliminate barriers across the two cultures. Shared leadership is a concept that is found in many quality improvement efforts.

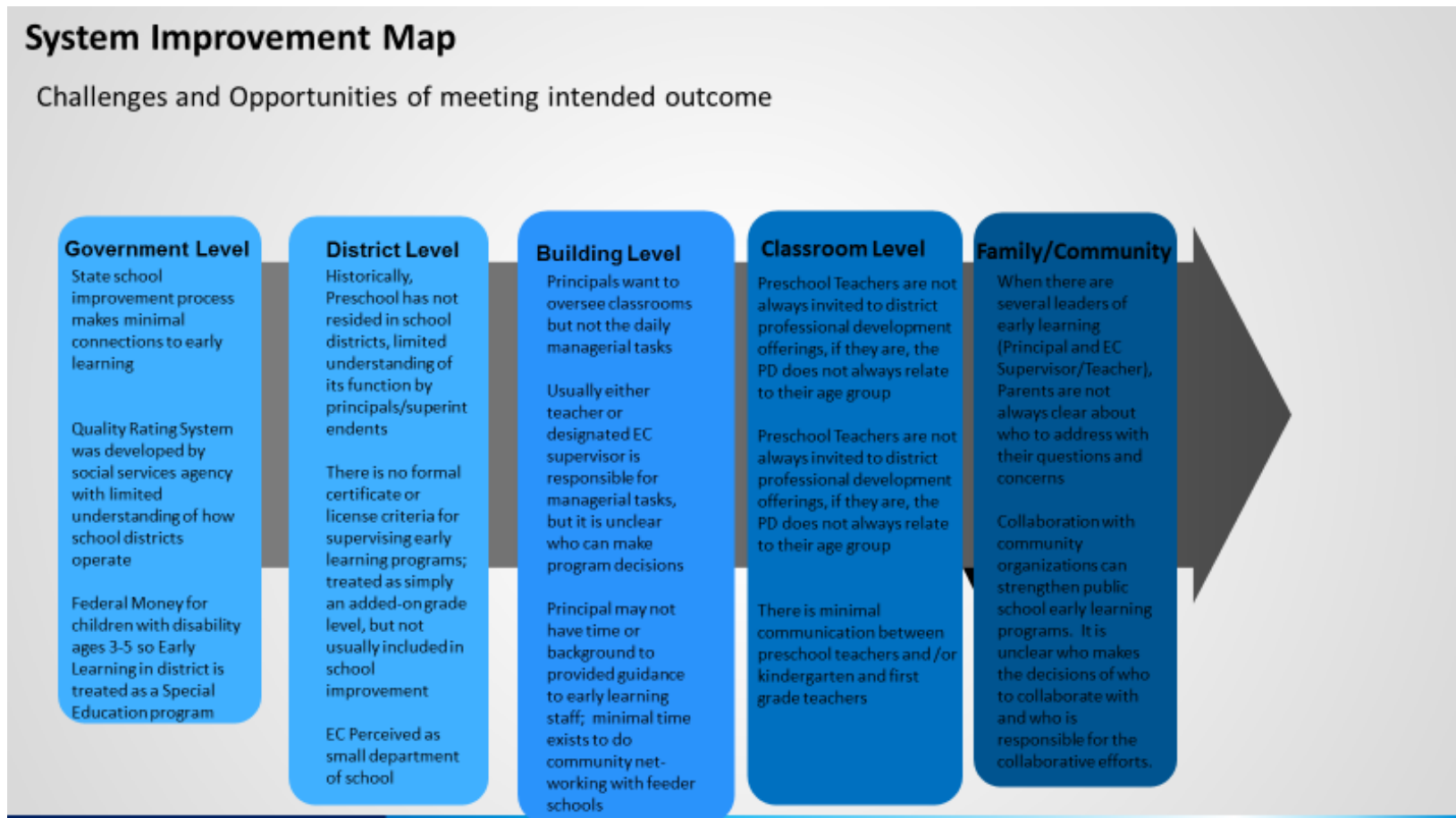
Figure 4: Fishbone Diagram: Early Learning Shared Leadership



The fishbone diagram allows groups of individuals to document their thinking as they come together collaboratively and dialogue about what issues may be barriers and opportunities for their intended outcomes. The fishbone diagram above is an example of preschool staff, including supervisors, teachers, parents, and school-age staff, teachers, elementary school principals, and parents, coming together to work on a solution for how the elementary school principal and the designated early learning supervisor can collaborate and share leadership decisions that promote an alignment between pre-K through grade 3 curriculum. This would occur over a series of meetings and the group would then develop a system improvement map. This map provides an organized visual to help the team begin to identify the necessary changes needing to occur to help accelerate improvement. Bryk et al. (2015) reminds us the function of the system improvement map is to provide a frame for the current areas of the system the group can focus on to begin to make changes that will result in beneficial outcomes for everyone residing within the system—keeping the work user-centered.

The following is an example of a system improvement map developed as a result of the fishbone diagram brainstorming session, focused on shared leadership, to improve a school district's early learning system.

Figure 5: System Improvement Map



The next step in the improvement process is to identify a goal and primary and secondary drivers to help determine the change initiative that needs to be implemented. The working theory of practice can begin at the user-centered level. Challenges at the building level can be addressed because this is within the organization's focus of control and may have the most positive and immediate impact on the current system and identified issue of shared leadership. After addressing those first challenges, other areas of the system improvement map can be addressed or advocated for with empirical data and shared stories from the field.

Although the examples shared in the fishbone diagram and System Improvement Map, do not support a network improvement community as describe by Bryk et al. (2015), it does represent a group of local stakeholders, specifically, school district personnel, who have joined forces to address an identified local need. It also represents how research and empirical data can be used to address system challenges, ideas can be tested through adherence to an iterative process, and changes leading to improvement can be made. Team development or partnership, along with dialogue for improvement, can be a catalyst to address the outcomes of the current system and for analyzing what about the current system needs to change. A fishbone diagram can help the team stay focused on the challenges and opportunities, eventually leading to the development of a system improvement map that will then help pinpoint the aim or goal that needs to be addressed. A resulting driver diagram will support the groups change initiative and is a way for the team to revisit the goal over a designated period of time; this helps determine if the intended outcome has been achieved, or if other considerations need to be made. Eventually, the goal will be tweaked or met and the change will benefit many of the systems stakeholders.

Leadership Agenda

The need for training in quality improvement strategies is necessary in the field of early learning. Learning how to develop partnerships through authentic dialogue, how to use assessment to make decisions about what needs to change, and learning about cultural differences will be necessary to help create the alignment of pre-K – grade 3 situated in public schools. Focusing on these three areas while using a strategy, such as the fishbone diagram, to help determine root causes in schools, will improve both teacher and student outcomes.

There is a need for early learning leaders to expand their knowledge and understanding of quality improvement strategies and systems. There is also a need for school-age leaders to understand the unique culture of early learning and not seek to change it, but embrace how providing appropriate spaces for young children will benefit everyone.

As a leader situated in both early learning and school leadership, I look forward to sharing the research through a variety of dialogical methods as both an advocate for early learning and a partner of inquiry for change with all stakeholders across the birth to grade three continuum. In the near future, in response to the request of a national leader of early learning, I will develop a blog or other type of forum to create a collaborative space for myself and others to dialogue about the leadership experiences noted in this paper and additional experiences I have had as an educational leader in states other than Ohio. This blog or other type of forum will be a place to share both my experiences and those of others who hope to create more systematic and quality early learning programs and experiences. This forum will share lived experiences and also highlight current and seminal early learning research. I also intend to present individually and in collaboration with colleagues at local, state, and national conferences as both an advocate and leader of early learning programs in public schools, presenting research and other pertinent

information to advance the field. I will continue to collaborate with colleagues on various local and state action research projects to help those of us supporting early learning in public school settings develop necessary partnerships, analyze appropriate data, and communicate for improvement for both children and families as well as staff.

Conclusion

This journey has been both analytical and emotional. Exploring a known document through an analytical process allowed me to gain a perspective from various points of view. Discovering both the strengths and challenges of how the Ohio Improvement Process supports overall school district improvement, as well as identifying the lack of inclusivity to all school members, allows me to advocate for areas of the system needing to improve. Sharing stories from the field has provided context and depth to the unique needs of early learning professionals situated in public schools. The need to strengthen school improvement efforts is as iterative as the process itself; because of this, when individuals ask the right questions at the user-centered level, they are able to develop change that may seem small, but could result in more meaningful and lasting change when the change agenda includes all it is shared among all stakeholders.

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