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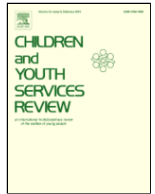


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## Who benefits? Head start directors' views of coordination with elementary schools to support the transition to kindergarten

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### ABSTRACT

Research and theory posit that children will benefit from coordinated and aligned early education experiences, yet there is limited research on how early education and elementary school systems coordinate with one another during this period. Using qualitative interviews with Head Start directors in the U.S. (N = 16), this study identified numerous ways in which Head Start directors coordinate with elementary schools to share information about individual children and program practices, and to serve as a bridge between families and schools during the transition to kindergarten. Thematic analysis revealed that coordination may benefit children indirectly through both improved teaching practices, increased alignment and parent supports. Findings indicate the need for additional research to explore indirect links between coordination and children's success. A conceptual model to guide future research is discussed.

### 1. Introduction

The transition to school is a critical period for children, with documented challenges for both children and families. When entering kindergarten, children can face vastly different educational contexts, expectations and requirements than experienced in their prior early education and home settings (Mashburn, LoCasale-Crouch, & Pears, 2017). Many children experience challenges with this transition (Purtell et al., 2018; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). However, efforts by early education programs and elementary schools can help support a successful transition (Ahtola et al., 2011; Cook & Coley, 2017; Cook, Dearing, & Zachrisson, 2017; LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer, & Pianta, 2008; Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005), suggesting that when adults provide continuity and alignment between educational contexts, children may benefit through positive educational experiences that lead to improved social and academic skills in kindergarten. Yet limited research has focused on coordination between educational systems during the transition to school, specifically between early education programs and elementary schools. This study sought to add to the limited literature on coordination between systems by gaining perspectives of directors from the national Head Start preschool program on the types of coordination activities they engage in with elementary schools, as well as the benefits and challenges to coordination efforts.

Nearly 70% of children in the U.S. have attended a formal early education program in the year before kindergarten (Corcoran & Steinley, 2017), yet most early education programs are located outside of elementary school buildings and do not have formal connections to the public schools children enter. Decades of research has sought to unpack the benefits of increasing access and quality of early education programs, with strong evidence that enrollment in high-quality early education programs is promotive for children and provides economic benefits to society beyond its costs (e.g., Reynolds et al., 2007; Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikhart, 2005). Yet recent studies of public pre-kindergarten (preK) programs have failed to find enduring cognitive and behavioral benefits beyond the preK year (Lipsey, Farran, & Hofer, 2015; Puma et al., 2012). This has lead researchers and theorists to focus on the transition to kindergarten and how current early education systems can promote long-term benefits for children (Mashburn et al., 2017). Specifically, there is a need for more empirical information on issues related to coordination and continuity across systems that could promote successful educational transitions (Stipek, Clements, Coburn, Franke, & Ferran, 2017).

The federal Head Start program in the U.S. is a national school readiness program for low-income children and families with a long history of focusing on the needs of children as they enter and exit the program. Head Start program requirements around coordination with elementary schools make them a rich context in which to study coordi-

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nation (Head Start Performance Standards, 2016, Section 1308 (g) Transition Services). Although their requirements increase the likelihood of engaging in coordination efforts, Head Start programs have continued to face challenges coordinating with local education agencies and elementary schools (National Head Start Association and CCSSO, 2017). Whereas Head Start programs have historically been required to establish coordination agreements with local education agencies, similar requirements for local education agencies were uncommon prior to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, the primary legislation governing K-12 education policy in the U.S. ESSA encourages coordination between local education agencies and early education providers around the transition to school, mandates local education agencies to coordinate with Head Start programs (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017), and provides opportunities at the state and local levels to define best practices around kindergarten transitions and coordination efforts such as joint professional development and planning. In response, it is likely that states and local communities will begin to design more intentional approaches to collaboration (Horowitz, 2017). In a context in which early education programs and elementary schools are increasingly called upon to coordinate with one another, it is essential to understand how coordination efforts function and the barriers and strengths of existing systems. As such, this study sought to provide an exploratory examination of how Head Start directors coordinate with elementary schools to support the transition to kindergarten in the U.S., and the benefits and challenges of coordination efforts. Empirical evidence is essential to understand the ways coordination efforts between early education programs and elementary schools function in order to inform future policy and practice.

### 1.1. Research on transition supports

Past research has shown that early education programs and elementary schools engage in many different types of transition activities to support children and families as they enter kindergarten in the U.S. These practices include activities to acquaint children and families with the new school including classroom visits, parent orientations and sharing information home. These practices can also include more collaborative and coordinated efforts between early education programs and elementary schools to share children's records, align standards and instruction, and engage in joint trainings and activities. Recent studies have shown small positive associations between transition practices engaged in by prekindergarten programs (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008) or elementary schools (Cook & Coley, 2017; Schulting et al., 2005) and children's social and academic skills in kindergarten. Most of the transition practices examined in past studies were focused on children and families, with the exception of the practice of sharing information. Studies in the U.S. and internationally have shown that when early education teachers and elementary schools share information about children, children's academic and social outcomes are enhanced in the first year of school (Ahtola et al., 2011; Cook et al., 2017; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). For example, a study in Norway found that when first grade teachers (the first year of school in Norway) received information about both individual children and their early education programs, children were rated as having higher social and academic adjustment in the beginning of school entry and mid-way through the school year (Cook et al., 2017).

Much less literature has assessed other types of coordination practices. As one exception, a recent study examined coordination practices reported by Head Start directors in a nationally representative sample of children attending Head Start (Cook & Coley, 2018). Head Start directors reported engagement in multiple coordination activities including providing Head Start records; helping identify kindergarten students; meeting with kindergarten teachers at the school; sharing cur-

riculum information, expectations and policy information; engaging in joint trainings; and participating in the development of individualized education programs for children with identified disabilities. Yet the only significant association between such practices and children's school success indicated that meeting with kindergarten teachers at school was related to increased language skills of children in kindergarten, highlighting the importance of in-person coordination. However, the survey data used in the study included simple dichotomous indicators of whether or not programs engaged in coordination practices and did not provide any details on their quality, duration or bilateralism. More research is needed to understand how Head Start programs engage with elementary schools to support the transition to school and what the benefits are to these collaborations.

### 1.2. Theoretical framework

Despite the limited empirical evidence, educational policy makers and theorists have highlighted the importance of alignment and coordination across systems for decades (Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Love, Logue, Trudeau, & Thayer, 1992; National Education Goals Panel, 1998; Stipek et al., 2017). The present study was guided by Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) Developmental and Ecological Transition to Kindergarten model, which takes an interactive systems approach to successful transitions to school, positing that connections among children, families and schools across the prekindergarten and kindergarten year are key. Yelverton and Mashburn (2018) have expanded this model, developing a framework around the kindergarten transition that focuses on how child characteristics, settings characteristics and system characteristics interact over time to support or thwart children's growth during the transition to school. At the systems level they note that standards, policies and supports from the federal down to the local level differ for early education programs and elementary school settings, with implications for children's learning environments. More specifically, the PreK-3rd grade model focuses on the need for alignment across prekindergarten through third grade for children to have high-quality, coordinated early learning experiences (Bogard & Takamishi, 2005). In a PreK-3rd approach children's experiences should be aligned in a way that ensures coordinated instruction across grade levels with developmentally progressive and differentiated instruction for each child as they move through levels (Stipek et al., 2017). Together these theories and frameworks provide a foundation for exploring the different ways systems coordinate and interact in the early school years. Specifically, they guided this study's research design, interview protocol, and data analysis and interpretation, as we explored how children's success may be rooted in aligned, coordinated experiences across the transition to kindergarten.

### 1.3. Study goals

This study sought to provide a rich examination of the ways Head Start programs in the study coordinate with elementary schools, and to address limitations in the literature base, which has largely excluded the voices of practitioners and lacked empirical attention to the benefits and challenges to collaboration and coordination practices, information required to make substantive policy and practice recommendations. Specific study goals were threefold: 1) to provide a rich description of the practices and processes Head Start programs interviewed use to coordinate with elementary schools in support of children's transition to kindergarten; 2) to delineate interviewed Head Start directors' views on the benefits of these practices and features of successful coordination efforts; and 3) to describe interviewed Head Start directors' opinions on the challenges of coordinating with elementary schools and ways to improve in the future.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Data & sample

Data were collected through twelve semi-structured phone interviews with sixteen Head Start personnel during the 2016–2017 school year (December–January). The interview protocol included guiding questions and probes about the participant's background, program, general transition practices, experiences coordinating with elementary schools around the transition, and views of benefits and challenges. The protocol was guided by theory and prior research and developed with input from an advisory committee of Head Start, early education, and local and state education agency representatives, and was approved by the authors' Institutional Review Board. All participants gave written and oral consent to participate in the study, and each received a \$15 retail gift card for participation. Interviews took an average of 42 min, and were recorded and transcribed.

Head Start directors were recruited through the state Head Start Association in one state in the northeastern U.S. It is important to note that this state did not have regulations around transitions or coordination across preschools and elementary schools in their licensing regulations or quality rating system. Interested programs were asked to identify the person within their program who could best discuss their transition practices. Interviews were conducted one-on-one by phone with the exception of two interviews where the program elected to have three people participate simultaneously.

The sampling strategy resulted in a diverse sample in terms of individual and program characteristics. Out of the sixteen participants, seven were Head Start agency-level leaders with titles such as Director, Executive Director, or Director of Children's Services. The other nine participants held titles such as Education Manager, Education & Disabilities Manager, Child Development Specialist, or Center Coordinator. The participants in these positions held various job responsibilities, with some assigned directly to one site and others working across multiple sites within their Head Start agency. All reported having either direct responsibility for transition and coordination activities, or supervisory responsibilities for staff engaging in transition and coordination activities. For this study, all participants will be broadly referred to as Head Start directors. All participants were women, most of whom had many years experience with Head Start, with about half citing they had worked for Head Start around 20 years. Programs varied in size and urbanicity, as well as the number and types of schools and districts they transitioned children to. Two served primarily rural areas, four served primarily suburban communities and six served urban areas. The number of children served ranged from 90 to 700 with some serving children in one site and others serving children across multiple sites. Similarly, some programs coordinated with only one school district, whereas others worked with multiple districts. For example, one urban program cited sending children to up to 19 different elementary schools within their one receiving district, whereas a rural program in the study had memoranda of understanding with seven different small receiving school districts.

### 2.2. Analytic plan

A team of three researchers participated in the analysis process, which included developing and revising the code list, coding, and holding regular discussions throughout the process. We loaded interview transcripts into NVIVO software for analysis (NVIVO, 2015), and developed initial codes through an iterative process starting with a priori codes based on the research goals and literature, which we then revised and added upon. We developed a code list in NVIVO with codes assigned to phrases within the transcripts (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

Multiple cycles of descriptive coding took place, with a first cycle of coding to assign codes to interview phrases in order to categorize and summarize the content of the interviews (Saldana, 2016; Wolcott, 1994). To begin, all three researchers coded one test interview and through discussions further adapted the codes. After reaching agreement about the nature of each code, two researchers coded all interviews. Although the goal of two coders was to ensure maximum coverage of codes to content (rather than exact agreement), tests of overall intercoder percent agreement in NVIVO were quite high (97%), providing evidence of consistent coding across the team.

Next, we conducted code mapping to match concepts from the codes to each of the three research goals, and to condense and organize the data in a way meaningful for the study (Anfara Jr., 2008; Saldana, 2016). Two researchers conducted the code mapping and created tabulations of which interviews covered each concept, with discussions to ensure inclusion of relevant concepts. This led to a second cycle of coding to refine and reorganize some of the descriptive codes for parsimony and ease of interpretation. We assessed a final set of 54 codes.

To address the first goal- to gain a descriptive picture of the coordination efforts employed by Head Start programs in the study - we organized descriptive codes of coordination practices in a table to delineate practice frequency, consistency, and exemplars. We used process coding to turn the codes into action (“-ing”) words to state the practices participants described doing during the interviews (Charmaz, 2002). For example, we grouped phrases coded as “standards,” “assessment,” “curriculum,” under the process code “Sharing information on the program, standards, assessment, and curriculum.” We then analyzed the process codes thematically and organized them into two broad categories: 1) practices for Head Start and elementary schools to **share information**; and 2) practices where Head Start serves as a **bridge between families and elementary schools**.

For the second research goal- to understand the benefits of these practices and Head Start directors' views of successful coordination- we assessed category relationships between specific practices and views on the benefits and success of these practices (Urquhart, 2013). To further understand these relationships, we coded and reviewed phrases where participants described what they believed were the “keys to success” for positive transitions and created conceptual maps to better understand the relationships between practices and their benefits. We used a similar analysis process to consider the third research goal- to understand the challenges and areas for improvement in the future- and used conceptual maps to frame these findings.

## 3. Results

The interviews with Head Start directors revealed that Head Start programs in the study sample were spending substantial time, effort and resources on the transition to school; that programs varied in the degree and ways in which their transition efforts were coordinated with the elementary schools that children were entering; and that programs perceived diverse benefits and challenges to coordination efforts. The results sections below detail each of these areas in turn.

### 3.1. Preparing children for kindergarten

Prior to discussing coordination efforts, it is essential to note that across the interviews, participants explained lengthy processes their programs engaged in to directly prepare children (and families) for the transition to kindergarten. Many directors described school readiness activities both inside the classroom and as part of family engagement strategies, including using literacy and social-emotional curricula, sending books home, engaging in activities to prepare children for what to expect in the transition, and helping children (and parents) to make social connections with others who would be attending the same

kindergarten. Acknowledging that many of the families served by Head Start may lack the resources needed to provide their children with the physical materials needed for kindergarten, several participants described how their programs provide backpacks filled with supplies and materials for children to use during the summer and to bring with them to kindergarten. These child-focused practices were an important part of the interviews, with participants including them in their overall description of transition practices and school readiness efforts. However, the majority of the interviews (and interview questions) focused on practices targeting coordination efforts with elementary schools.

3.2. Coordinating through information sharing and bridging

Thematic analysis grouped coordination and collaboration practices between Head Start and elementary schools into two main categories: 1) *information sharing*; and 2) ways in which Head Start serves as a *bridge* to connect children and families to elementary schools. Fig. 1 provides key exemplars of practices in each of these categories, and delineates the number of interviews that discussed engagement in each type of practice. The information sharing activities and bridging activities both varied by relationships with different school systems, formal partnerships, and location. Head Start directors in the study cited both benefits and challenges to these coordination efforts.

3.2.1. Information sharing

Many collaborative practices between Head Start and elementary schools fit into the theme of information sharing. These practices included sharing data on children (both universally and for specific children); sharing general information to align planning and practices around curricula, assessment and standards; engaging in joint professional development activities; meeting informally or formally to share information; observing each other's classrooms; and participating in formal community committees or councils. All participants discussed engaging in multiple information sharing coordination practices. We further delineated two subcategories of information sharing practices, including 1) *knowledge transfer* about individual children, where information was shared uni-directionally from Head Start programs to elementary schools, or 2) bi-directional sharing of program information in

order to support *alignment* and coordination of programming, where both Head Start programs and elementary schools share information with one another. Even activities that at face value did not appear to be about information sharing (e.g. joint trainings or participating in community councils) were discussed by participants as ways to connect and share information (both about children as well as about programming) with elementary schools. When discussing these practices, participants frequently spoke about the relationships they developed and maintained through these activities and interactions with elementary school staff.

3.2.1.1. *Knowledge transfer: Information sharing about individual children* The majority of Head Start programs included in this study discussed sharing some information on at least some individual children (e.g. children's assessment data or other records about the child's progress in Head Start) with the elementary schools children were entering. They described this information sharing or knowledge transfer as uni-directional, where Head Start provided written or oral information about an individual child with the school the child was entering. These practices ranged from universally sending paper records for all children to their new schools, to only sending records for children going to schools that requested the information, to only sharing information about children when there was a specific concern (e.g. making an informal phone call to a principal to discuss a child's behavior challenges).

Some participants described processes where Head Start and elementary school representatives collaboratively developed a form for Head Start to fill out about each child. Others described sending standardized assessment data, unsure if anyone at the elementary school actually looked at it. Most participants who mentioned this type of data sharing also described a process where they first had parent meetings to discuss the information they would be sharing with the schools and acquired parental permission to share the data with schools.

Many participants discussed how their information sharing process had changed over time and often varied by the district the child was entering. One noted that their program moved to a standardized form after years of each teacher sharing their own version. Another participant described a transition profile sheet developed with the district that all community early education providers filled out for each child,

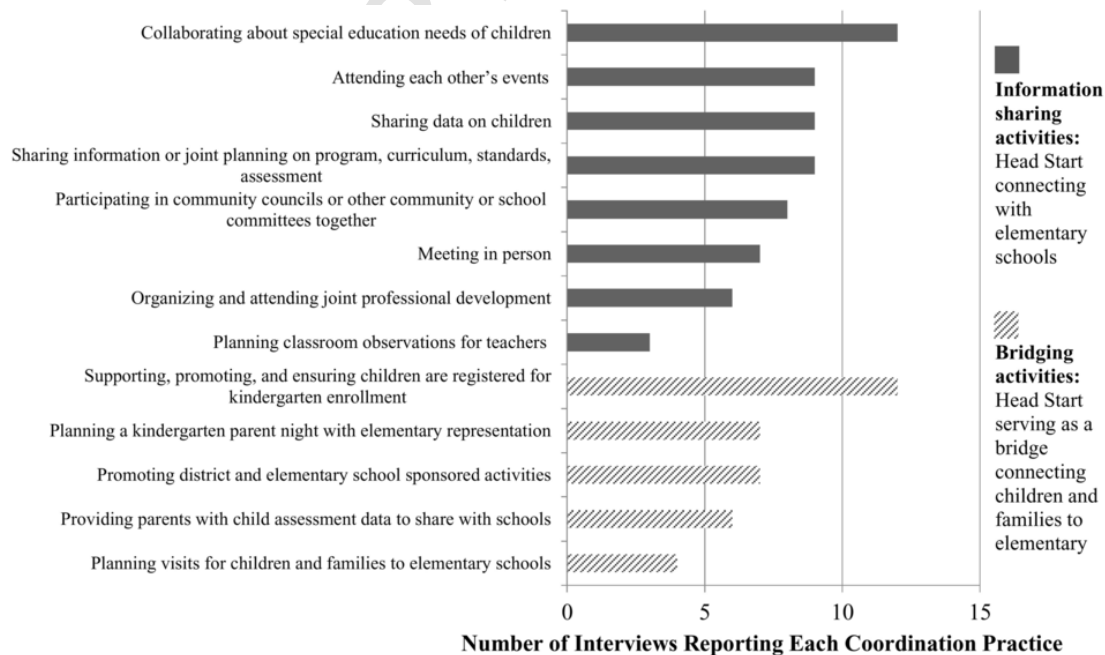


Fig. 1. Frequency of interviews citing information sharing and bridging coordination practices.

which was then used by the district for kindergarten placement purposes. They developed this system after years of inconsistent information sharing, and an unclear understanding of what type of information the elementary schools wanted.

This form was developed many, many years ago with the...public schools. It's been tweaked throughout the years. Usually, we do a school readiness meeting at least once during the year. So we sat down with those and we said ok what do you think we should have on them, what's beneficial for you, for the public school to know. So when they go to place this child, we know that they're in a good placement.–Director #10.

One program described a unique process akin to “speed dating” used to help one of their receiving districts make kindergarten placement decisions. The district invites Head Start and other community-based providers to attend.

Well about the transition, we do have the public schools open up their early childhood center and have the kindergarten teachers there, and our teachers and other teachers from the community and we are all invited to come down and do a quick intro about the children back and forth. It helps the public schools better place children. It's like an 8 min date kind of thing. –Director #12.

All directors discussed passing along information on children from Head Start to elementary schools. Nine out of twelve programs described some form of sharing information about all individual children in their programs whereas three programs did not systematically share information on individual children. These programs noted various challenges to sharing information with their receiving schools. One participant discussed how they stopped offering to share this information because the elementary schools did not want it, and another mentioned privacy issues where they could not share child information. In addition, not all directors who universally shared information on children were confident that the districts were receiving it, opening it, and reading it, and cited this as a challenge. The programs that cited sharing information that was specifically requested by the districts (e.g. they had developed a standard form with the district) were more confident that the information was being received, opened and used.

Despite these challenges and variability in the consistency of information sharing on individual children, all directors mentioned ways they informally share information on specific children about whom there are concerns. Directors described informal outreach to schools for specific children, typically those who had behavioral challenges or experienced trauma, yet were not special education eligible (and therefore did not have an individualized education program (IEP) and received no formal transition meeting as required by special education law).

So they're not special education, but we want to make sure the school district and our teachers and our staff all get around a table and have a conversation about that child before they leave the program so that they're fully aware of what they are receiving and can pick up where we are leaving off. –Director #11.

When asked how they decided which children got identified as needing this additional contact, many directors reported they had informal ways of “knowing” who needed it. One participant described how the districts her children transition to did not want them to send any records or assessment data universally, but that many of the school principals were responsive to personal phone calls about specific children who may have challenges as they enter kindergarten.

If they're on IEPs then typically their transition is being discussed through the disabilities department. But if that's not the case, and sometimes we have kids that we've referred and they

haven't been picked up, but we have concerns that they are going to have some challenges when they enter. That's a different call that typically I would make...usually, [to] the school principal. I used to call the Early Childhood Coordinator. But what I found is typically these are the people that are saying they [the children] are not eligible for services... So I found it more effective over time to actually have these conversations with the school principal where these kids are going to. –Director #1.

However, one interview described a much more formal case management process used throughout the year to identify children who need additional supports. She described how by the time they get to the transition, they have identified children of concern and held transition meetings with the receiving elementary schools. This program stated that all of the different districts they transition children to were very responsive to these meetings.

It's part of our case management, the way we've redesigned it all...We have what we call kids management meetings one Tuesday a month, where our case managers and our family advocates meet at different sites to look through files and talk about kids and talk about the classrooms and make sure that we're touching base. So those are the names that come back to our large leadership team to talk about those families that really need a higher level of coordinator support from multiple areas.- Director #11

In summary, programs participated in numerous types of information sharing about children. In addition, participants reported multiple ways they shared more general information about their programs, curricula, standards, and assessment use and how to best align their practices to support children in their communities.

*3.2.1.2. Alignment: Bi-directional information sharing about programming, curricula, standards, and assessments* Participants described numerous ways they shared and received general information with elementary schools, varying greatly in formality, timing, the type of information shared, who was sharing it, how it was shared and the potential for how it was used. Through this type of bi-directional information sharing, some directors discussed very informal ways of getting information about elementary schools, such as former Head Start parents coming back and telling Head Start about what skills their children needed for kindergarten and what the curriculum was like, or a friend who is a teacher in the elementary school providing this information to them in informal conversations.

So we have multiple siblings- a child that went off to kindergarten last year the parents will be so proud and bring back the report card and show it to us all...So the teachers then are really aware of what the readiness goals are and what the expectations are for our kids going into the kindergarten class. – Director #5.

Others described informal conversations occurring during other transition activities or other meetings. For example, one explained that the same kindergarten teacher comes to the Head Start kindergarten night each year to talk to parents and then often stays after and talks with the director about curricula and other practices. Some described long-standing relationships where they could pick up the phone and get answers about what was happening at the elementary school level.

I have a nice relationship with a lot of the principals here in X, and a lot of time I'll holler out to them and say is there anything changing this year, anything you're doing different, is there anything you want us to purchase this year? – Director #8

In addition to numerous examples of informal avenues for information sharing, directors also described several more formal levers. In the majority of interviews, participants described varying levels of formal joint professional development and planning activities and formal

councils or groups within the community that facilitated information sharing and collaboration. Eight out of twelve programs discussed the importance of community councils or other early childhood groups that included the public school district, Head Start and other early childhood programs. Some of these groups met with the explicit goal of sharing information on the transition to school and school readiness, but many others focused on other issues, yet were levers for connection between the Head Start programs and school districts. When discussing an advisory committee for their agency, one participant explained the conversations that occur with elementary school representation on the committee.

A lot of the conversation during the first meeting of the year, which is around November, is really like a debriefing from the schools staff as to what they feel like a majority of the children in the community need extra assistance in. –Director #3.

Multiple participants discussed ways such groups have come together in pursuit of local or state grants to support their collaboration and early childhood systems in their communities. In some cases specific grants were used to spark these types of committees and conversations or to provide additional training opportunities.

There was a preschool expansion grant. I was part of that funding and three other providers plus the public schools all came together to write that grant so the hope would be to get 200 extra [preschool] slots at some point. The funding has disappeared...but through that collaboration there has been a shift, a greater effort to share professional development opportunities for staff. –Director #3.

A small number of participants described joint professional development or planning sessions as the norm. While joint professional development was sometimes described with the purpose of joint planning and alignment of curricula, other times it was described simply as a way to bring everyone to the same room, with the outcome of additional conversations about transitions and alignment, and the building of stronger relationships across educational systems. Directors also mentioned how other community meetings or groups could help to build relationships. One participant described multiple different groups and committees she either organized or attended, and while she argued for the importance of involvement in all of them, she pointed to professional development as one of the best ways to build relationships with the school district.

A lot of those relationships were developed in the different meetings, but honestly I feel like they were developed even more because my [training and technical assistance] specialists have gone to public schools to do trainings on family engagement when the parent-family-community engagement framework came out. So, when you do those types of trainings you kind of get to know the teachers more and you get to know the principals more. –Director #8.

For some Head Start programs, finding opportunities for either formal trainings or informal conversations took substantial effort or planning and was considered a challenge. These programs cited logistic challenges such as different professional development days, lack of strong relationships, and examples of inviting elementary school staff and teachers to their trainings without anyone showing up. Some directors expressed that relationships had waned after a key ally in the district (e.g. a superintendent, principal, early childhood coordinator) left after many years of a strong relationship, leaving little communication. When asked who their “transition” contact is at the elementary school, ten out of twelve directors cited a specific person whom they contact, with two directors struggling to name a specific person. How-

ever, the role and title of the person mentioned varied greatly, ranging from an individual kindergarten teacher, to principals, to special education coordinators, a registration office representative, and family engagement staff at the district.

While some directors cited that it was hard to get in touch with anyone at the district or elementary school, directors of programs in the study that were co-located in public school buildings discussed frequently inviting elementary staff or being invited by elementary staff to meetings or professional trainings and also highlighted the frequent informal conversations that took place while passing in the hall.

For our single sites that are located in the elementary schools there's a lot of continual conversation and they're nicely integrated. The other nice thing is, because they're right in the public schools when it gets to be that kindergarten screening time, with parent's permission, it's really easy to walk that file right down the hallway or have our family advocate take kids to screenings. –Director # 11.

The connections built from being in the same physical space were sometimes retained even when this convenience ended. One director reflected on the continued benefits even years after they were no longer co-located with the public schools.

So they know us, we were their neighbors to the integrated preschools so it's a very different relationship that's developed over time. Even though we're now out of the schools they know a lot about us...I would say it's about 10 years ago that we switched to not being in the schools.–Director #1.

Another strong theme that emerged within the overarching construct of coordination practices highlighted the key role of special education in creating connections between Head Start programs and elementary schools. Indeed, special education was mentioned in some capacity in all twelve interviews, highlighting the multiple ways in which special education policies or children receiving special education services helped to create connections between Head Start programs and elementary schools. These connections took many forms. Head Start programs mentioned submitting referrals of children to the public schools for evaluations, having school staff come to Head Start to provide services directly to children, and having some children attend both a special education program with the public schools for part of the day and Head Start for part of the day. Even participants who reported that they did not have a lot of collaboration with the public schools overall mentioned that they coordinated about special education. Kindergarten transition meetings are required for all children receiving special education services. The participants discussed attending these meetings and sharing information about the transition and new staffing and services that children and parents could expect as they transition to kindergarten. Moreover, multiple participants mentioned that the benefits of such policies extend beyond special education children, with Head Start directors gaining a lot of information about elementary schools in their districts from their coordination efforts for special education children, information which benefited and informed their whole program and the other children they serve.

So through those meetings we learn an awful lot about what they're doing and we try to input that... through the whole program. –Director #7.

In addition, special education was mentioned in terms of challenges, with directors discussing the negative implications for children when there are not strong relationships between Head Start and the elementary schools. For example, some programs found it challenging to help Head Start children access the special education services they need.

### 3.2.2. Head start bridging families and elementary schools

The second primary theme that emerged concerned how Head Start programs in the study support children's transition to kindergarten by serving as a bridge between families and schools, providing information, support, and other services to parents to help smooth the transition. Many directors discussed connecting with the public schools to ensure that Head Start staff knew the dates for registration and events so they could share this information with parents. Although the description varied, all participants reported holding a kindergarten night for parents where they invited at least one person (e.g. kindergarten teacher, principal, someone from the registration office) from at least one receiving district to talk with parents.

So we have what we call a transition meeting in, I would say, around February, where we invite the parents of the kids transitioning to kindergarten, but we also invite staff from the school systems that they're going to. And it's a time where parents get information directly from the schools just about all different kinds of things, like what to look for in a classroom, how best to help their kids transition, how to be on the PTA or any kind of parent group they may have.- Director # 6.

Some Head Start directors discussed elaborate visits they plan to bring children and families to the elementary schools; others simply promoted or assisted children and families in attending the school-sponsored events.

We do these beautiful transition visits where...we take buses over to the schools so they get to meet the principals and they get to meet the teachers and they get to tour the school. -Director # 8.

All participants reported supporting families in some way in the registration process, but the depth of the support varied from program to program. Some programs reported simply providing the information about when and where registration was to take place, whereas others held meetings about the paperwork needed. Others were even more directly involved by providing transportation and translation services to support parents in registering their children for kindergarten, bringing children to screenings, or physically holding registration at the Head Start site. This breadth shows not only diverse practices across Head Start programs, but also the lack of consistent policies at the elementary school level, which can be a challenge, highlighted in the quote below.

We get all the information so that we can continue to support and share with parents what's going to happen for them. You know, for some towns you have to go and get the paperwork, some towns you get on a list and they mail it out to you, some will have sessions where you can go and get help with the paperwork. -Director #1.

The differences across elementary schools posed a challenge for Head Start programs in the study, particularly those that were sending children to multiple different districts and schools. Programs that had more than one receiving district often mentioned that they had a better relationship with some districts than others, and that it varied by factors such as the number of children they sent to the district, but also by the relationships that had been developed over years. They also expressed that some districts reached out and invited the Head Start program to all of their transition events, where others noted the extensive work they did to access information about the registration processes and events that their families would need to attend.

In addition to understanding the coordination practices Head Start programs engaged in, we also sought to delineate Head Start directors'

views of the benefits of coordinating with elementary schools around the transition to school.

### 3.3. Views of the benefits of coordinating

All Head Start directors were asked directly to identify the benefits of coordination—both broadly and specifically for children. Head Start directors in the study unequivocally expressed broad beliefs in the benefits of coordination with elementary schools. Although they clearly believed there were benefits, most participants struggled to identify or express specific benefits for children. This showed a general lack of a theory of change around how coordination efforts would benefit children. When probed with specific questions about how these practices could benefit children, participants often provided examples of benefits to teachers and parents. Through the analysis process, we created a conceptual map to delineate how specific coordination practices may be associated with benefits for children. Fig. 2 provides a proposed model for how the coordination practices described by Head Start directors in the sample (column 1) were perceived to benefit Head Start programs, elementary schools and families (column 2), with the ultimate goal of benefiting children (column 3). In this conceptual model we posit that the activities in column one benefit children (column 3) through changes in Head Start and elementary school practices and increased comfort levels of parents (column 2). As noted above, these potential benefits for children did not derive directly from the data; rather, we added these hypothesized paths to benefits for children.

#### 3.3.1. Benefits of information sharing

As shown in the top pathway in Fig. 2, Head Start directors hoped the uni-directional *knowledge transfers of information* from Head Start staff to elementary schools would help elementary schools to better understand where children were coming from and how to support them academically and socially at the start of kindergarten. This increased understanding, in turn, was expected to benefit children's social and academic development in kindergarten. Multiple participants described why they believe it is important to share information on all children (not just those with disabilities).

I think it's always nice for a teacher to know where to start with a child. If we can help the kindergarten teachers just by giving them the information that we have as far as- this is what this child likes to do, this is what this child is really good at, this is how this child learns best, then they already have kind of a leg up with that child. So hopefully they'll be able to tap into that stuff and their teaching can be more effective with that child. Because I think they have a lot less time than we do to figure that stuff out. - Director # 6.

Head Start directors also saw benefits from the second type of information sharing- bi-directional sharing of information about curricula, standards, assessments and programming in pursuit of *alignment*- seeing potential for this information sharing to change practices done by both elementary schools and Head Start staff (Fig. 2, column 1, box 2). These findings suggest that with more information about the expectations, standards and skills needed to be successful in kindergarten, Head Start programs may be better able to support children's school readiness skills and set a foundation for kindergarten that will benefit children. In addition, if elementary schools have a better understanding of what is taught in Head Start they may be able to build upon children's existing skills and understand how to support them from the time they enter school. From these two paths, children should receive better educational experiences in both systems and have increased positive adjustment to school and improved academic and social outcomes in kindergarten (Fig. 2, column 3). One participant described how she invited staff from each school district her children would transition to



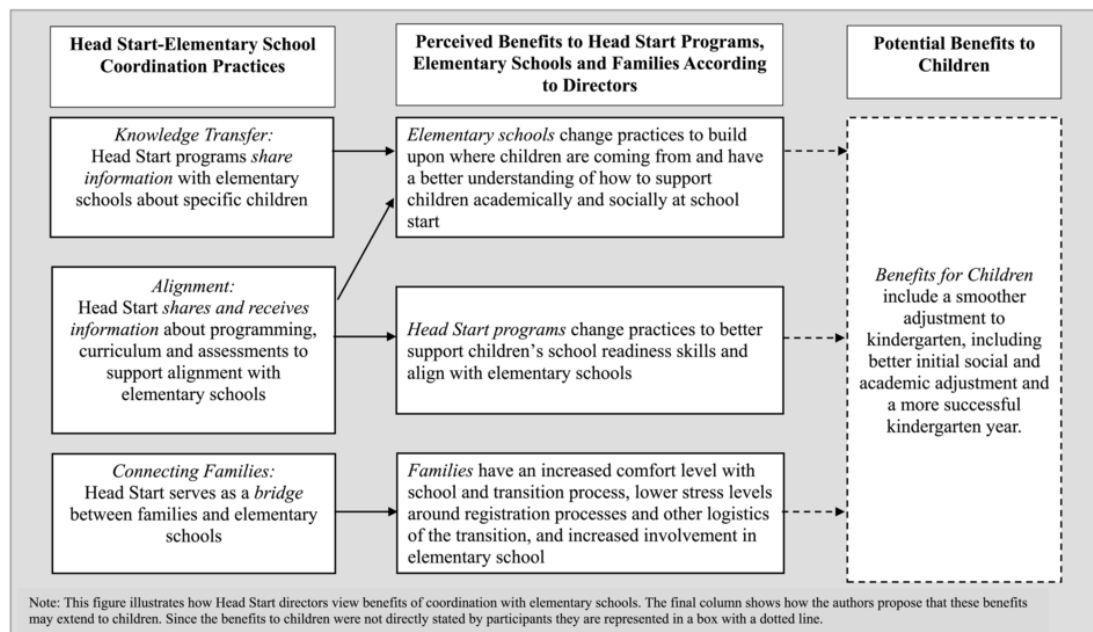


Fig. 2. Conceptual model linking Head Start-elementary school coordination practices and benefits.

and gathered information from email and other meetings in order to set school readiness goals each fall.

We just kind of get a sense of what they want every kid to know by the time they leave here and are ready for kindergarten. And those go into our plan for the classrooms, so all of the teachers know that these are our school readiness goals. – Director #6

Another participant asks kindergarten teachers to provide feedback on how former Head Start children are doing across multiple domains. After receiving feedback that children needed more work in mathematics last year, she used this information to plan professional development opportunities for her staff and decided to take part in a study on adding more mathematics activities to their curriculum.

Another thing that I did this year based on my data outcomes and feedback from the kindergarten teachers is- some of them felt that in some aspects of math...last year the children didn't score quite as high- working with X on doing these young mathematician games with [our children] and working with the teachers. – Director #8

One participant discussed how aligning assessments is a way to tie everything together, indicating another way in which information sharing may change Head Start practices to align with elementary schools and better support children's school readiness skills. Multiple directors described their use of Teaching Strategies Gold (TSG), a system to collect, organize, and report data on young children's learning, to assess children in their programs (Heroman & Tabors, 2010).

As far as alignment goes, we do TSG [Teaching Strategies Gold]. A few years ago, the public schools picked up on doing TSG in their schools. So when the children leave us, they're using the same TSG...and TSG is aligned with our Head Start framework, which is aligned with the state standards. – Director #10.

Together, data from the participating Head Start directors indicated potential benefits of coordination practices for improvements and alignments in instruction across Head Start and elementary schools, which we hypothesize will in turn lead to benefits for children. One participant described this succinctly in relation to shared curricula.

I do believe that by sharing curriculum that we are going to see some higher results, and definitely a smoother connection when kids start kindergarten. – Director #12

### 3.3.2. Benefits of bridge building

In contrast to their difficulties expressing how coordination practices may directly benefit children, Head Start directors in the study had clear explanations for how their practices directly benefited parents, as shown in the bottom portion of Fig. 2, column 1. Directors relayed a sense that most children are resilient and that it is in fact parents that need direct support the most. Analyses delineated multiple ways Head Start programs coordinated with elementary schools to serve as a bridge connecting parents to schools, which in turn, directors believed, would indirectly benefit children. Directors spoke eloquently about how parents in many ways needed the transition activities more than the children, citing that parents faced stressors around the transition to school that can be alleviated with supports.

I also think transition really when it comes down to it, is more beneficial to the families/the parents of kids. You can't really prepare a child for what they don't know is coming. I mean, you can do the field trips and you can show them what a big school is and then you kind of have to cut it at that, and then just teach them the things they need to know to succeed. I think with parents, it's a lot less stressful to send their babies off to kindergarten when they kind of have a clue of what they're going to be sending their kids off to. – Director #6

Some participants noted that support was particularly important for families who faced additional obstacles such as immigrant families and those whose first language is not English. For these families, additional supports such as translation or help navigating the paperwork needed to enroll children in kindergarten were essential. In addition, these families expressed the need for more emotional support in order to increase their comfort level with a new educational environment.

For some of the families who English is not their first language, moving from Head Start to this big public school is intimidating. So having our family advocate, our teacher, our staff helping with this transition trying to make this kindergarten experience

a little less scary; that benefits some of our families. – Director #12

Kindergarten registration emerged as a big theme from the interviews, although it was not asked about directly in the interview protocol. Directors described processes ranging from simply letting parents know when to register all the way to working very closely to do the registration with or for them. When explaining the registration process, one participant exclaimed “it works!” and when pressed to explain what they meant by this they explained how working with the elementary schools is beneficial.

If there's a registration and the child misses it, our advocates will call over there, get the families, get them registered. So we know that our kindergarten children get registered and are able to attend kindergarten the following year. – Directors for program #10

Directors expressed how challenging the registration process could be for parents and the benefits to alleviating some of the burden by providing extensive supports throughout this process. Some felt that if they did not provide this support, some children would not be registered for kindergarten on time and those children would miss out on other transition activities and potentially even some of the school year.

There was also a discussion by some directors in the study about preparing parents for the family involvement that was expected in elementary schools. Understanding that parent involvement in school is important, Head Start programs described preparing parents in multiple ways, including inviting parents to participate in parent committees and parent nights; promoting reading to children every day; and providing example “homework” activities for parents to do with their children. These directors felt that this would benefit parents in their ability to support their children in elementary school.

We want to have that success for families and be able to let them move on and take leadership positions in their schools...In a couple of cases we've had great luck with people coming off our policy council to go run PTOs [parent-teacher organizations]. We're sad to have lost them because they were so amazing. Then we see the work that they're doing for their school district and we're like yeah that's where they need to go next. So it's like there's a lot of benefit to it. – Director #11

### 3.4. Where the paths break down: challenges and room for improvement

Finally, interviews also provided an understanding of Head Start directors' views of the challenges of coordinating with elementary schools and ways they think coordination could improve in the future to better support children and families. Themes that arose included participants wanting expanded coordination efforts, the reinstatement of some coordination practices that worked well in the past, and the need for systems improvement. Many expressed that they are always working to improve transition practices and have an interest in learning more about the activities other programs are doing.

Participants discussed having multiple approaches, strategies and practices around coordination and transition practices, yet also mentioned more they hoped to do in the future. This included more opportunities for joint training, more in-person meetings where staff could visit and observe each other's classrooms, more opportunities for teachers (not just administrators) to connect across the systems, and easier data sharing. One participant expressed the importance of planning more joint trainings in the future. Directors shared this sentiment when discussing why they believe that teachers should meet in person (rather than just transferring paper records for children), and visit and observe each other's classrooms. Another participant expressed that learning more about each other's systems would be helpful.

I think it would be really beneficial for the public school teachers to know about what some of our mandates and some of our requirements are. And I think it would be good for our teachers to hear that about the public schools as well. When we can find joint mandates, when we can find things that we know will benefit the child and will benefit the experience for the child then we can set up training so that there's kind of a viewpoint from both sides. – Director #6

Multiple participants described the practice of teachers visiting and observing classrooms as being more common in the past, less common in recent years, but desired for the future. One director explained a past practice that involved Head Start teachers visiting kindergarten classrooms and kindergarten teachers visiting Head Start classrooms.

Well it was nice for our preschool teachers, especially, to see a kindergarten classroom, because they were the ones that visited in the fall. It was also kind of nice to see what's going on in a kindergarten classroom. I think sometimes people think that all they're doing is like playing and dancing, you know, I don't think they really know what to expect. So it's good for them to see what a typical day looks like. Then, I'm sure it benefits the kindergarten teacher to come and observe a preschool room to just to see what a day looks like, what the routine is, just to see what kind of experiences the kids will have. – Director #9

Another common challenge that emerged was the lack of communication driven by distance, with some programs discussing the ways relationships were stronger when programs were located in the same facilities. One participant discussed how it was much easier to do joint trainings or meetings when located in the same buildings for many years and their efforts to try to continue these practices after they moved out of public school buildings. Her discussion of the challenges also included a poignant description of challenges around time and varying expectations and regulations that the two systems face, showing the complicated nature of the challenges.

I think one, when you're in the building it's just easy, you walk across the hall, or they're having a meeting or we're having a meeting. It was just physically easier. I know for a few years we really did try, and we were even trying to invite other childcares in the town, but getting people there was really just, you know, you get busy. – Director #1

She went on to describe how even when a memorandum of understanding (which Head Start programs are required to have signed by the public schools) is in place, there are still challenges to implement what is agreed on. These challenges include time, resources and scheduling issues. Another participant who expressed a less than ideal connection with the public schools described multiple challenges to get her basic required tasks completed, including the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MOU), and getting the services needed for their children with special needs.

We still don't feel like the transition for children is as smooth as it could be... Their staff [district] that they're sending no longer are knowledgeable about Head Start and so they don't feel invested in honoring the Head Start standards and requirements. So they refuse to get background checked and they are not complying with the IEPs... We have an MOU in place and they have not signed off on it yet. So it's six months past the sign date. – Director #3

These challenges echo other participants' discussions of how the relationship between Head Start and elementary schools has implications for special education children. Director #1, who also expressed a number of challenges in relation to coordinating with districts, described

how the relationships, and in some cases, the location make it easier or harder for children to get the services they need.

I can say that when we were in the public schools it was just so much easier to get a child picked up. Like even now the X public schools will come out and do a classroom observation; 9 out of 10 times that kid looks like the most perfect kid in the whole world. But when you're in the public schools you can go across the hall and say "send someone over to observe what's happening right now"...Even if this child didn't get an integrated preschool program...the speech therapist was in the building; so if she had a cancellation, she would come down to the Head Start. – Director #1

Data sharing was another area in which many participants described challenges, with four programs expressing challenges in their data sharing process and another three stating that they had no real process in place for sharing data. While some of the later programs expressed skepticism that the schools were interested in data sharing, multiple participants explained that both Head Start and the elementary schools were ready to share data and were on board with having a better process in place, but logistical limitations were holding them back. For example, multiple participants described how both they and the public schools used the Teaching Strategies Gold (TSG) assessment system yet were unable to share data directly through the system.

So it's how we pull through that data, which we haven't been able to quite figure out around how GOLD is set up. But since we use GOLD, they use GOLD; how do we pull that data through so that we automatically have it? In one of our school districts we're actually working on trying to schedule a data team meeting between the public school, us, and there's another early childhood center and we will look at measures to see how we could work that. – Director #11

Another participant explained that they also use TSG, but the public schools decided not to and created their own assessment system. Another participant put plans in place to both use and share data this way, but funding limitations stopped this plan.

In summary, directors identified a number of challenges to coordinated practices; indeed, only one participant did not identify any challenges. It is essential to note that all participants expressed a sincere interest in continuous improvement; even their discussion of challenges often pointed constructively at ways to improve. For example, multiple participants expressed an interest in learning more about what other programs were doing to overcome these challenges and how their own program could improve their transition practices in the future.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Strengths and limitations

This rich qualitative study of Head Start programs in one Northeastern state provides the first of its kind in-depth look at coordination practices between early childhood programs and elementary schools that moves far beyond the basic dichotomous reporting of practices in prior research (Cook & Coley, 2018). Results inform a range of implications for early childhood and elementary school leaders and practitioners (detailed below), and informed the development of a conceptual model—an overarching theory of change—that can be further validated and extended in future research. Prior to discussing these implications in depth, it is essential to consider limitations of this work. First, the interviews only provided the views of Head Start Directors from one state, and did not include the voices of Head Start teachers or elementary school principals, staff or teachers. This study also did not include other program types or providers from different geographic regions

within the diverse mixed delivery system of early education in the U.S. Focusing on richly describing the coordination practices undertaken by Head Start programs in the sample and how these directors perceived benefits and challenges, this study also did not seek to quantitatively assess the effects of such efforts on programs, families or children. Future research should include examinations of coordination efforts between a diverse array of early education providers and elementary schools, with additional research seeking to rigorously delineate consequences for educational practice and for children's successful transitions to kindergarten.

### 4.2. Conclusions

Our in-depth analysis of Head Start programs' experiences identified two overarching ways in which Head Start coordination activities described in this study may serve to support children's education experiences and successful transition to kindergarten. First, results found that Head Start coordination activities included *information sharing* practices with elementary schools through uni-directional knowledge transfers and bi-directional alignment of systems. Information sharing took place through multiple venues and levers, ranging from informal and happenstance to formal and purposefully planned, with directors feeling that in-person interactions and strong relationships supported the efficacy of these efforts regardless of the formality of the process. Yet, they also noted that numerous barriers could inhibit effective information sharing practices. Existing regulations sometimes formed the backbone of these efforts, providing an important base on which to expand to further coordination practices. For example, regulations concerning assessments, data sharing, and service provision planning for children served by the special education system served as a model for how such collaborations could work and a lever to promote interactions between systems. Another key example derived from districts which had jointly developed preK assessments or reporting structures that Head Start teachers shared with elementary schools. Still the results identified continuing challenges in these spheres, with examples in which districts with shared assessment systems between preK and elementary schools still struggled to share data and communicate regularly.

Second, results found that Head Start programs served as a *bridge* to connect children and families to elementary schools and to facilitate the smooth transition of children from Head Start to kindergarten. Some of the information sharing and bridging activities were universal whereas others were for specific children and families (e.g. children with behavior concerns, families whose first language was not English), with no clear pattern emerging in relation to the relative perceived efficacy of universal versus targeted practices. Instead, a common link behind activities perceived to be most successful appeared to rest on shared goals and direct communication between educational systems. We discuss implications of these lessons below.

From these rich descriptions of information sharing and bridging practices described by the participants, as well as from their views of the benefits of such practices, we developed a conceptual model (Fig. 2) which proposes specific indirect paths through which coordination practices may lead to benefits to children. First, we posit direct pathways in which information sharing through knowledge transfer may promote changes in elementary teacher or school practices and may improve alignment between systems, leading both Head Start programs and elementary schools to shift practices in beneficial ways. In turn, we hypothesize that such changes in practices may provide benefits to children, including a positive initial transition and continuing social and academic success in school. Second, we posit that bridging activities linking Head Start parents to elementary schools will support parental efficacy and decrease parental stress, in turn leading children to be more comfortable with their new school setting and thus gaining more both socially and academically.

Although this model draws directly from the data in relation to proposed links between coordination practices and shifts in teacher, school, and parent behaviors, participant's articulated the links to children's functioning far less frequently. Indeed, one of the most surprising results from this study revolved around directors' difficulty delineating specific ways their coordination efforts benefitted children's learning and successful transition into elementary school. Although participating directors deeply believed in such benefits in a global sense and clearly saw coordination activities as constructive for programs and for parents, they struggled to provide specific examples or pathways through which coordination practices would increase children's success- that is, they seemed to lack a theory of change how coordination efforts could directly benefit children. This suggests the importance of helping Head Start directors and staff create comprehensive theories of change for their programs and practices, thinking deeply about how their practices can provide both direct and indirect benefits for children. Greater empirical evidence of the benefits of coordination practices that could be shared with educational leaders and practitioners would likely enhance these efforts.

#### 4.3. Implications

This study provides an important in-depth view of coordination practices from the perspective of Head Start directors and goes beyond past quantitative research that has found limited direct relationships between coordination practices and child outcomes in kindergarten (Cook & Coley, 2018). Insights gleaned from this rich qualitative study help to contextualize the lack of direct links between the quantity or diversity of coordination practices and children's success in kindergarten, suggesting that although Head Start programs engage in a broad array of practices seeking to improve alignment with elementary schools and transfer knowledge about children and educational practices, the quality and depth of such practices are often stymied by systemic barriers. Head Start directors pointed to a lack of time, energy, and systemic partnerships to engage in the type of meaningful collaboration that occurs when teachers and leaders from the two systems engage in regular, structured collaborative efforts (such as coordinating data reporting systems and engaging in coordinated joint trainings) and in informal information sharing. Directors in the study were clear in delineating the importance of in-person collaboration, the type of time-intensive activities which other research similarly has found to be least common (Little, 2016). This is consistent with the limited literature on coordination that assessed which collaborative practices are related to children's outcomes, finding that the only practices significantly linked to children's outcomes were in-person meetings between Head Start and kindergarten teachers, suggesting the importance of face-to-face, high intensity collaborative efforts (Cook & Coley, 2018). Together, these results suggest that efforts to create regular, systemic connections between early education programs and elementary school, using both place-based (shared space) and person-based (committees with standing meeting times; regulatory systems requiring direct communication) efforts may support more effective collaboration practices. In contrast, regulations which require evidence of collaboration (such as rules governing MOUs between Head Start and elementary school programs) without regular, face-to-face interactions may have limited effectiveness.

Indeed, the systems required to increase the undertaking and benefits of coordination require joint buy-in. The Head Start programs in our sample initiated substantial activities to share information, align practices, and provide supports to bridge relationships between families and schools, yet if they do not yield positive changes to early education, kindergarten and parenting practices, they may not yield any benefits for children. For example, if Head Start sends children's

records to elementary schools, school staff must review and incorporate this information into their instruction and interactions with specific children and families to be impactful for children. Some research on kindergarten teachers' reports of transition practices indicate that this may be a challenge. Curby et al. (2018) found that while 50% of kindergarten teachers in a large sample reported that preschool records were made available and they read them for "certain children," only 29% reported using them for the whole class and 21% reported not using them at all, with many reporting barriers to the use of such records. This was echoed in the present study, with many Head Start directors reporting sending records but being unsure of whether they were received and used by elementary schools. Such patterns reiterate the importance of school leadership and jointly developed policies regarding the types, frequency, and format of information to be shared and agreement on how such data will be considered and incorporated into educational practice.

Our results also highlight the additional coordination needed to support certain populations of children as they transition to kindergarten, particularly children who may have challenges due to behavioral, medical, or cultural considerations. This is consistent with prior research finding that children with needs that are not necessarily being met through special education services may need additional supports during the transition to kindergarten (Mashburn et al., 2017). These results suggest that some of the coordination and data sharing used in the special education system may fruitfully be translated to other populations of children to enhance the more informal systems that our respondents described.

Adding to the limited literature on coordination and collaboration between early education and elementary schools during the transition to kindergarten in the U.S., this study provides detailed accounts of how Head Start directors in our sample work to engage elementary schools. The preliminary conceptual model developed through this work delineates how these activities may benefit programs, teachers, schools, parents, and indirectly benefit children. Future research should seek to test and replicate this mediational model in larger samples. For now, this model provides a framework for practitioners and policymakers as they assess how their coordination practices may support both positive programmatic changes and children's success during the transition to kindergarten and beyond.

#### Declarations of interest

None.

#### Uncited references

NVivo, 2015  
Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000

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