

# Understanding How Kindergarten Teachers' Beliefs Shape Their Transition Practices

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## Abstract

Kindergarten teachers can support children's transition to school by reaching out to parents to encourage parent involvement. These outreach efforts, which are also commonly referred to as transition practices, have the potential to support children's transition to school. Scholars suggest that teachers' beliefs shape their practices. This article reports findings from a qualitative case study conducted with three kindergarten teachers that aimed to understand the ways in which teachers' beliefs shape their transition practices. Kindergarten teachers in this study believed that a variety of skills and behavioral attributes support children's successful transition to kindergarten, but they emphasized the importance of early literacy skills. The ways in which teachers' beliefs about school readiness, parental involvement, and efficacy shape their transition practices are described. These findings highlight important issues related to developing home-school partnerships which aim to increase parent involvement to support children's readiness for school.

Key Words: school readiness, transition to school, teacher beliefs, parent involvement, kindergarten teachers, home-school partnerships, outreach

## Introduction

Kindergarten teachers can play an important role in supporting children's transition to elementary school by utilizing transition practices which aim to

encourage parent involvement that supports children's transition to formal schooling (Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999). Commonly used transition practices, which have also been referred to as outreach efforts, range from sending parents information about the kindergarten classroom to holding an open house after the school year begins (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Pianta et al., 1999; Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005). Although studies have linked kindergarten teachers' transition practices to improved outcomes for children in kindergarten (Hindman, Skibbe, & Morrison, 2013; Schulting et al., 2005), there has been less emphasis on understanding kindergarten teachers' decision making processes with regards to their outreach efforts. A large body of literature indicates that teachers' beliefs inform their practices (Fives & Buehl, 2012; D. M. Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996). More specifically, scholars suggest that beliefs about school readiness have the potential to shape early educators' practices (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006). Research also suggests that teachers' beliefs about parental involvement, parents' efficacy, and teachers' efficacy shape efforts to encourage parental involvement (Kim, 2009). Therefore, this study aims to understand how kindergarten teachers' beliefs about school readiness, parental involvement, and efficacy shape their transition practices. Understanding the link between kindergarten teachers' beliefs and their transition practices may provide important insights into the development of home-school partnerships that aim to increase parental involvement to support children's readiness for school and transition to kindergarten.

## Background

### Conceptualizing School Readiness and the Transition to Kindergarten

The terms *school readiness* and *transition to kindergarten* are often coupled together (Dockett & Perry, 2013; Pianta, Cox, & Snow, 2007). These complex and multifaceted ideas are explored in a significant body of research conducted in the United States and in international contexts (Dockett & Perry, 2013). The increased emphasis on research and policies focused on school readiness and the transition to kindergarten can be traced to the idea that children who experience a successful transition to formal schooling will have improved subsequent outcomes in academic and social/emotional domains. The general consensus among scholars and policymakers alike is that these improved outcomes have the potential to decrease academic, social, and economic inequalities. Therefore, much of the research has focused on disparities in school readiness and the transition to kindergarten among children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Coley, 2002; Lee & Burkham, 2002; Stipek & Ryan, 1997), culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Coley, 2002;

Lee & Burkham, 2002; Rouse, Brooks-Gunn, & McLanahan, 2005), as well as children with special needs (Fox, Dunlap, & Cushing, 2002).

Although the concept of school readiness is multifaceted, it is generally viewed as a fixed or prerequisite set of physical, intellectual, and social skills necessary for children to successfully fulfill schooling requirements (Cronic & Lamberty, 1994; S. L. Kagan, 1990). Common conceptualizations of readiness, particularly among parents, are based upon children's chronological age and maturation. Children are deemed "ready for school" when reaching a specific chronological age (Scott-Little et al., 2006), while parents who adhere to a maturational view of readiness may opt to redshirt or postpone their child's kindergarten enrollment (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). A more complex view of readiness suggested by scholars posits that conceptions of school readiness are shaped by social and cultural contexts defined within families, schools, and communities (Graue, 1993; Smith & Shepard, 1988). According to this view, there is no absolute definition of readiness, rather it is co-constructed by individuals and shaped by the way readiness is defined within contexts (Graue, 1993; Scott-Little et al., 2006; Smith & Shepard, 1988). A more formalized conceptualization of school readiness was outlined by the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP, 1997) which identified physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches toward learning, communication and language usage, and cognition and general knowledge as components of children's readiness. Although most conceptions of school readiness focus on children's readiness for school, the NEGP also identified characteristics of ready schools, yet this conception of readiness has received less attention in the literature (see for an exception Murphey & Burns, 2002; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). It is clear that the concept of school readiness is multifaceted and often guided by competing views, yet the general conceptualization remains focused on children having a set of skills, knowledge, and dispositions that are related to the successful transition to formal schooling.

The transition to kindergarten—which scholars also refer to as the transition to school—is often conceptualized as a set of practices as well as specific programs intended to support children's transition to formal schooling. Although much of the research has focused on kindergarten teachers' transition practices (Early, Pianta, Taylor, & Cox, 2001; Pianta et al., 1999) and school-based practices (Schulting et al., 2005), there are a few studies that have conceptualized transition practices in terms of parent behaviors (Puccioni, 2015; Taylor, Clayton, & Rowley, 2004). The Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition proposed by Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) offers a more nuanced and integrated conceptual model of the transition to kindergarten by drawing upon a range of work guided by ecologically oriented system theories (e.g.,

Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Pianta & Walsh, 1996; Sameroff, 1995). This conceptual model contends that the transition to kindergarten occurs in an environment characterized by the evolving interactions among child, school, classroom, family, and community factors. As such, the transition process begins the year prior to kindergarten entrance and continues throughout the kindergarten year (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). This conceptual model not only emphasizes the interrelated connections between children and their contexts, but also how these connections develop patterns that affect transition outcomes. For example, a parent may not attend meetings or participate in school events in part because of their recollections and previous school experiences (Barnett & Taylor, 2009). Likewise, a teacher may not contact the parent of a child experiencing difficulty because the teacher believes from previous experiences that the parents may not be supportive. The transition to kindergarten is a time of great change for children and families that have profound impacts on children's subsequent academic outcomes (Claessens, Duncan, & Engel, 2009; Duncan et al., 2007). Kindergarten teachers have the potential to support this transition by reaching out to parents and families in ways that build positive home-school partnerships that support children during this period. This study aims to understand the ways in which teachers' beliefs shape their transition practices.

### **Kindergarten Teachers' Transition Practices**

Kindergarten teachers engage parents with young children entering kindergarten in a variety of ways to help support children's transition to school. In the literature, researchers have referred to these engagements as outreach efforts or transition practices (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Hindman et al., 2013; Jung & Han, 2013; Pianta et al., 1999; Schulting et al., 2005). Although there is no formal operational definition of transition practices, scholars have identified common practices related to the transition to kindergarten (National Center for Early Development and Learning, 1996). Some researchers have categorized these engagements in terms of when the practice occurred (e.g., before or after the school year begins) or if the practice was implemented in an individualized or whole-class format (Early et al., 2001; Pianta et al., 1999), while other scholars have categorized transition practices by the type of parent involvement teachers would like to encourage, such as efforts to increase parent involvement at home and at school, or general communication between home and school (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Hindman et al., 2013). Although there is no universal operational definition of transition practices or outreach efforts, the most common practices include sending informational resources to parents, telephoning parents, and inviting parents to attend orientations or

back-to-school nights, while the least common include conducting home visits prior to the start of kindergarten and coordinating efforts with preschool programs (Daley, Munk, & Carlson, 2011; Little, Cohen-Vogel, & Curran, 2016; Pianta et al., 1999; Schulting et al., 2005).

Studies have shown that schools serving historically disadvantaged student populations report using fewer transition practices (Daley et al., 2011; Little et al., 2016; Pianta et al., 1999). More specifically, research has shown that transition practices may vary by the urbanicity and poverty level in the district (Daley et al., 2011; Little et al., 2016; Pianta et al., 1999), as well as by the racial and ethnic composition of the student population (Pianta et al., 1999). In the seminal study conducted by Pianta et al. (1999), teachers reported that a lack of access to kindergarten rosters and no financial compensation during the summer were barriers to implementing transition practices prior to the start of the school year. Despite logistical and financial barriers to the utilization of transition practices, research indicates that kindergarten (Early et al., 2001) and preschool (Rous, Hallam, McCormick, & Cox, 2010) teachers who received specialized training to enhance children's transition to kindergarten reported using more types of transition practices before and after the school year began in comparison to those teachers who did not have any special training.

Several studies have examined the role transition practices play on children's academic outcomes during the transition to elementary school. Of these studies, most have examined the predictive relationship between global measures of transition practices and children's early academic outcomes using data drawn from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Kindergarten cohort (ECLS-K). For example, Schulting et al. (2005) demonstrated that schools implementing more transition practices measured in the fall of kindergarten had students who scored higher on achievement tests at the end of kindergarten. Moreover, the authors demonstrated that parent involvement at school mediated the relationship between transition practices and academic outcomes, and this relationship was stronger for families from middle-income backgrounds. Building upon the work by Schulting et al. (2005), Galindo and Sheldon (2012) demonstrated that kindergarten teachers' ongoing transition practices during the school year were associated with children's achievement at the end of kindergarten and that this relationship was also mediated by parent involvement in school. Also drawing upon data from ECLS-K, Jung and Han (2013) found that teachers' outreach efforts were positively associated with children's gains in reading achievement, and these gains were greater for children who entered kindergarten with lower reading levels and for those who read more outside of school. In a descriptive study of 62 preschool, kindergarten, and first grade teachers, Hindman et al. (2013) explored the independent contribution

of specific outreach efforts on children's early development in language, literacy, and mathematics. The authors found that children in classrooms where the teacher encouraged parents to volunteer in class had higher mathematics skills, while offering workshops and trainings for parents was associated with greater vocabulary development. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that as kindergarten teachers use more transition practices, parents become more involved in education-related activities and children's achievement increases.

### **Teachers' Beliefs About School Readiness, Parent Involvement, and Efficacy**

The study of teachers' beliefs spans several decades (Fives & Buehl, 2012; D. M. Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992). Much of this research has aimed to link teachers' beliefs to their practices (Fang, 1996; Fives & Buehl, 2012; D. M. Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992). A belief can be defined as an opinion or conviction of truth which may or may not be supported by empirical evidence. Several studies have linked early educators' and elementary school teachers' beliefs about developmentally appropriate practice to their instructional practices (Maxwell, McWilliam, Hemmeter, Ault, & Schuster, 2001; Vartuli, 1999). Scholars suggest teachers' beliefs about school readiness have the potential to shape their practices (Scott-Little et al., 2006). In fact, a few studies have examined early educators' beliefs or perceptions about school readiness in relation to experiences intended to prepare children for the transition to school (Gill, Winters, & Friedman, 2006; Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Daugherty, Howes, & Karoly, 2009). Yet, much of the research examining kindergarten teachers' school readiness beliefs compare their beliefs to those beliefs held by preschool teachers and parents. Findings from these studies suggest that parents, as well as preschool and kindergarten teachers, believe it is important for children to be able to interact meaningfully with adults and peers, communicate their wants and needs effectively, and follow the teacher's directions to be successful in kindergarten (Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). The development of home-school partnerships, particularly those that enhance and enable parent involvement, is one way to support children's transition to kindergarten. Therefore, it is important to understand how kindergarten teachers' beliefs about school readiness potentially shape their outreach efforts.

Research also suggests that teachers' beliefs about parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002) and parents' efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992) shape their attitudes and efforts to encourage parent involvement. In general, teachers who believe parent involvement is crucial to children's educational success and actively encourage parental involvement are more likely to enable or increase parent involvement

(Anderson & Minke, 2007; Epstein, 2010). For example, early educators who have positive attitudes towards supporting parent involvement engaged in more activities to encourage it (Desimone, Finn-Stevenson, & Henrich, 2000). Similarly, teachers who hold positive beliefs about parents' efficacy for helping their child learn are more likely to encourage parent involvement than teachers holding less positive views (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002; Walker & Dotger, 2011). Yet, research suggests teachers often hold low expectancies concerning the efficacy of parents of color, and these deficit views may decrease teachers' invitations for involvement (Yin, 2009).

Studies also show that a teacher's sense of self-efficacy is related to the invitations offered for parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). Teachers who have a strong sense of self-efficacy engage in more outreach efforts which include scheduling conferences with parents, having more parent volunteers in the classroom (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1987), and sending information home about homework and ways to support literacy learning (Garcia, 2004). Moreover, teachers who report having a positive sense of self-efficacy hold more positive views of parent involvement among parents of color (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002; Moosa, Karabenick, & Adams, 2001) and show a greater willingness to learn from parents (Swick & McKnight, 1989). Taken together, these studies highlight the importance of teachers' beliefs in shaping their efforts to reach out to parents to encourage and enable parent involvement.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand the ways in which kindergarten teachers' beliefs shape their use of transition practices. In this study, I approach the examination of kindergarten teachers' beliefs and their transition practices through an ecological lens which considers the transition to kindergarten to be a complex process that occurs among children, families, teachers, schools, and community across time (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Given that few studies examine the ways in which kindergarten teachers' beliefs shape their transition practices, this study was exploratory in nature and involved the collection and analysis of qualitative data from a case study (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). This study explores the ways in which kindergarten teachers' beliefs about school readiness, parent involvement, and efficacy shape their transition practices. In this study, transition practices are considered to be kindergarten teachers' efforts to encourage parent involvement that supports children's transition to school. As such, transition practices may occur in whole-group or individualized formats that take place prior to the start of kindergarten and throughout the school year.

## Methods

A qualitative case study was conducted with three kindergarten teachers at Oakvale Elementary School (all names are pseudonyms). Located in the Northeastern United States, Oakvale Elementary is a public elementary school in a high-poverty community that predominately serves families of color. Purposeful sampling was employed due to preexisting relationships based on university field work. The researcher had some previous knowledge of the participants through previous interactions with the school administrator. All of the participants were informed about the goals of the study and understood any potential risks outlined in the IRB waiver.

The teachers in this study were White females who have valid teaching credentials and Master's degrees in an education field. The major difference among the teachers in the study was their years of teaching experience which ranged from two to eight years. At the time of data collection, Ms. Karlson had been teaching at Oakvale Elementary school for eight years and was the most senior member of the kindergarten team, while Ms. Braxton had been teaching at Oakvale for six years. Ms. Jenkins, who was the most junior member of the kindergarten team, had two years of teaching experience at the time of data collection, both of which were at Oakvale. The teachers in this study met weekly during a common time for the purpose of lesson planning.

### Data Sources

Data were collected over an eight-month period beginning in April prior to the beginning of a kindergarten school year and continued through the month of November. Triangulation was achieved by gathering multiple sources of data which include individual semi-structured and unstructured interviews, researcher field notes, and documents provided to parents related to the transition to kindergarten, curriculum, and instruction. Interviews with kindergarten teachers were a key data source for this study. Each teacher participated in three to four 30- to 45-minute semi-structured and unstructured interviews which were digitally recorded and transcribed. Field notes that were taken during kindergarten orientation, which occurred in the spring prior to the beginning of kindergarten, as well as back-to-school night, which occurred during the beginning of October, also served as important sources of data for this study. These events were intended to build home-school partnerships by providing information about school policies and curriculum, in addition to encouraging parent involvement. As such, these settings provided an important data source for learning about teachers' beliefs as well as the types of transition practices utilized. A review of relevant documents, which included a



compilation of instructional materials provided to parents during kindergarten orientation and back-to-school night as well as daily communication logs sent home to parents in children's take-home folders, were an additional source of data for the study.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of the data was guided by general strategies recommended by Miles et al. (2014) which included reading the data for a sense of the whole, coding, memoing, and developing themes and patterns from the data and codes. Coding was divided into two major stages: first cycle and second cycle coding (Miles et al., 2014). A set of deductive codes were used to begin the first cycle coding approach to data analysis. I began with two master codes, beliefs and transition practices, plus several subcodes which included readiness, parent involvement, and efficacy. This list was applied to the first set of interview transcripts and field notes from kindergarten orientation and then examined for fit and utility. Causation coding was also used to search for combinations of antecedent and mediating variables that attempt to map decision making processes (Miles et al., 2014). Pattern coding, as a second cycle method, was conducted to identify emergent themes (Miles et al., 2014). Analytic memos were written to document my reflections and thought processes about the data.

### **Findings**

This study aimed to understand how kindergarten teachers' beliefs about school readiness, parent involvement, and efficacy shape their transition practices. Analysis of the data revealed that kindergarten teachers used a variety of transition practices and that their beliefs shaped the ways teachers reached out to parents to encourage and enable parent involvement.

#### **Beliefs About School Readiness Shape Transition Practices**

Kindergarten teachers' beliefs about school readiness in general, and the increasing demands of early learning standards more specifically, shaped the ways in which teachers reached out to parents to encourage home-based parent involvement. Teachers in this study shared concerns that children who demonstrated fewer foundational literacy skills at the beginning of kindergarten would have difficulty meeting the demands of the newly adopted kindergarten curricula that was aligned to the state standards. Ms. Karlson, the most senior member of the kindergarten teaching team, shared that "kids who didn't go to preK, you have to teach them all of that [early literacy skills] and then what we need to know in kindergarten. It makes the job of a kindergarten teacher that

much harder because preK is not mandatory.” Although teachers in this study believed it was important for children to have a variety of academic skills and social/emotional attributes to successfully transition to kindergarten, there was more emphasis placed on the importance of early literacy skills in shaping children’s future success in kindergarten. More specifically, teachers emphasized the importance of children having a degree of phonological awareness in addition to a beginning understanding of the alphabetic principle at the start of kindergarten. Ms. Jenkins, the least senior member of the kindergarten team, worried her “expectations are too high,” but admitted that “knowing letter sounds is very helpful, even just knowing the letter names and knowing how to write them, and being able to recognize their first and last name, whether it be orally or written, and write at least their first name” would help support children’s successful transition to kindergarten. Teachers collectively expressed a belief that children need to have a sense of how we read and hold books, skills that are inclusive of “concepts of print.”

In addition to phonological awareness and concepts of print, kindergarten teachers in this study also emphasized the importance of children having the stamina to sit, listen, comprehend, and discuss texts prior to entering school to meet the demands of the newly adopted curricula. Ms. Jenkins described how changes in the curriculum now require children to sit for extended periods during read-aloud lessons and be able to provide spoken responses to comprehension questions. Teachers also emphasized the importance of children being able to communicate. Ms. Braxton, for example, explained that in order to help children successfully transition to kindergarten, it is important for them to be able to “answer questions appropriately, communicate with another person, another student, another teacher.” Going further, all of the teachers in this study also believed it was important for children to be able to engage in conversations using socially acceptable school-based conventions, and these were to be cultivated by parents through parent–child interactions prior to kindergarten. For instance, Ms. Braxton explained that, “the most important thing that students need to have or children need in general is just to be talked to... just to have conversations with your kid, so they understand I’m talking, you’re talking, going back and forth.” In other words, teachers believed it was important for children to have familiarity with conversational discourse traditionally found in school settings.

Teachers’ beliefs about school readiness and the demands of newly adopted curriculum shaped the types of materials and resources shared with parents during kindergarten orientation. During kindergarten orientation, where approximately 60% of the families who were invited to attend participated, teachers provided parents with a comprehensive set of education-related

materials and resources to be completed with children during the summer prior to the start of kindergarten. Ms. Karlson, who was described as the lead kindergarten teacher by the school administrator, explained to parents at kindergarten orientation that the provided materials were intended to help children learn to recognize the letters of the alphabet, numbers up to 20, colors, and shapes. She also explained that customized writing templates were included in the materials to provide each child with opportunities to “practice writing their first and last name as well as the letters of the alphabet.” Each child also received a picture book to take home, and Ms. Jenkins encouraged parents to read the book with their child over the summer. During kindergarten orientation Ms. Karlson directed parents to complete the suggested activities with their child over the summer by doing “a little bit each day,” and to return the completed activities at the beginning of the school year. Parents responded positively to the suggested activities and eagerly shared that they already used similar types of activities at home and bought “workbooks” to help get their child “ready for kindergarten.” During an interview, Ms. Karlson stated, “We need to do a lot more in the same amount of time,” so if parents engage their child in the suggested activities provided during kindergarten orientation, “then in September we’re hopefully on a good path.” Analysis of the materials and resources provided to parents during kindergarten orientation and back-to-school night showed a greater emphasis on parents’ engaging their children in early literacy-related learning activities in comparison to other content areas such as mathematics and social/emotional development.

A sense of urgency seemed to exist among the teachers to help children successfully meet the academic demands of kindergarten which shaped the types of materials and resources shared with parents during traditional transition practice events like kindergarten orientation and back-to-school night. Although teachers utilized whole-group transition practices to encourage home-based parent involvement, they also described examples of parents taking up specific invitations to participate in suggested education-related activities when information was communicated on an individualized level during a conference or when suggestions were provided in response to a parent-initiated question. For example, after discussing the use of invented spelling at parent conferences, Ms. Jenkins and Ms. Braxton described evidence of parents supporting their child’s use of invented spelling when completing homework. In this way, teachers were encouraging and inviting parents to engage their child in suggested developmentally appropriate practices. Taken together, this evidence suggests that kindergarten teachers’ beliefs about school readiness shaped their efforts to encourage home-based parent involvement, particularly as it relates to the development of early academic skills that would support children’s transition to kindergarten.

## **Beliefs About Parent Involvement and Efficacy Shape Transition Practices**

Teachers in this study believed parent involvement was crucial to children's success in kindergarten and began using mobile technologies to build positive home-school partnerships and encourage home-based involvement. Ms. Jenkins shared having difficulty with behavior management during the previous school year and believed it was because she did not "reach out" to parents at the beginning of the school year. In response, Ms. Jenkins decided to "do something different" and provide parents with her personal cell phone number so they can "reach me with questions about homework and behavioral concerns." Ms. Jenkins described sending parents a "text in the middle of the day with a picture of their child doing something great," because she believed this positive message would help build "rapport with my parents" and as a result parents would feel more comfortable seeking help to support their child with school-related assignments at home. Ms. Jenkins explained that, "texting is mostly what we do. They [parents] have my cell phone number, and we talk or text. If they [children] have trouble with the homework, they'll [parents] just send me a text."

Kindergarten teachers at Oakvale believed it was important to use innovative approaches utilizing mobile technologies in an attempt to build partnerships with parents who were less likely to engage in school-based involvement activities (e.g., attendance at parent conferences, back-to-school night) in order to encourage home-based involvement. As such, teachers began using a new web technology application, remind.com, to communicate literacy-learning strategies to parents via text messages. (Note: remind.com is one of many newly available applications that facilitate home-school communication.) Teachers discussed the use of the application with parents at back-to-school night and sent multiple informational fliers home to encourage parents to sign-up for an account. This free online resource enabled teachers to share a variety of literacy-related web links and materials with parents via text messages. For example, Ms. Karlson explained that, during common planning time, all of the kindergarten teachers decided to use the application to send parents a link to a video on YouTube of the alphabet song currently used in their classes. The text message encouraged parents to watch the video so they could learn the song and sing it with their child. Additional text messages were sent to encourage parents to have their child practice writing letters of the alphabet at home and study spelling words. With over half of the parents who were invited to sign-up for a remind.com account participating, all of the teachers in this study believe this practice provided an efficient way to reach out to parents and encourage home-based parent involvement.

Kindergarten teachers' beliefs about parents' efficacy for helping their child learn also shaped their transition practices. Most teachers in this study believed parents are capable of supporting their child's learning but may need support engaging in developmentally appropriate teaching practices. For example, Ms. Jenkins shared that, although parents know how to read and write, "they don't remember how they learned how to read and write," and they may struggle to "teach" their child, "especially with the shift to Common Core." Ms. Jenkins shared that some parents will tell her they "don't understand math," or "don't know how to help." To support families, Ms. Jenkins described providing parents with learning strategies to use at home and modeled how to engage the child in the activity. In contrast, Ms. Karlson and Ms. Braxton, the most senior members of the kindergarten team, expressed concerns about parents' willingness to engage their child in suggested activities. For example, Ms. Braxton explained she doesn't "bother" sending book bags home any longer because the "parents won't read" with the children or complete the suggested activities. Ms. Karlson attributes the lack of home-based involvement to parental role construction, stating parents "think, well, that's the job of a teacher. .... That's why I send my kid to school." Ms. Karlson and Ms. Braxton both expressed frustration about their perceived lack of parent of involvement with kindergarten orientation materials, explaining that for the past few years, parents have been provided with suggested materials and resources at kindergarten orientation, and each year only a small percentage of children return completed materials despite offering a small incentive for children. These findings highlight the ways in which teachers' beliefs about parents' efficacy and capacity shape their outreach efforts. Ms. Jenkins believed that parents needed help engaging their child in developmentally appropriate practices based upon conversations with parents. Her response was to provide parents with resources and model strategies to parents. In contrast, Ms. Braxton believed parents would not engage their child in suggested activities and, as a result, was less willing to encourage home-based involvement.

Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs shaped their efforts to encourage parental involvement that supports children's transition to school. Modeling developmentally appropriate teaching strategies to parents was considered to be an important transition practice among the kindergarten teachers in this study. For example, Ms. Jenkins expressed confidence about modeling strategies for parents to encourage home-based parent involvement, stating that, "this year was probably my most successful when it came to modeling....especially writing. When it was modeled and shown, hey this is how we do it in the classroom; this is what works," it was evident when examining the children's homework that parents were utilizing the suggested strategies at-home. Yet, other teachers felt

less confident providing learning suggestions to parents. Ms. Braxton wanted to encourage parents to ask their children questions and have children answer in complete sentences, but she wondered, “how do we communicate that to parents, I don’t know....can we tell them to teach their child how to speak in complete sentences?” Although Ms. Jenkins was the least experienced member of the team, she expressed efficacy in modeling for parents and provided multiple examples of providing developmentally appropriate strategies for parents to use at home with their child. Whereas Ms. Braxton, who expressed less confidence sharing strategies with parents, was less likely to report sharing or modeling learning strategies to encourage home-based involvement. Overall, this evidence suggests that when teachers felt more comfortable or confident engaging in certain outreach efforts like modeling strategies to parents, they were more likely to report engaging in those practices, whereas teachers who felt less confident engaging in certain practices were less likely to report utilizing those outreach efforts.

## Discussion

This qualitative case study drew upon literature linking beliefs and behavior to understand the ways in which kindergarten teachers’ beliefs shape their use of transition practices. Scott-Little et al. (2006) suggested that early learning standards have the potential to shape teachers’ conceptions of school readiness which, in turn, may influence their practices. In addition to beliefs about school readiness, research has shown teachers’ beliefs about parental involvement, parents’ efficacy, and their own sense of self-efficacy shape their orientation and efforts to promote parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002; Yin, 2009). The goal of this exploratory case study was to understand how kindergarten teachers’ beliefs about school readiness, parent involvement, and efficacy shape their transition practices. Findings show kindergarten teachers in this study believed that a variety of skills and behavioral attributes helped support children’s successful transition to elementary school and employed both traditional and innovative transition practices to encourage and enable parent involvement. Moreover, kindergarten teachers’ beliefs shaped their transition practices.

Beliefs about parent involvement shaped the ways in which kindergarten teachers in this study reached out to parents to encourage and support their involvement. Kindergarten teachers in this study believed home-based parental involvement was crucial to children’s early learning and successful transition to kindergarten. As such, teachers provided parents with a variety of materials, resources, and invited parents to engage in suggested school-based learning

activities at home in an effort to increase children's early learning and academic performance. This is an important finding as research indicates that teachers who believe parents play a vital role in their child's educational success and actively encourage parental involvement are more likely to increase home and school engagement (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Brown & Medway, 2007). Consistent with previous research, in many cases, explicit requests for home-based involvement from kindergarten teachers in this study were taken up by parents (Anderson & Minke, 2007).

Kindergarten teachers conceptualized readiness as a fixed set of skills and behavioral attributes necessary for children to successfully transition to school (Crinic & Lamberty, 1994; S. L. Kagan, 1990). Although kindergarten teachers in this study discussed the importance of children having early mathematical skills like counting and recognizing shapes and colors, teachers placed more emphasis on the importance of early literacy skills. Teachers emphasized the importance of children having phonological awareness, knowledge of the alphabetic principle, and concepts of print. Teachers also believed it was important for children to have the stamina to sit, listen, comprehend, and discuss texts in order to meet the demands of the curriculum which was aligned to the recently adopted early learning and K–12 English language arts Common Core standards. Consistent with previous research, the kindergarten teachers placed importance on children being able to communicate their wants and needs and interact meaningfully with adults and peers (Lin et al., 2003; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Teachers in this study also emphasized the importance of children being able to engage in a classroom discourse characterized by appropriate turn taking, which was categorized by Cazden and Beck (2003) as speaking rights and listening responsibilities. Overall, these findings are consistent with literature suggesting that kindergarten teachers who work with children from low-income backgrounds place greater emphasis on early literacy skills to meet the increasing demands of learning standards and accountability measures (Wright, Diener, & Kay, 2000).

It is clear that kindergarten teachers in this study believed children benefit from having a variety of academically oriented skills and behavioral attributes, like sitting still and listening, during the transition to elementary school. However, teachers in this study placed more emphasis on the importance of early literacy skills. Teachers reflected upon the changing curricular demands within the classroom and expressed a sense of urgency to ensure children met academic expectations in kindergarten, particularly around the literacy domain. These beliefs about school readiness shaped the ways in which kindergarten teachers reached out to parents, specifically, in the types of learning activities and resources provided to parents to encourage and enable home-based involvement.

Kindergarten teachers in this study shared concerns about children's possible lack of early literacy skills upon school entry. In an effort to improve children's early literacy skills and meet grade level academic expectations, kindergarten teachers provided parents with literacy-related resources and encouraged parents to engage their child in these suggested activities over the summer prior to the start of the school year. These findings highlight the important role early learning standards play in shaping kindergarten teachers' conceptions of school readiness as well as their practices (Scott-Little et al., 2006).

Although teachers in this study participated in several common transition practices like kindergarten orientation and back-to-school night to support children's transition to kindergarten (Pianta et al., 1999), they also utilized innovative, ongoing outreach efforts to encourage home-school communication and encourage parent involvement, particularly for parents who did not attend school-based events. Teachers in this study used mobile phone technologies to communicate with parents and encourage home-based parent involvement. Whether these communications occurred through individualized formats via private text messaging or whole-class formats through the use of remind.com, teachers were using mobile phone technology to encourage home-based parent involvement in order to support children's transition to kindergarten. Although the use of mobile phones to encourage parent involvement with young learners is a relatively new approach, Horowitz et al. (2006) reported findings from a recent intervention in which mobile phones were used to deliver text and video content to encourage parent-child engagements around early literacy-related content. Findings indicated that parents from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to engage their child in real-world letter recognition activities, similar to the activities suggested in the videos. With over 50% of the parents in this study opting to receive teacher-generated messages sent through remind.com, the utilization of mobile phone technologies as a transition practice to encourage home-based parent involvement has the potential to engage parents who may be less likely to attend school-based events. Research indicates that over 75% of adults in the United States have a smartphone; this percentage, however, significantly decreases to 54% for adults with less than a high school diploma, and 64% for those making less than \$30,000 per year (Pew Reserach Center, 2017). This may explain why only 50% of the parents in the study opted to receive teacher messages through remind.com.

Overall, teachers in this study believed it was important to develop strong home-school partnerships that encourage parents to participate in their child's learning at home in order to support their successful transition to elementary school. Although specific invitations for involvement are a contributing factor in parents' decisions to become involved (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005), it is



important to note that the ways in which teachers invite parents to participate may have a differential impact on parents' involvement. Kindergarten teachers in this study noted that parents were more likely to respond to invitations to participate in suggested education-related activities with their child when the information was communicated on an individualized level during a conference or when suggestions were provided in response to a parent-initiated question. This important finding warrants further investigation.

This study also aimed to understand how kindergarten teachers' beliefs about their own efficacy as well as parents' efficacy shape their outreach efforts. Bandura (1986, 1989a, 1989b) suggested that self-efficacy beliefs are drawn from four general sources which include direct experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal. Bandura proposed that the most powerful source of self-efficacy is from positive and successful direct experience. In general, findings from this study suggested that teachers held positive views of parents' efficacy. Teachers in this study believed parents were capable of engaging their children in various education-related activities but may need more specific guidance to engage in developmentally appropriate research-based practices. Although teachers did not necessarily express concerns about parents' efficacy to engage their child in suggested learning activities, some teachers in the study expressed concerns about parents' follow-through, believing that most parents did not engage their child in suggested activities based upon their own previous direct experiences with parents. These negative experiences which reinforced their perceptions about parents' lack of involvement resulted in a decrease in outreach efforts. This finding is consistent with those presented by Swick (2004) who found that teachers' engage in a self-fulfilling prophecy of negative parent and family involvement based upon a few negative involvement situations. In contrast, teachers who believe parents are capable of contributing to their children's education success are more likely to act in ways that encourage parent involvement in comparison to teachers who hold less positive views (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). It is important to note that teachers' invitations that encourage parent involvement may serve as a form of verbal persuasion which may have a positive influence on parents' sense of self-efficacy. Therefore, additional research exploring the relationship between kindergarten teachers' explicit invitations for parents' home-based involvement and parents' sense of self-efficacy is warranted.

Kindergarten teachers' sense of self-efficacy also shaped their outreach efforts. For example, teachers in this study who expressed confidence reaching out to parents to share or model learning-related strategies to encourage home-based involvement were more likely to report engaging in those practices in comparison to those teachers who expressed a lack of confidence. This positive

sense of self-efficacy, which was often related to outreach efforts, seemed to be shaped by teachers' previous direct experiences with parents. For example, Ms. Jenkins's reports of successfully modeling instructional strategies and actively encouraging parent involvement were often coupled with comments demonstrating a positive sense of self-efficacy related to those efforts. In this study, teacher's beliefs appear to operate within a system rather than independently (Fives & Buehl, 2012). Ms. Jenkins held positive beliefs about parent involvement, parents' efficacy, and a positive sense of self-efficacy, all of which were reinforced by positive experiences working with parents. In contrast, Ms. Braxton's negative views about parents' efficacy and capacity coupled with her lack of self-efficacy sharing and modeling strategies operated in ways that limited her outreach efforts, which, in turn, may have reinforced negative beliefs about parental involvement, parents' efficacy, and her own self-efficacy (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). One possible explanation for differences in beliefs about parental involvement and efficacy among the teachers in this study may relate to their years of experience teaching at this school. Ms. Jenkins had the least amount of experience working at this school and perhaps had encountered fewer negative experiences with parents in comparison to her colleagues who had more years of experience working at this school. Another possible explanation is that Ms. Jenkins viewed her experiences with parents as a space for reflective practice which motivated her to find innovative ways to reach out to parents and encourage their home-based involvement. These findings are important as scholars suggest that teachers who have a strong sense of self-efficacy and place importance on parental involvement are likely to offer ongoing invitations to encourage parent involvement and to persist in overcoming obstacles to develop productive home-school partnerships (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). Overall, these findings highlight the importance of in-service teacher education programs that not only address teachers' sense of self-efficacy, but also enhance their beliefs about parents' efficacy in helping their children learn and invitations for involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002).

## **Conclusion and Implications**

Findings suggest kindergarten teachers in this study shared certain beliefs about the types of skills and behavioral attributes that support children's successful transition to kindergarten. Additionally, teachers used a variety of transition practices to build home-school partnerships that encourage parental involvement. Kindergarten teachers' beliefs shaped the ways in which they reached out to parents to enable and encourage parent involvement. Research indicates that many parents want information about the academic expectations

in kindergarten (McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro, & Wildenger, 2007), and teachers who provide parents with information about the types of skills and attributes which support children's successful transition to kindergarten in combination with corresponding developmentally appropriate practices that support children's early learning have the potential to shape parent involvement in meaningful ways. However, kindergarten teachers must be mindful to bridge children's home learning environment and school practices in order to successfully support early learning and development during the transition to school.

It is important to note that none of the kindergarten teachers in this study mentioned the importance of learning about families' home learning environments or literacy practices as a means to support children's literacy learning in school. Research highlights the importance of examining out-of-school literacies to support children's learning in school (Hull & Schultz, 2002). Teachers should engage parents in more informal exchanges about children's in and out-of-school literacy learning in order to understand parents' beliefs about parental involvement and home literacy activities (Dickinson & Tabors, 2003). This lack of attention paid to parents' beliefs and practices could be a result of teacher preparation programs "training" educators in what Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) refer to as the traditional parent involvement paradigm which does not recognize or legitimize the interaction patterns of many families or resource differences which often results in teachers viewing parents as deficient and their children in need of remediation. Therefore, kindergarten teachers' must broaden their definition of parent involvement and family engagement to be inclusive of the cultural and linguistic diversity represented in the population of families and children they serve. Outreach efforts should be culturally and linguistically appropriate and aim to build a reciprocal relationship with families that build upon their funds of knowledge (Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992). This requires that kindergarten teachers consider parents and children as experts who can provide teachers with invaluable information that can be used to shape their transition practices (Doucet & Tudge, 2007). Future research should continue to explore the complex and reciprocal relationships that exist among stakeholders to understand the ways in which teachers' outreach efforts shape parental involvement, as well as the ways in which families shape teachers' outreach efforts.

Although case studies do not provide generalizable data to make definitive claims, they do allow one to identify and theorize about the complicated relationships between teachers' beliefs and their practices. Future research should explore the interrelationship between school administrators, kindergarten teachers, and parents as they create new spaces and partnerships to support early

learning during the transition to elementary school. Professional development focused on supporting teacher–parent communication is another important avenue for future research (Mistretta, 2017; Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012). Additionally, scholars should explore the effectiveness of in-service professional development programs that prepare kindergarten teachers to use a variety of transition practices, as research suggests that kindergarten teachers who have had specialized training to enhance children’s transition to elementary school are more likely to use more transition practices (Early et al., 2001). Finally, research should continue to explore the ways in which mobile phone technologies can be used to build home–school partnerships to increase parental involvement.

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