Understanding Standards-Based Reform in Early Childhood Education:
An Exploratory Study of Implementation

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ABSTRACT

Standards-based reform has traditionally focused on K-12 educational systems, but there is growing evidence that it is now affecting early childhood programs. While it is increasingly apparent that standards-based reform has arrived in early childhood, there is a significant gap in our understanding of how these policies are being implemented in early childhood programs or the resulting effects. This study adds to the literature by investigating how early childhood program staff, including administrators, professional development staff, and teachers, make sense of standards-based reform. This study provides a description of reform efforts in three early childhood programs and discusses how programs and teachers are implementing standards-based reform. An interpretive holistic comparative case study design was used to examine three school-based early childhood programs chosen based on the extent to which they were implementing standards-based reform. Data collected included interviews with program administrators, professional development providers and coaches, teachers, and teaching assistants, and review of salient documents such as curricula and professional development materials. Study findings indicate early childhood programs are implementing standards-based reform in a variety of ways. Across all three programs, staff strove to implement SBR to the best of their abilities while dealing with various levels of funding and professional development support. Although staff in the programs expressed concerns about meeting the myriad standards associated with SBR implementation, they all found satisfaction in seeing measurable results in the performance of their students.
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Early childhood programs are at a crossroads. It has become abundantly clear that influences in early childhood, or the years from birth to five, can provide a framework for future success in school and life. Quality programs that support families and young children have demonstrated long term impacts on social and academic outcomes for children (Reynolds & Temple, 2005, Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997). As recognition grows about the potential impact of early childhood programs, both state and federal governments are investing substantial funding into diverse early childhood programs (Hustedt & Barnett, 2011).

However, not all early childhood programs are the same. Unlike the universally funded and relatively coherent K-12 education system, for years the early childhood system has been fragmented and lacking cohesive funding streams. Young children are in diverse settings including home child care; center child care; informal arrangements with family, friends and neighbors; Head Start; and programs linked to the K-12 system. These all have varying classroom quality, expectations for child outcomes, oversight agencies, and funding streams. Parents may or may not have access to early childhood programs, and, even if they do, the quality of these programs may not be sufficient to ensure children positive short and long term outcomes. Public funding, universal classroom quality standards, and child outcome standards for early childhood programs are not mandated by the federal government and that has led to states cobbling together a system that includes diverse ways to support, care, and educate young children and their parents.

So how do we create and fund a flexible early childhood system with disparate and distinct components that meet the needs of all parents while ensuring quality programs that contribute to positive outcomes for children? Over the years, federal and state governments, as well as communities across the country, have struggled with this question. States have begun to fund universal early childhood programs for children aged 3-5, while the federal government continues to fund Head Start (Hustedt & Barnett, 2011). Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge has given states federal funding to design a more cohesive system based on quality and access. States and communities are working to put accountability measures in place to ensure there are universal standards for classroom quality and child outcomes as a framework for a coherent, yet flexible, system (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012). One possible method of accomplishing
this through accountability and comprehensive reform based on universally acceptable standards—also known as standards-based reform.

Originally termed systemic reform, standards-based reform (SBR) focuses on the alignment of educational policies to standards, curriculum and instruction, professional development and teacher training, and testing, to make the educational system more coherent and effective (O'Day & Smith, 1993; Smith & O'Day, 1991). The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 (NCLB; Public Law 107-110) expanded the scope and potential impact of SBR by creating an accountability system of rewards and sanctions linked to student performance on tests to motivate schools, teachers, students, and parents to increase student achievement (Fuhrman, 2004; Superfine, 2005).

Policymakers have traditionally concentrated SBR on the K-12 educational system. However, with the enactment of NCLB and Good Start, Grow Smart (The White House, n.d.), in addition to the more recent Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grants1, pressure on schools to raise student achievement has increased. Driven by calls for accountability across the educational spectrum and the desire to ensure that young children are ready to enter kindergarten, early childhood programs have risen to the attention of policymakers (Stipek, 2006). This is also due to the increasingly available evidence regarding the importance of the early years to later success in school and life and the positive effects of quality early childhood education programs (La Paro & Pianta, 2001; Reynolds, Temple, Ou, Arteaga, & White, 2011; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2002; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997). As a result, the number and size of publicly-funded early childhood programs is increasing at national, state, and local levels, with a concomitant rise in expectations, evaluation, and accountability (Gallagher, Clayton, & Heinemeier, 2001; Gilliam & Zigler, 2000; Stipek, 2006).

Oversight of early childhood programs has traditionally taken the form of monitoring system inputs rather than systematically evaluating outcomes (Spodek, 1983). However, a constellation of recent policy initiatives provides indications that this is beginning to change. These initiatives include: a) the use of testing in early childhood programs, such as Head Start’s National Reporting System and the assessments required for Early Reading First programs; b) the establishment of early childhood standards aligned with K-12 standards, such as Minnesota’s Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs); c) the use of research-based curriculum, such as Doors to Discovery and Opening the World of Learning (Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004; Roskos &

1 http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallenge/index.html
Vukelich, 2006; Stipek, 2006); and d) the development of state and national quality classroom standards for early childhood programs monitored and measured by Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS; Mitchell, 2009). These policy mandates are new to early childhood programs, which traditionally have been relatively free of government control or accountability pressures (Barnett, 1993; McConnell, et al., 1998). The increased use of assessment, implementation of research-based curriculum, interest in establishing QRIS, and alignment of practice to standards in early childhood programs are evidence that SBR is beginning to influence early childhood programs.

As a result, the nature of and expectations for early childhood programs have changed dramatically. Originally viewed as places where children played, unfolding and blooming along their own developmental timelines, early childhood programs are now places where teachers knowledgeable in child development and learning are expected to ensure that children are ready for kindergarten (McGill-Franzen, 1993; Meisels & Shonkoff, 2000).

There are indications that these changes are presenting challenges to early childhood programs in a variety of ways. First, although there is a growing consensus about the domains, skills, and dispositions children need to be ready for kindergarten, there is a lack of a universal definition of school readiness (Snow, 2006; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). This has resulted in an array of early childhood standards varying in depth and quality (Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006). Second, although demands to assess young children have increased, there is little consensus about how to assess young children and a dearth of valid, reliable, and useful tests (Bordignon & Lam, 2004; McConnell, 2000; McConnell, Priest, Davis, & McEvoy, 2002; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004; Snow, 2006). Third, developmentally appropriate practice, considered to be the cornerstone of best instructional practice in early childhood, has undergone significant revisions in recent years, but the field is still struggling to find a consensus on the best way to teach young children effectively (Dickinson, 2002; Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004; Lubeck, 1998). These challenges are compounded by the existence of a fragmented and diverse early childhood system consisting of community based child care, family child care, Head Start, and publicly and privately funded child care centers. These different early education locations have diverse funding streams and different oversight agencies, which adds to the complexity of the early childhood system (Hustedt & Barnett, 2011; Mitchell, 2009). While it is increasingly apparent that SBR has arrived in early childhood, there is a significant gap in our understanding of how these policies and reforms are being implemented in early childhood programs or the resulting effects.
There is, however, a large research base regarding the effects of SBR and accountability in K-12 systems. There is some indication that SBR can have positive effects on schools, teachers and students in K-12. Large-scale assessment, a key feature of the new iteration of SBR, can have positive effects by motivating teachers and students to work harder, giving teachers information about the effectiveness of their curriculum and instruction, and providing information to administrators to improve policies and programs (Abu-Alhija, 2007). There is evidence that accountability systems have led to moderate increases in student learning based on test performance (Hanushek & Raymond, 2005). SBR has also increased alignment in policies at the local level (Supovitz & Taylor, 2005) and encouraged principals to help teachers use data to inform instruction and focus attention on low-performing students (Ladd & Zelli, 2002).

In spite of evidence of these positive effects in the K-12 system, there are also indications that SBR and accountability are having unintended and potentially negative consequences on schools. It has been argued that the results of large-scale testing can be misused or misinterpreted, leading to student anxiety and disengagement, increased drop-out rates, narrowing of the curriculum through focusing on test-taking skills and decreasing higher-order thinking skills, reduced staff commitment to teaching, and administrators focusing policies on raising test scores (i.e., reallocating resources) instead of enhancing real learning (Abu-Alhija, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2004). For example, Booher-Jennings (2005) found teachers in Texas concentrated their efforts on “bubble kids,” or those children most likely to pass achievement tests, rather than children who were most at risk. There have also been allegations that NCLB and the increased pressure to demonstrate student outcomes has resulted in teachers and principals cheating (Blacker, 2011).

What explains these differences in positive and negative effects? A hallmark of SBR is the reliance on local control to implement the reform, allowing for local program flexibility to choose the processes of reform (Smith & O'Day, 1991; Superfine, 2005). In addition, it has been argued that policy implementation depends on how local actors understand, interpret, and make sense of policy (Spillane, 2004; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Therefore, variation in effects could be due to variations in interpretation and implementation of SBR at the local level, depending on a program’s organizational context and individual administrators and teachers.

This reasoning is particularly relevant to SBR. The goal of SBR is to improve student learning, which depends on making classroom instruction more effective, which in turn makes teachers the key locus of change (Cohen, 1995; Cohen & Ball, 1990). Teachers may respond to reforms in various ways, viewing the reform as something they already do, reframing the reform
in terms of existing practices and beliefs, or selectively implementing aspects of the reform (Cohen & Ball, 1990; Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Duke, 2004; Fullan, 2001). Teachers also work within the context of a school community, and the way in which administrators interpret SBR will influence school policies and subsequently how teachers interpret SBR (Spillane, 2004). Therefore, how local schools and teachers interpret policies affects how the policies are implemented, which in turn affects the consequences of the policy.

While there is a large body of literature on the implementation and consequences of SBR and accountability systems on K-12 schools, there is a much smaller research base on how SBR is affecting early childhood programs. In addition, the early childhood system has significant differences from the K-12 system in terms of funding, governance, oversight, and locations. Also, the way in which young children learn is based on hands-on experiences that are connected to concrete and abstract concepts, which is significantly different from the majority of instruction in the K-12 system. We know little about how these reforms are being implemented across early childhood program contexts, to what extent the reforms are changing classroom practice, or whether or not reforms are improving student outcomes. Does the pattern of effects observed in K-12 also hold true for early childhood programs? In addition, we have little understanding of how early childhood program administrators and teachers are implementing the SBR, the challenges they face as they implement new requirements, or the possible outcomes of SBR in early childhood. This study aims to add to the literature about SBR in early childhood by investigating one aspect of policy implementation: how early childhood programs and classroom teachers understand SBR and put it into practice.

Using Theories of Action to Understand the Process of Implementation

One way to better understand the implementation and effects of complex policies such as SBR is to use theories of action to describe the implementation process. Theories of action have traditionally been used in program evaluation to better understand programs (Chen, 1990; Patton, 2008; Weiss, 1998). Theories of action have also been used to better understand the links between policy implementation and outcomes (Chatterji, 2002; Malen, Croninger, Muncey, & Redmond-Jones, 2002; Supovitz & Taylor, 2005). Chatterji (2002) argues that because of the complex and systemic nature of SBR, evaluating the policy impact requires a more comprehensive and systemic approach. Elucidating a policy’s theory of action is one way to do this.

A policy’s theory of action describes the connections among various components of a policy and the mechanisms by which it is expected to effect change—essentially, how a program
is supposed to work (Chen, 1990; Patton, 2008; Weiss, 1998). Describing a theory of action entails articulating the specific components of the reform, specifying how the components are linked, and identifying intermediate and final expected outcomes. Researchers may then focus on a particular component, look at all of the components individually, or examine the integrated components simultaneously (Bickman, 1985; Chatterji, 2002; Weiss, 1998).

The current theory of action for SBR in K-12, which will be explored in detail in Chapter 2, can be summarized as: a) rigorous state standards provide a framework for aligning assessment, curriculum, and professional development at the local level, providing motivation for local level change when combined with b) rewards and sanctions attached to student performance on tests, with the result that c) local districts and schools implement a constellation of individualized and coherent policies and supports, leading to d) increased teacher capacity (beliefs and knowledge) regarding content and pedagogy, which results in the intermediate outcome of e) high quality instruction, culminating in the ultimate outcome of f) improved student learning and achievement (Chapman & Snyder, 2000; Fuhrman, 2004; Haertel & Herman, 2005; O'Day & Smith, 1993; Smith & O'Day, 1991). Figure 1 illustrates this theory of action.

The theory of action of SBR is similar in early childhood education with one potentially important difference. Unlike K-12, SBR in early childhood does not yet include the same accountability system of rewards and sanctions linked to test performance. However, expansion and continuation of funding for early childhood programs is increasingly dependent on establishing that children’s school readiness is improving by assessing and reporting student outcomes.

When this theory of action is working as intended, a number of things are assumed. The main components include standards, assessment, curriculum, professional development, and rewards and sanctions. Since coherence is key, it is assumed that these components are aligned with and informed by the standards (Smith & O'Day, 1991). Assessment and the attachment of rewards and sanctions to student performance on the assessment is assumed to motivate reform and provide information for districts, schools, and teachers to make decisions (Abu-Alhija, 2007; Chapman & Snyder, 2000; Fuhrman, 2004). Curriculum is assumed to be aligned with standards and assessments and provides the primary framework and content of teaching (Smith & O'Day, 1991). Professional development and meaningful opportunities for teachers to learn are critical components of SBR because teacher learning, in terms of content and effective pedagogy, as well as their understanding and interpretation of policy, is the key to enhancing capacity and
encouraging implementation, thus leading to change (Cohen, 1995; Corcoran & Goertz, 1995; Fullan, 2001; Spillane & Louis, 2002).

![Diagram of Standards-based reform theory of action]

Figure 1. Standards-based reform theory of action. State standards are aligned with local policies and supports, curriculum, professional development, and assessment to influence teacher capacity, leading to high quality instruction and student learning. Rewards and sanctions associated with assessments provide motivation for reform.

Implementing a policy is one of the first steps toward meaningful change in program practices and teacher capacity. However, there is ample evidence that implementation of policies is characterized by both successes and challenges for many programs (Firestone, Fitz, & Broadfoot, 1999; Duke, 2004; Mabry & Margolis, 2006). How local actors interpret the policy affects how they implement the policy. In doing so, they may adapt or transform the intent of the policy (Cohen & Ball, 1990; Duke, 2004). This interpretation represents a key way in which policies become implemented at the local level.

**Research Questions**

In this study, a description of the theory of action of SBR is used to explore how early childhood programs and teachers are implementing SBR policies at the local level. Theories of action help to open up the black box of policy effects by specifying the mechanisms by which policies are expected to be implemented to create change. The focus of this analysis is on the way
in which early childhood programs and teachers interpret and implement SBR policies in their local contexts, examining motivations for implementation, challenges, and possible outcomes.

In early childhood, little is known about how SBR is being implemented across programs, particularly in terms of how teachers are implementing the policies. There is some evidence that the use of assessment in early childhood is changing early childhood teachers’ beliefs about what skills are important to teach (Kowalski, Brown, & Pretti-Frontczak, 2005). There is also evidence that early childhood teachers who are asked to implement a specific curriculum in their classes do so based on their prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences, choosing certain aspects of the curriculum to implement, but not fundamentally changing practice (Ryan, 2004). In addition, there is preliminary evidence that comprehensive accountability systems that include teacher training can improve teacher practice (Hooks, Scott-Little, Marshall, & Brown, 2006). But there is little known about how early childhood programs and teachers are interpreting the constellation of policies that compose SBR in their local context or what policies and supports are in place to assist that interpretation. Similarly, little is known about how early childhood program staff are implementing SBR. If SBR relies on local control and local interpretation to allow flexibility in response, then how are individual early childhood programs responding? To answer this question, the following research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways have early childhood program staff implemented standards-based reform?
   What are examples of different components of standards-based reform in early childhood, and how do they interact?

2. What factors are serving as motivation for early childhood program staff to implement standards-based reform?

3. How have early childhood program staff adapted to standards-based reform implemented in their program?
   a. What challenges have programs encountered as they implement standards-based reform?
   b. What role did existing program culture play in the implementation process?
   c. What types of support did programs give staff during the implementation process?
   d. What are some potential outcomes of implementing standards-based reform in early childhood programs?
Significance of Study

SBR in early childhood is relatively new, and little is understood about the ways in which it is being implemented at the local level. Implementation addresses how the policy is working by revealing the processes or mechanisms at work and the intermediate outcomes that provide the critical links toward the ultimate outcome of improved student learning. By determining how and to what extent the intermediate outcomes are achieved, we gain a better understanding of how and why a policy is or is not working. Understanding the way in which SBR and accountability are implemented at program and classroom levels in early childhood may lead to a greater understanding of how the policy is working.

Implementation ultimately relies on teachers changing their classroom practice to be more effective. The theory of action of SBR hinges on providing high quality instruction that leads to student learning. However, high quality instruction is achieved by building teacher capacity through school-level policies aligned with state standards, which in turn depends on how administrators and teachers interpret and make sense of policies. For SBR to work, developing local level policies aligned with standards resulting in high quality classroom instruction is critical. Instructional capacity depends on a number of factors, and developing a greater understanding of these factors will increase the understanding of what types of learning teachers need to implement policies effectively. A critical component of SBR is professional development that is meaningful, and unpacking the current conceptions of SBR in early childhood may expose the gaps in early childhood teachers’ knowledge and understanding, thereby informing future professional development.

Definition of Key Terms

Accountability. Accountability in the broad sense means responsibility for one’s actions to an external authority. In education, accountability refers to holding schools and teachers responsible for students’ academic performance.

Developmentally appropriate practice. Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is a set of guidelines generally accepted within the field as best practices in the classroom regarding curriculum and instruction. It is not a curriculum in and of itself, nor is it composed of explicit standards. Rather, it is intended to be a guide for implementing curriculum that focuses on how children learn, based on a solid research foundation (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992). Dickinson (2002) describes DAP as “…the belief that children’s development should be taken into account as adults interact with children, structure their time and space, and plan activities for them” (p.
DAP undergoes revisions as new research regarding early childhood development and learning surfaces (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Dickinson, 2002).

**Early childhood assessment.** There are two major types of assessment used in early childhood programs: informal, authentic, performance-based assessments; and formal, on-demand, standardized tests. Performance-based assessment, also called informal or authentic assessment, consists of assessing children in the classroom setting as they naturally interact with materials, peers, and adults (Dichtelmiller, Jablon, Dorfman, Marsden, & Meisels, 2001; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004). Standardized tests, also termed formal or on-demand assessments, are characterized by having standardized administration and scoring procedures, with items selected in a consistent way (Lonigan, 2006; Neisworth & Bagnato, 1996). They also are intended to sample a selection of children’s behavior, which is solicited by adults in specific ways outside of a natural setting, hence the name “on-demand” (Neisworth & Bagnato, 1996).

**Early childhood education programs.** Early childhood education programs are designed to provide services to children and families during the first five years and range from subsidizing child care for working families to intensive intervention programs for children at risk. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on early childhood education programs for children aged three to five that provide some form of focused and intentional classroom instruction and receive the majority of their funding from public sources. There is a wide variety of terms used to refer to programs and systems serving young children and their families, both in the research and policy development literature. In this analysis, the term *early childhood program* will be used to refer to educational programs serving young children before they enter kindergarten.

**Educational accountability systems.** Accountability systems are systems schools have put in place to measure student performance. These systems rely predominantly on a constellation of standardized tests, and increasingly the performance on these tests is linked to rewards and sanctions. In particular, NCLB has tied federal funding in K-12 to student achievement as measured by tests, with significant consequences if performance targets are not met.

**School readiness.** Various stakeholders, including teachers, school administrators, parents, policy makers, and the general public, have different conceptions of what is meant by “school readiness” or being “ready to learn” (Snow, 2006; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Teachers and parents both stress the importance of social and emotional development, while the federal government has recently placed a priority on cognitive aspects of school readiness, particularly literacy (Meisels, 1999; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). For the purposes of this study, school readiness will refer to the constellation of skills, attitudes, and behaviors that children need upon entrance
to kindergarten to be successful in school. These skills fall into a variety of developmental domains, including social-emotional, language and literacy, creativity, cognition, and physical ability.

Standards-based reform (SBR). An educational reform movement stemming from the systemic reform concept developed in the 1990s, which advocated for coherence among disparate elements of the educational system (Jennings, 1998; Smith & O'Day, 1991; Superfine, 2005; Vinovskis, 1996), SBR is considered synonymous with systemic reform. SBR has come to mean the development of rigorous standards and the alignment of these standards with curriculum, instruction, professional development, and assessment to create a comprehensive, coherent, and effective educational system. SBR rests on two fundamental concepts: 1) transparent alignment of standards and assessment, delineating what children are expected to know; and 2) flexibility and local control over the process of education, allowing “reform efforts to be tailored to unique local problems” (Superfine, 2005, p. 16).

Capacity. Although there are different views about the means to create school or teacher capacity (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Smith & O'Day, 1991), there appears to be some agreement about the expected results. Capacity means having ability, but it can also refer to productivity. School and teacher capacity refers to the amount, allocation, and quality of available resources, an organizational structure and culture that encourages collaboration and cooperation focused on goals, and the knowledge, skills, and abilities of teachers and other staff (Corcoran & Goertz, 1995). In this study, capacity will also refer to beliefs, attitudes, and experiences that underlie knowledge and affect how individuals interpret and make sense of new knowledge.

Theories of action. There are a number of concepts linked to theory of action in evaluation, including program theory, implementation theory, theory of action, theory of change, and logic model (Patton, 2008). Program theory generally refers to the links between components and mechanisms of a program that describe the immediate, intermediate, and ultimate outcomes of a program and how it is expected to affect outcomes, often based on social science theories and focused on people’s responses to the program (Donaldson, 2003; Patton, 2008; Weiss, 1998). Implementation theory is distinguished from program theory by describing the actual activities of a program, or what staff need to do to implement the program (Weiss, 1998). Weiss describes theories of change as “the assumptions that link a program’s inputs and activities to the attainment of desired ends; it includes both implementation theory and program theory” (1998, p. 338). Theories of action are very similar to both theories of change and program theory; theories of action tend to be more focused on how to achieve specific outcomes (Patton, 2008). A logic
model is a tool to help develop program theory but is also used to describe other kinds of activities associated with a program.

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). QRIS use classroom quality and environmental rating standards to assess early childhood classrooms and provide support for improving quality (Mitchell, 2009; Shaak, Tarrant, Boller, & Tout, 2012). In contrast to early learning and development standards that describe what children should know and be able to do, classroom quality standards focus on what happens in a classroom. These are two distinct ways of ensuring accountability in early childhood programs, which is of note because it is distinct from the K-12 system that tends to focus primarily on student outcomes.

A Note on Timelines

This study was conducted during the time period of 2007-2008. Staff in all three programs investigated were interviewed during this time, and relevant documents were collected and reviewed. The majority of the case analyses and descriptions, as well as much of the cross-case analysis, were also completed during this time. However, due to personal reasons, I, the author and researcher, was not able to fully complete this dissertation until now (2013). In the intervening time, there have been changes in the early childhood policy context. Early Reading First, a federal competitive grant that strove to create early childhood centers of excellence focused on early literacy and utilizing many principles of SBR, is no longer funded. The No Child Left Behind legislation is currently up for reauthorization and under considerable scrutiny. States are able to apply for waivers from NCLB if they are willing in implement plans focused on effective improvement policies and provide additional support for students most at risk for school failure. Race to the Top, including the Early Learning Challenge competitive grants, are inspiring states to create comprehensive early childhood systems that include professional development, coherence across early childhood and K-12 systems, outcome data collection systems, QRIS, and quality early childhood environments.

Despite these changes in the policy environment, however, the elements of SBR remain an important factor in early childhood reform efforts. There is a continued emphasis on aligning curriculum and assessment with outcome standards related to what children should know and be able to do when they enter kindergarten. Closing the achievement gap and addressing the needs of children most at risk remains a priority. The importance of developing quality early childhood classrooms by increasing teacher capacity and knowledge about the most effective educational practices has only increased in the past four years. This is evidenced by the proliferation of
quality rating systems for early childhood programs and the diversity of tools used to measure quality in early childhood. Professional development for teachers currently in the field is gaining greater recognition as a tool to increase quality programs, with the expectation that increased classroom quality will lead to better outcomes for children. There is enhanced emphasis on creating cohesive early childhood systems that incorporate a shared vision to provide access to quality care and education for all children while maintaining the flexibility for parents that is characteristic of early childhood. Expectations for early childhood education programs have only increased over the years, with the components of SBR providing a framework for reforms. As the ante is upped for early childhood programs and they are increasingly in the public spotlight, understanding how policies are implemented in early childhood is becoming more important. Therefore, this study is even more relevant for the early childhood field.

**Overview of the Study**

This dissertation has eight chapters. Chapter 1 has provided a statement of the problem, along with definitions and a discussion of the significance of the study. Chapter 2 builds the conceptual framework for the study through an in-depth review of the literature. Methods are discussed in Chapter 3. A case study methodology was employed, using three early childhood programs as the primary units of analysis. Interviews with teachers provided the necessary detail to understand how early childhood teachers have implemented SBR, while interviews with program administrators and review of salient program documents will provide the context within which the teachers operated. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 describe the three early childhood program case studies. All names of school districts, teachers, staff, and administrators have been changed to maintain confidentiality. Chapter 7 provides a cross-case analysis, and Chapter 8 examines implications and provides recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of the literature begins with an overview of early childhood systems and programs, the history of standards-based reform (SBR) in K-12, and the recent developments of SBR in early childhood. Next, the concept of theories of action is explained, illustrating the utility of the concept for informing policy implementation research. The theory of action underlying SBR and accountability as enacted in the K-12 system and early childhood education is discussed. Finally, the nature of implementation and the importance of how local actors, specifically program administrators and teachers, interpret SBR policies is addressed.

Early Childhood Programs: History and Current Issues

The current state of early childhood programs can best be understood by briefly tracing the historical evolution of programs and the influences that have affected their development. Evolving research on child development, evaluations of early childhood programs, and shifts in state and federal policy have combined to alter the purpose and structure of early childhood programs over time. Conceptions of school readiness, appropriate curriculum and instruction in early education, quality classroom environments, and purposes and methods of assessing young children continue to evolve and remain issues shaping the field. In addition, the early care and education system has evolved over time as an interrelated yet independent group of programs with a diverse history of funding, oversight, and procedures. This has led to significant challenges to developing comprehensive reform.

Evolution of Early Childhood Programs

Early childhood programs as they are understood today have a relatively short history, particularly in terms of publicly-funded early childhood programs on a large scale. However, interest in educating young children has persisted for more than two centuries (McGill-Franzen, 1993). In the mid to late 19th century, early childhood education programs in the form of kindergarten and nursery schools began to make positive inroads into the educational system (McGill-Franzen, 1993; Meisels & Shonkoff, 2000; Spodek, 1983). Originally viewed as places where educators allowed children to play and supported their natural unfolding, by the 1950s kindergartens began to evolve into more formal academic settings focused on direct instruction (McGill-Franzen, 1993).
Early perspectives about child development informed the structure and nature of the first nursery schools. Maturationist theorists postulated that children progress through universal and unvarying stages of development determined by biological maturation (Cole & Cole, 1989). Children were either ready or not ready for more formal instruction; therefore there was little emphasis on academic instruction or evaluating educational outcomes (Spodek, 1983). To some extent, this belief of children “becoming ready” through natural maturation is one way in which early childhood and kindergarten teachers perceive school readiness to this day (Smith & Shepard, 1988). The maturationist viewpoint was tempered by behavioral psychologists such as John B. Watson who postulated the opposite: development was largely determined by environmental factors that could be modified to produce positive outcomes (Meisels & Shonkoff, 2000). These ideas emerged in the 1930s and 1940s from early deprivation studies that led to conclusions that early educational experiences could increase intelligence (Ramey & Ramey, 1998; Zigler & Styfco, 1996).

A combination of societal factors and a new understanding of child development made the 1960s a turning point for early childhood programs. A number of important theoretical contributions shaped early childhood programs. Constructivist theories, associated primarily with Jean Piaget, viewed the child as composed of interlinked developmental domains and the teacher as facilitator who designed stimulating environments for children to explore (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Cole & Cole, 1989). Human ecological systems theory, associated primarily with Urie Bronfenbrenner (1986), provided the foundation for understanding the interlinked context in which a child develops. Relationships, including the teacher-child relationship, were also recognized as important foundations for later school and life success (Mashburn & Pianta, 2006; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). As behaviorist and constructivist theories about child development came to prominence, early childhood programs were seen as one way to affect early development and later achievement.

The mounting evidence about the importance of the early years for shaping later school and life outcomes was a catalyst for implementing a wide range of public and private, demonstration and large-scale early childhood programs in the 1960s (Ramey & Ramey, 1998), many of which demonstrated positive short-term outcomes and eventually long-term effects (Barnett, 1995). The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, the Carolina Abecedarian Program, and the Chicago Child-Parent Center were high-quality programs for young children that included longitudinal evaluation (Ramey & Ramey, 2004; Reynolds & Temple, 2005; Reynolds et al., 2011; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997). All three programs were designed for children and families
at risk and had high quality programming with small classes, qualified teachers, and an
intentional focus on instruction (Reynolds & Temple, 2005). Much of the research about the
lasting impact of early childhood programs came from evaluations of these demonstration
programs (Zigler & Styfco, 1996). The short-and long-term evaluations of these projects provided
evidence that quality early childhood programs can deliver positive outcomes for children and
society and provided a research base for the components of quality early childhood education
(Barnett, 1995; Reynolds & Temple, 2005; Reynolds et al., 2002; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997).
Propelled by early results from experimental demonstration projects, Head Start began in 1965 as
a pilot program and it became the first large-scale, publicly-funded early childhood program
(Zigler & Styfco, 2000).

Head Start began as a pilot project designed to provide comprehensive support services
for families and children to lift them out of poverty, but quickly became a large scale federally
funded program believed to be the solution to poverty (Zigler & Styfco, 2000). At the time of
Head Start’s inception, little was known about how to meet the varied needs of children at risk
and living in poverty. As a result, Head Start initially focused on the whole child, including
enhancing physical health, social-emotional development, mental skills, educational competence,
family relationships, responsible attitude, and self-worth. Eventually these became consolidated
into an overarching goal to enhance social competence (Zigler & Styfco, 2000). The Head Start
model placed a great deal of importance on parent involvement, engagement, and empowerment,
and parents have been an integral aspect of Head Start programming throughout its
implementation.

Concurrent with the evolution of publically funded formal early childhood programs was
the growth in informal child care settings. As more parents entered the workforce, there was a
growing demand for care for young children. This parallel movement toward care and education
of young children was composed of a broad range of nonparental custodial care, including public
and private centers; home child care; and family, friend, and neighbor care. As the demand for
mothers to work increased, there was also an increased demand for federal and state subsidies to
help parents provide child care (Cohen, 1996). While the child care movement was initially
distinct from more formal publically funded early childhood education, there was a growing
recognition that informal child care also played a role in young children’s development.
Increasingly, the field of early education began to recognize that both formal and informal early
education settings and programs formed a flexible system to meet the child care needs of parents
while helping to educate young children (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012; Mitchell, 2009).
Research during the 1980s began to emphasize the cognitive aspects of early childhood development while placing the development of cognition in a sociocultural context (Dickinson, 2006). Vygotskian theory has contributed to an understanding of societal and cultural influences on development and learning along with the “zone of proximinal development” (Allal & Ducrey, 2000; Gredler, 2000). Early literacy, or how young children begin to acquire literacy skills and behaviors, became the subject of increasing research (Dickinson, 2002; Snow, 2006). As the understanding of how literacy emerged in children grew, it became clear that early childhood laid the foundations for later literacy skills, particularly in terms of phonemic awareness (Dickinson, 2006; Juel, 1988).

In addition to literacy, social-emotional development and social competence continued to emerge as another area of substantial research. Social-emotional development, such as social skills, relationships with teachers and peers, motivation, behavioral issues, and attitudes toward school and learning are unique predictors of academic success or failure when other variables such as family characteristics and cognitive ability are taken into account (Denham, 2006; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). More recently, research about self-regulation and executive function have shown to also influence academic success, and this has become an emphasis in early childhood programs (Willoughby, Wirth, & Blair, 2012). The rise of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) as a focus in the K-12 system has encouraged a concomitant rise in research and instruction in early childhood. As a result, early childhood programs are developing more intensive STEM curricula and becoming more intentional in their STEM instruction (Bosse, Jacobs, & Anderson, 2009; Craig, 2000).

Long-term evaluations of early childhood programs, a substantial research base demonstrating the importance of the early years, and increased interest in ensuring children enter school “ready to learn” led to the expansion of early childhood programs. Since the 1960s and particularly during the 1990s, the number of states with publicly supported early childhood programs has grown exponentially (Gilliam & Zigler, 2000). As public funding for early childhood programs increased, accountability became more important, resulting in regulations for early childhood programs and assessment of program outcomes.

**Current Issues**

The increased attention directed toward early childhood programs has highlighted a number of current issues in the field. Early childhood programs have evolved in a piecemeal fashion in both the public and private realms. This has resulted in a fragmented system of early childhood programs throughout the nation with varied state and federal funding streams and
oversight. In addition, there are a number of issues affecting the early childhood field, including defining school readiness and a lack of consensus around appropriate instructional practices and assessment of young children.

**Funding and Oversight.** As early childhood programs expanded, a range of options evolved, each with different funding streams, governance, and oversight agencies. Over the years, federal and state governments have created multiple programs to support and educate young children. The majority of these programs are either centered in the department of education or the department of health and human services. A comprehensive review of all of the programs related to family support and education is beyond the scope of this review, but a brief summary of the funding and governance silos directly affecting young children’s education follows.

There are four main funding streams for early childhood: federal funds, state funds, tax credits, and local community funds. Funds can come in the form of competitive grants or mandated funding. At times, these funding streams can work together (such as the federal government requiring matching state funds for some programs), but they are also stand-alone silos. Many early childhood programs are adept at blending and braiding diverse funding streams to ensure their programs’ survival. A last source of funding for early child is Early Child Special Education federal and state funds, and these funds are available to young children who have identified disabilities (Hustedt & Barnett, 2011).

There are three main types of early childhood programs that are linked to these funding streams: Head Start, child care (a broad distinction that encompasses nonprofit or proprietary child care centers; family child care homes; care by family, friends or neighbors; and nursery schools), and public school-based prekindergarten programs (Mitchell, 2009). Head Start is primarily funded and administered by the federal government through grants to local areas, but some states provide additional Head Start funding. Head Start is a free program for children who qualify. Child care is funded through a combination of individual fees from parents, child care subsidies, and tax credits. Public school-based programs tend to be funded by local grants or educational agencies, although they can also be funded through Title I federal funds for schools who qualify (Hustedt & Barnett, 2011).

Increasingly, states are funding scholarships for early education. This funding stream is a relatively new phenomenon and works differently in each state. Essentially, parents apply for a scholarship and then choose an early childhood program based on a quality rating system (discussed later in this review). This type of funding is different from traditional early care and
education public funding in that the money follows the child rather than funding a specific program.

As can be seen by this brief overview, funding for early childhood programs is complicated and often unstable. Each of the early childhood silos (Head Start, child care, and school-based programs) often fight amongst each other for money and have organizations at the federal and state level to assist with advocacy. Early childhood programs often cobble together funding from diverse sources to maintain adequate funding. For example, it is common for a public school-based program to receive funding from federal Title I monies, a local levy from the school district, and grants from private foundations. Each of these funding streams has different accountability and reporting requirements, leaving early childhood program administrators to navigate an increasingly complicated world of funding and oversight.

**School Readiness.** Although there is growing consensus about the goals and expected outcomes of early childhood programs, different approaches toward defining school readiness remain. This lack of clarity surrounding the goals of early childhood programs means that it is difficult to define an outcome to measure, and early childhood programs often use existing assessment instruments (Snow, 2006; Kagan, 2012). At times this means there may be a mismatch between goals and actual outcomes. Framing the goals and outcomes of early childhood programs so they can be reliably and validly assessed continues to be a key issue in early childhood programs today, but there is general agreement that school readiness is the overall goal (Snow, 2006). Defining exactly what this means is challenging, however. The federal government has come to see school readiness primarily in terms of cognitive outcomes while early childhood practitioners often view school readiness in terms of the whole child (Wesley & Buysse, 2003). For some teachers, the development of social-emotional skills represents the most important outcome of early childhood programs, but the lack of good measurement tools means these skills are rarely assessed (Denham, 2006; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000).

Meisels (1999) has summarized four approaches to school readiness that have been acknowledged in the literature and addressed throughout the previous historical discussion: Idealist/Nativist, Empiricist/Environmental, Social Constructivist, and Interactionist. A summary of these approaches including theoretical assumptions and implications for early childhood pedagogy and assessment is presented in Table 1. Each of the views described in the table continues to have adherents within early childhood, compounding the contested nature of school readiness. Those who adhere to a particular philosophical approach to readiness also tend to promote the particular type of pedagogy and assessment associated with the approach, which has
led to many debates in the field about how to appropriately teach and assess young children. Early learning standards, which will be discussed later in this review, are beginning to provide a comprehensive framework for uniting these disparate views about school readiness, but debates regarding the different approaches continue (Kagan, 2012).

**Curriculum and Instruction.** Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) first became popularized in the 1980s by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), but has a long history rooted in research on child development, progressive educational strategies, and constructivist learning. DAP is a series of research-based position statements regarding how young children learn and develop and how programs should support them that has become accepted as best practice in providing instruction to children birth through age eight (Bredekamp, 1987). DAP forms the framework for quality early childhood curriculum and instruction.

The NAEYC guidelines for DAP were originally published in 1987 and were heavily based on constructivist, experiential approaches where the teacher acted as facilitator (Bredekamp, 1987; McGill-Franzen, 1993). Ten years later, the 1987 guidelines for DAP were revised to reflect new research regarding early childhood development and effective instructional methods. The revised guidelines for DAP rejected the maturationist perspective and embraced Vygotskian theory, placing more emphasis on the role of families, culture, and society on children’s development (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Dickinson, 2002). Teachers were encouraged to play a more active role in children’s cognitive development, scaffolding learning while continuing to make it meaningful to the child (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). The 1997 version of DAP is based on the following principles: (a) developmental domains are closely linked, (b) development occurs in a similar sequence but at different rates in children, (c) early experiences are cumulative, (d) development is influenced by the multiple contexts in which children live, (e) children actively construct knowledge, (f) development results from maturation interacting with the environment, (g) children learn and develop through play, (h) development is enhanced by challenging children just beyond current skill levels, (i) children have multiple learning styles, and (j) children learn best in an environment where their physical and emotional needs are met (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, pp. 9-15).

DAP underwent further revisions in 1998. In response to new research and a greater emphasis on early literacy, NAEYC collaborated with the International Reading Association to issue a joint position statement about developmentally appropriate literacy practices, suggesting that instruction in specific skills such as letter awareness was an important aspect of teaching.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Theoretical Basis</th>
<th>Definition of School Readiness</th>
<th>Implications for Pedagogy</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Idealist/ Nativist</td>
<td>Prominent prior to 1950; to some extent still evident</td>
<td>Maturationist philosophy; Arnold Gesell. Development is primarily internal and based on biological factors in which a child “unfolds” based on their internal clock.</td>
<td>Children are ready for school when they biologically mature; based primarily on social skills and ability to attend to tasks.</td>
<td>A teacher supports the natural development, but the process cannot be accelerated.</td>
<td>Primarily focused on physical characteristics of maturation and chronological, prescribed stages. Often used to determine whether or not a child can enter K.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empiricist Environmental</td>
<td>First emerged in 1930s &amp; 1940s, enjoyed various times of adherence and detraction.</td>
<td>Development based on external environmental forces. Behaviorist roots; John B. Watson. Cumulative and hierarchical in nature; skill development builds on previous skills in linear fashion.</td>
<td>Focuses on child behaviors, skills, and abilities; Readiness is an absolute state external to the child and criteria are universal, such as recognizing colors and letters; visual and auditory discrimination.</td>
<td>Teacher can completely control development through constructing environment. Explicit teaching models, direct; intentional, and systematic instruction.</td>
<td>Behaviors and skills can be empirically measured; based on decontextualized skills correlated with skills needed to be successful in school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Constructivist</td>
<td>Fairly recent development; emerged in 1970s and 1980s.</td>
<td>Elements of Piagetan and Vygotskian theory; could be said it was “modified Piaget”. Relativistic; readiness is relative and can only be defined within social and cultural contexts.</td>
<td>Communities co-create meanings of readiness that will depend on the particular context because different communities and schools have different skills necessary for success in future academic pursuits.</td>
<td>Teachers work with schools, parents, and the cultural and social context from which a child comes. Focused on inclusive classroom practices. Children construct meaning through experiences.</td>
<td>Based in communities; Assess all aspects of development. Multiple modes and perspectives embedded in assessments, including direct assessment and teacher and parent observation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interactionist</td>
<td>Recent; 1990s</td>
<td>Combines some of the above philosophies, acknowledging the importance of child characteristics as well as the context in which a child develops. Elements of Vygotskian theory.</td>
<td>Readiness is “bidirectional” (Meisels, 1999, p. 49); maintains the relativity of readiness. A focus on not only having the child ready for school, but ensuring the school is ready for the child. Readiness results from child’s interactional experiences with teachers, peers, and social context.</td>
<td>Teachers continually respond to child’s needs and evaluate skills against coherent standards that recognize developmental ranges. “Zone of proximal development”.</td>
<td>Done over time and contextually based; teacher-child interactions form the basis for assessment. Must be done in actual classroom situations.</td>
</tr>
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*Note.* Elements of table adapted from McConnell, et al. (1998), Meisels (1999), and Snow (2006).

The most recent version of DAP was published in 2009 and included a position statement regarding DAP. This version continues to be based on the same principles outlined in the 1997 version, but with slight changes in wording that reflect new research. The 2009 DAP addresses a number of new issues confronting the early childhood education field, including the lack of quality infant and toddler care; the unique needs of English Language Learners and new immigrants; and the increasing number of children coming to early childhood programs with special needs, disabilities, mental health issues, and/or challenging behaviors (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The 2009 DAP also expands upon the 2003 NAEYC NAECS/SDE joint position statement regarding assessment and accountability by highlighting the important connection between early childhood programs and the elementary years as a way to decrease the achievement gap (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2003). Copple and Bredekamp (2009) note that accountability systems and pressures can help create greater alignment and coherence between early childhood and K-12 systems, but also can potentially negatively impact young children and early childhood programs if high-stakes tests are used inappropriately. Finally, the most recent version of DAP specifically points out the role of teacher knowledge and skills in creating a quality classroom, describing the need to balance implementing researched-based curriculum with teacher autonomy and informed decision-making (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Although DAP is grounded in an extensive literature about how children develop and learn, the evidence about whether or not a DAP classroom actually improves children’s outcomes is mixed. In general, research indicates that programs implementing curriculum and instructional models based on DAP show improved child outcomes (Dunn & Kontos, 1997; Frede, 1995). However, many of these studies are based on observational and correlational designs, some without pre-test measures, which limits the conclusions that can be drawn from them.

DAP provides a framework for curriculum and instruction and guidance for creating quality early childhood learning environments. There are also specific instructional strategies based in DAP that have been validated by extensive research. Much of the research regarding effective instructional practices focuses on early literacy. This evidence often derives from high-quality experimental or quasi-experimental designs, and, as a result, there is a substantial amount
of understanding about what type of instruction works to enhance children’s literacy. For example, dialogic reading, a specific type of shared storybook reading where teachers encourage children to interact while the story is read, is an effective way of increasing vocabulary and other literacy skills (Lonigan, 2006; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Other effective practices include the use of questioning techniques and decontextualized language, organizing a print-rich environment, and using a comprehensive curriculum focused on literacy (Lonigan, 2006; Vukelich & Christie, 2004; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

There is also evidence that various ways of using explicit, systematic, direct instruction to teach phonological awareness and letter naming is effective (Adams, 2001; Lonigan, 2006; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). A number of experimental studies have demonstrated that both large and small group interventions focused on explicit phonemic awareness activities can enhance phonemic awareness and reading ability in young children, particularly children at risk for reading failure (Hatcher et al., 2006; Hatcher, Hulme, & Snowling, 2004; Lundberg, Frost, & Peterson, 1988). Although explicit and direct instruction are important components of effective teaching, concepts also need to be meaningful to children and learned in an active and engaging way (Neuman & Roskos, 2005b).

DAP has also been criticized in a number of ways. First, because DAP is a set of loose guidelines, teachers may have very different interpretations of what is and is not DAP (Lee & Walsh, 2004). Second, evaluators and practitioners have expressed concern that DAP guidelines may be biased (Lee & Walsh, 2004) and may not be appropriate for every child in every cultural context. For example, some suggest DAP and child-centered learning can work well for white-middle class children, but is less appropriate for other cultures, ethnicities, and social class backgrounds because of the difference in cultural ways of knowing and being (Hsue & Aldridge, 1995; Gersten, Darch & Gleason, 1988 as cited in Huffman & Speer, 2000; Lubeck, 1998).

**Quality Rating and Improvement Systems.** In recent years, quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) have become increasingly popular state initiatives to increase the quality of early education programs. Recognizing that the early education system is fragmented, with children placed in programs with different funding streams and oversight and a wide range of quality environments, QRIS aim to provide a unifying force to improve early education. Over 18 states have QRIS in place, while most other states are either planning or piloting them (Mitchell, 2009).

QRIS have two main objectives: provide a way to rate the quality of early education programs while also creating a system of supports to help programs improve. QRIS were
developed in response to the range of quality evidenced throughout early childhood programs to provide a unifying and aligning framework for the system as a whole. QRIS measure classroom quality using accepted instruments (many based on DAP), give a program a rating (such as from one to four stars), and provide technical assistance to help programs improve (Mitchell, 2009; Schaack et al., 2012). QRIS use classroom quality standards and staff core competencies to assess quality classrooms.

**Assessment.** The issues surrounding school readiness and appropriate instruction inform and influence discussions about assessment in early childhood. There is considerable controversy about what, why, and how to assess young children. Diverse purposes of assessment, the difficulty of accurately assessing the changeable nature of young children, and the developmentally appropriateness of various assessments contribute to the controversy around testing young children.

There are two major types of assessment used in early childhood programs: informal, authentic, performance-based assessments; and formal, on-demand, standardized assessments. Performance-based assessment, also called informal or authentic assessment, consists of assessing children in the classroom setting as they naturally interact with materials, peers, and adults (Dichtelmiller et al., 2001; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004). These types of assessment tend to be based heavily on ongoing observation of children within the context of skill development and are useful for informing instruction (Dodge, Heroman, Charles, & Maiorca, 2004; Lonigan, 2006). Because of the highly changeable nature of development and the sensitivity of young children, informal assessment has been promoted as a way to increase the validity of data; it more accurately shows what children know and can do (Dichtelmiller et al., 2001; Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2000; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004). Although it has been argued that authentic assessment can be used for program evaluation purposes (Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004), there are significant limitations. Performance-based assessments lack standardization, so aggregation and comparison of scores are difficult, and they do not provide a way to know if children are making adequate progress toward accepted outcomes (Lonigan, 2006; Snow, 2006). Because it is usually teachers doing the assessment rather than more neutral observers, there is the potential for bias (Snow, 2006). Additionally, there is no way of knowing if the abilities demonstrated in an informal way actually translate into the formal abilities needed for school (Bordignon & Lam, 2004). Finally, it has been noted that significant professional development and training are needed to use performance-based assessment accurately (Shepard, 1997; Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz, 1998).
Standardized tests, also termed formal or on-demand assessments, are characterized by having standardized administration and scoring procedures, with items selected in a consistent way (Lonigan, 2006; Neisworth & Bagnato, 1996). They also are intended to sample a selection of children’s behavior, which is solicited by adults in specific ways outside of a natural setting, hence the name “on-demand” (Neisworth & Bagnato, 1996). As a result, standardized tests may limit the range of skills and behaviors measured and may not provide an accurate picture of what children know and can do (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2000; National Association for the Education of Young Children & National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2003; Neisworth & Bagnato, 1996). Additionally, the psychometric properties of many standardized assessments for young children have been criticized for having inadequate norming populations, low validity, and low reliability (Bordignon & Lam, 2004; Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2000). The nature of young children also contributes to possible measurement error in formal assessment because children develop at a rapid pace and are easily distractible and highly sensitive to unknown administrators or unfamiliar environment (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2000).

Summary

The previous discussion of the history of early childhood programs has highlighted a number of themes that continue to be relevant for early childhood programs today. The early childhood system is a fragmented amalgam of diverse settings, including child care, Head Start, and publicly funded school-based programs. Each of these silos has different funding streams and governance, leading to challenges for accountability. Early childhood programs are based on a large number of theories about how children develop and learn. Although these theories have evolved over time, they are still all in evidence in current early childhood programs. The notion of school readiness has increased in importance throughout the history of early childhood programs. Although there appears to be different approaches, there is no one universal definition of school readiness. The way in which school readiness is defined, particularly in terms of standards, has implications for early childhood curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Because of these different theories and approaches, as well as the different funding structures, early childhood programs vary vastly in quality. QRIS attempt to address this issue by providing universal classroom quality standards and assistance to programs for improvement. These issues of funding, instruction, assessment, and school readiness are highlighted by the current emphasis on SBR and accountability in K-12. As will be seen in the following section, SBR and accountability is now affecting early childhood programs as well, drawing attention to these
issues. There is indication that early childhood programs are continuing to evolve as a result, but little is known about exactly how this evolution is occurring or what it means for programs, classrooms, and students.

**Standards-Based Reform in K-12 and Early Childhood**

SBR can be thought of as a constellation of policies intended to improve the quality of teaching and educational systems. These policies include development and implementation of standards, aligning research-based curriculum with the standards, and using assessments aligned with standards to determine the extent of student achievement (Fuhrman, 2004). SBR in K-12 and early childhood originally began as primarily a state-driven effort but, has evolved into policies associated with the federal government.

The idea for SBR as it is conceptualized today was initiated in the 1980s during a time of government retrenchment, deepening societal problems, and increased scrutiny of public education (Zigler & Styfco, 1996). In 1983, the report *A Nation at Risk* was released, which described the national public schools as mediocre and questioned students’ ability to compete in an increasingly global world (Roskos & Vukelich, 2006). The report ushered in an era of increased federal and state attention toward school reform (McDonnell, 2005a). Challenging standards were proposed to improve schools by increasing clarity regarding what teachers were expected to teach and what students were expected to learn (Jennings, 1998).

SBR began as a state-driven effort not associated with a formalized national reform agenda (McDonnell, 2005b). In 1989, President George H. W. Bush convened state governors at an Education Summit in Virginia to establish six National Education Goals (Meisels, 1999; Roskos & Vukelich, 2006). These goals were diverse in nature and demonstrated a federal and state agreement on education goals, which provided a framework for school reform in the states (Vinovskis, 1996). The first of these goals was “By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn” (Shepard et al., 1998, p. 1), while the remainder of the goals focused on student achievement in K-12.

*A Nation at Risk* and the resulting focus on improving schools and student achievement through the use of standards had a profound influence on K-12 public education that filtered down to the curriculum in the early years. Kindergarten teachers were feeling pressure from early elementary teachers to send children to their classes with increased levels of skills, meaning “…the expectations and even the curricular materials of the later grades began to infiltrate kindergartens” (Meisels, 1999, p. 40; Shepard, 1997). There were a number of unintended
consequences that resulted from this push for school readiness, including redshirting or the practice of holding children deemed not ready back a year; instituting an additional year of “developmental” kindergarten; and increased kindergarten retention rates (Meisels, 1999; Shepard, 1997; Smith & Shepard, 1988).

As the state SBR movement evolved, it became clear that to achieve the goals outlined in the Education Summit, significant reform that addressed the entire school system was needed (Vinovskis, 1996). As a result, the concept of systemic reform was proposed as a way to fundamentally change the structure of schools resulting in more engaged and professional staff and more coherent policies and instruction (Smith & O'Day, 1991). Systemic reform as proposed by Smith and O’Day (1991) consisted of a commitment to goals focused on students, developing a “coherent system of instructional guidance,” and clear and congruent policies at all levels of the system (p. 247).

Smith and O'Day (1991) suggested that the components of an instructional guidance system include rigorous content standards, local control over choosing curriculum aligned with standards, and in-service and pre-service professional development linked to standards that fosters good instruction. Challenging assessments aligned with standards were also proposed as a key aspect of systemic reform, providing both information for school improvement and stimulation for effective instruction through accountability (Smith & O'Day, 1991). In this view, the school was proposed as the primary unit of change, and the state would provide leadership (Vinovskis, 1996). Systemic reform also relied on restructuring educational systems by increased local control and flexibility combined, with strong state leadership and incentives to motivate reform (Smith & O'Day, 1991; Vinovskis, 1996).

This concept of systemic reform became known as SBR, and in the 1990s the federal role in SBR increased (McDonnell, 2005b; Superfine, 2005). Goals 2000 and the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) expanded the role of the federal government in education by providing both the framework and the motivation for SBR (McDonnell, 2005b; Superfine, 2005). To receive Title I funds, states and schools were expected to develop standards, assessments, and accountability systems. However, the implementation of these policies was fraught with difficulties in terms of both interpretation and execution at the local level, and they lost the support of policymakers (McDonnell, 2005b; Superfine, 2005).

In 2001, ESEA was reauthorized, resulting in the No Child Left Behind Act. Similar to Goals 2000 and the 1994 reauthorization of ESEA, the goal of NCLB is to provide incentives to implement SBR. However, NCLB includes a strong system of accountability to motivate reform,
attaching rewards and sanctions to school performance on tests, representing further federal control over education (McDonnell, 2005b; Superfine, 2005). Furthermore, NCLB seems to follow the principles outlined by Smith and O’Day (1991) regarding systemic reform by including professional development and technical assistance to schools (Wanker & Christie, 2005). Accountability adds to the SBR movement by incorporating a system of standards, testing aligned with standards, and rewards and sanctions to hold schools accountable for student achievement, leading some to call the current conception of school reform “standards-based accountability” (Haertel & Herman, 2005). Policymakers see assessments as a relatively inexpensive and easily implemented reform strategy, and one of the few ways that policymakers can directly influence classroom practice (Chapman & Snyder, 2000; Linn, 2005). Therefore, SBR provides the direction, while accountability provides motivation.

The elements of SBR and accountability have begun to spill over into publicly-funded early childhood programs (Roskos & Vukelich, 2006; Stipek, 2006). From 2003 to 2007, Head Start implemented the National Reporting System (NRS), with fairly negative results. This was a standardized test that was questioned for its utility and validity (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2004). Additional federal legislation during this time catapulted early childhood onto the national scene: Early Reading First, which was part of NCLB, and Good Start, Grow Smart. Early Reading First is a competitive grant program for early childhood programs intended to enhance the quality of early childhood programs and the language and literacy skills of young children (United States Department of Education, 2006). Good Start, Grow Smart initiatives include (1) strengthening Head Start by focusing on literacy skills and implementing a national assessment system; (2) partnering with states to institute early learning guidelines (standards) aligned with K-12 and encouraging early childhood program coordination; and (3) providing information to parents, teachers, and caregivers about the importance of early childhood and ways to enhance development and learning in the early years (The White House, n.d.). While incentives and sanctions do not currently affect early childhood, the basic premises of SBR are evident, including instituting standards, local level policy congruence, and demand for coherent curriculum and instruction.

While currently there is significant policy debate about the reauthorizing NCLB and proposed changes to the legislation, SBR elements are continuing to be seen in additional federal educational reform efforts. Race to the Top (RTT), a part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, focuses on education reform based on standards, assessments that both inform teacher decision making and demonstrate student outcomes, and developing effective
teachers. Similar to NCLB, the goals of RTT center on decreasing the achievement gap and creating quality schools, but unlike NCLB, RTT is a competitive grant program\(^2\). While RTT is focused on K-12 systems, there is also a portion of the funds dedicated to state-wide early childhood systems. Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) is also a competitive grant program focused on children at-risk that asks states to find ways to increase quality early education, design integrated early childhood education systems, and use assessments to demonstrate outcomes\(^3\). Early childhood teacher professional development and a quality rating system for early childhood programs are included in RTT-ELC. It is clear that SBR elements continue to be a driving force of state and federal educational reform efforts.

SBR, once primarily a state-driven effort, has evolved into a national reform movement directed by the federal government. NCLB has upped the stakes in SBR by adding rewards and sanctions linked to school-level test performance as a way to motivate reform activity. In addition, early childhood programs, traditionally outside the realm of state and federal government directives, are being increasingly affected by SBR pressures. Although there is a substantial literature base regarding the process of implementation and the effects of SBR and accountability in K-12, there is little understanding of how SBR is being implemented in early childhood programs. Furthermore, the effects of the current emphasis on SBR on early childhood programs and classrooms remain to be seen. The following section will discuss the theory behind SBR and what is known about how it is being enacted in both K-12 and in early childhood programs.

**Implementing Standards-Based Reform Efforts**

**Theories of Action**

Understanding SBR requires not only examining its stated effects, but also any unintended consequences. In addition, examining how SBR is implemented at the local level provides in-depth explanation for how and why these effects occur. One way to examine the effects and implementation of a policy such as SBR is to use the concept of theories of action. Using theories of action as a framework for examining policies and program implementation unlock the black box, describing program processes and providing a way of understanding how and why a program works or does not work. Theories of action also can help to illuminate both

\(^2\) [http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html](http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html)
\(^3\) [http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallenge/index.html](http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallenge/index.html)
intended and unintended consequences, explicitly articulate intermediate outcomes that are prerequisites for ultimate outcomes, and assist with program improvement (Bickman, 1987).

Originally focused on individuals, Argyris and colleagues (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985) proposed theories of action as a way to describe, monitor, and explain behaviors as they are situated within different contexts. Theories of action are the mental models, schemas, and paradigms that individuals have constructed from past experiences and interactions with their environment that provides a framework for understanding the environment and responding appropriately (Argyris et al., 1985). Theories of action are composed of a linked set of contextually-based causal propositions that describe actions and the resulting intended and unintended consequences (Argyris et al., 1985). There are two different kinds of theories: espoused theories and theories-in-use (Argyris et al., 1985). Espoused theories are what people say they will do in a particular situation, while theories-in-use are the cognitive frameworks that explain actual actions (Argyris et al., 1985).

While originally used to explain individual behaviors (Argyris et al., 1985), the concept of theories of action has evolved into an important tool for understanding, explaining, and evaluating programs and policies (Chen, 2004; Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Mark, 2003). Explicating a program’s theory of action describes the causal mechanisms at work in a program or policy, revealing what happens inside the black box between inputs and outcomes (Lipsey, 1993). Theories of action for programs and policies are composed of two different, although complementary theories: program theory and implementation theory (Weiss, 1998).

Program/Policy theory is a series of linked assumptions that describe actions, processes, and expected results of programs and policies (Chen, 2004), essentially outlining “how a program is supposed to work” (Bickman, 1987, p. 5). Implementation theory describes how the program/policy is meant to be implemented, focusing on the specific actions taken by program/policy staff (Chen, 1990; Weiss, 1998).

**Theory of Action: Standards-Based Reform**

The current theory of SBR evolved from the notion of systemic reform that originally included three main components: a) rigorous academic standards that captured what children should know and do; b) coherent alignment of standards, curriculum, instructional methods, teacher certification, professional development, and assessment; and c) increased local control and flexibility for teachers and schools (O'Day & Smith, 1993; Smith & O'Day, 1991). Over time, accountability systems in terms of measuring outcomes and applying incentives based on performance became linked with the notion of SBR, providing the motivation for states and
schools to engage in reform (Superfine, 2005). In this new era of SBR, accountability systems have taken a prominent role for measuring and stimulating change (Haertel & Herman, 2005). Accountability systems focus on schools with student outcomes as the primary measure of interest, where scores are reported to the public and incentives are attached to performance levels (Fuhrman, 2004; O'Day, 2004).

The linking of SBR with accountability represents a “tight-loose” coupling, where expectations and outcomes are clear and tightly controlled, but there is local control over the process in which districts, schools, and teachers reach the expected levels of performance (Clune, 1993; Smith & O'Day, 1991). In this way, policy makers have struck a balance between the strong United States tradition of local control over schools and the perceived need for widespread and systemic school reform (Superfine, 2005).

The current theory of action for SBR in K-12 was summarized in Chapter 1 and is illustrated in more detail in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Theory of action of standards-based reform in K-12.

The key components of SBR are the shaded boxes, including state standards aligned with curriculum, professional development, and tests at the local level. The mechanisms by which change is expected to occur are primarily through capacity building which is motivated by rewards and sanctions. School district policies address professional development, curriculum, and assessments and are intended to develop teacher capacity, which will result in student learning.
The program administrators, usually consisting of a director and perhaps a coordinator, are responsible for most, if not all, of the policies. In addition, the motivation for early childhood programs to engage in SBR comes from the desire to maintain and increase public funding, not from specific rewards and sanctions attached to performance. This revised version of SBR in early childhood is shown in Figure 3.

![Figure 3. Theory of action of standards-based reform in early childhood programs.](image)
The key components of SBR are the shaded boxes, including rigorous state standards aligned with curriculum, professional development, and tests at the local level. Program policies are guided and informed by standards, focused on the goal of school readiness, and motivated by funding.

**Components of Standards-Based Reform in Early Childhood Programs**

The theory of action of SBR relies on a constellation of components and assumptions which together are intended to create a more coherent instructional guidance system at the local level. The most important of these components is the standards, which are intended to drive alignment of local polices regarding professional development, curriculum selection, and the development of an assessment system. A description of the components and the assumptions of SBR in early childhood is provided below.
Standards. The driving force behind SBR is the standards themselves. Ideally, standards are meant to be challenging, rigorous, and speak to not only what is taught, but to some extent how it is taught (Smith & O'Day, 1991). By developing standards and a coherent comprehensive instructional guidance system based on standards, the intent is to focus schools on the primary goal of student achievement (Fuhrman, 2004; O'Day, 2004), and that by motivating schools to focus on this goal, change will occur. In other words, standards represent the ultimate outcome of schooling and should clearly lay out expectations for what children should know and be able to do.

Although most states have published early childhood standards, this is a relatively new (1999 or after) occurrence (Scott-Little et al., 2006). Currently, all but two states have Early Learning Standards, which has increased from less than 16 in 2001 (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2011). Standards in early childhood have the potential to provide a framework for reform efforts and for integrating diverse early childhood systems, but there are fears in the field that they could also lead to a focus on cognitive skills, a lack of attention to individual developmental differences, and fragmented instructional content (Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004; Neuman & Roskos, 2005a). The development of state standards in early childhood has been a collaborative process that has led to a variety of standards varying in depth and breadth (Brown, 2007; Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004; Scott-Little et al., 2006). This variety derives from state context and stakeholders involved in the process (Scott-Little et al., 2006). In a nationwide content analysis of state early childhood standards, (Scott-Little et al., 2006) found that cognitive domains, particularly literacy, tended to predominate while there was a lack of attention to social-emotional development. While there is some understanding of the content of standards and the process of development, there is little known about potential effects of these standards on early childhood programs and classrooms (Brown, 2007; Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004; Scott-Little et al., 2006).

In Minnesota, the early childhood standards are called the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs) and were developed and reviewed by a large number of stakeholders representing a diverse array of early childhood programs, including the Minnesota Department of Education—Early Learning Services, coordinators of school-based early childhood programs, Head Start providers, and child care providers (Minnesota Department of Education, 2005b). The ECIPs framework includes six domains: social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language and literacy development, creativity and the arts, cognitive development, and physical and motor development. In addition to statements about what children should know and
be able to do, the ECIPs take an ecological approach to supporting children’s development, outlining how families, teachers, community members, and policymakers can promote development (Minnesota Department of Education, 2005b). The ECIPs have been aligned with Minnesota’s kindergarten learning standards (Minnesota Department of Education, 2005a).

**Curriculum.** The intent of SBR is for standards to drive curriculum choices and development at the local level, and it is expected that school districts will align curriculum with standards (Smith & O'Day, 1991). In early childhood, developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) traditionally has been used to guide instructional practice. It not a curriculum, but rather a guide for implementing instruction and curriculum that focuses on how children learn based on a solid research foundation (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992). Curriculum in early childhood programs is meant to be integrated and focused on the whole child, consisting of themes that ideally come from the children’s interests and have meaning to children (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Copple and Bredekamp 2009). Teachers then attempt to link activities in the themes with specific learning goals for children. The result can be a disjointed, unintentional program centered on themes such as “teddy bears” or a highly intentional, active, coordinated classroom centered on projects that children initiate and teachers support.

In the past few years, formal curricula have been increasingly incorporated into early childhood programs. This is a direct influence of increased accountability and policy initiatives such as Early Reading First and Good Start Grow Smart, which have mandated the use research-based curriculum in federally funded early childhood programs (Roskos & Vukelich, 2006). This has led to the proliferation of early childhood curricula (e.g., Doors to Discovery, Wright Group, McGraw-Hill, 2001) and a focus on cognitive skills, particularly literacy. The use of a “boxed” research-based curriculum is expected the increase the quality of classroom environments as well as enhance children’s outcomes, and there is evidence that, when implemented with fidelity, some curricula are successful in achieving these outcomes (Fischel, Bracken, Fuchs-Eisenberg, Spira, Katz, & Shaller, 2007; Preschool Curriculum Evaluation Research Consortium 2008). This increased use of curriculum models and implementing a curriculum with fidelity is quite new to teachers and presents challenges. The challenges for early childhood programs include ensuring integrated content, aligning standards with curriculum and pedagogy, and balancing systematic, intentional teaching of curriculum content with child-initiated activities (Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004). There may also be resistance by program administrators or teachers to using a prescribed curriculum because of its perceived inconsistency.
with developmentally appropriate practice (Snow & Paez, 2004; Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, & Milburn, 1995).

**Professional Development.** In SBR, professional development, or teacher learning, refers to both pre-service and in-service education. Despite the general consensus that teacher education level is important for quality educational practices, there is contradictory evidence about the relationship between pre-service education levels and teacher quality in early childhood (Early et al., 2007). However, in-service professional development is one of the most important elements of SBR because teacher learning represents one of the main mechanisms through which teachers are meant to change (Corcoran & Goertz, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Fullan, 2001; Smith & O'Day, 1991). This study focused primarily on in-service professional development.

Professional development can be one-time events or ongoing instruction, general or specific, and face-to-face or online. It can take the form of mentoring, coaching, supervision, staff development meetings, college coursework, or professional learning communities, among other formats. However, it has been argued that professional development that is focused on content and pedagogy; provides continuous, ongoing support and intensive training on key issues; and is linked to assessment, curriculum, and standards is needed to support teachers as they implement reform (Corcoran & Goertz, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Fullan, 2001; Harvard Family Research Project, 2005/2006; Katz, Sutherland, & Earl, 2005). In a longitudinal study of how California’s state educational reform initiative, Cohen and Hill (2001) found that improved teaching and learning depended on the types of learning opportunities offered to teachers. Professional development, or learning opportunities, that were intensive, linked to student performance, and grounded in the curriculum facilitated teaching practices that were congruent with the intent of state reform (Cohen & Hill, 2001).

There is little known about the extent to which professional development is used in early childhood and the quality of professional development for early childhood teachers. Similarly, there is still much to be learned about effective professional development in early childhood. However, it is acknowledged that professional development is needed to implement SBR in early childhood, particularly in terms of observing young children, sequencing instruction, and using data and assessment to inform instruction (Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004).

**Assessment.** In K-12, testing and assessment has become the centerpiece of SBR, theoretically providing both motivation and information for reform. Data from large-scale testing are expected to be used for a variety of purposes, including state and federal accountability, school improvement, and classroom instruction (Fuhrman, 2004; Linn, 2005). Districts and
schools are expected to use data to make decisions about professional development and resource allocations, among other areas of school improvement, and the results of assessments are also used for accountability purposes (Linn, 2005). For the data on these tests to be useful, they need to be valid, reliable, and aligned with standards (Linn, 2005; Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002). There also needs to be support available for effectively using data for school improvement, both at a school level and individual classroom level (Mintrop, 2004; O'Day, 2004). In addition, some suggest that large-scale assessment systems must be accompanied by ongoing assessment and progress monitoring systems to meaningfully inform instruction at the classroom level (Yeh, 2006).

In early childhood, assessment is playing a growing role in programs and is an important component of SBR. As discussed in the prior section, assessment in early childhood is difficult for a number of reasons, but primarily because of the lack of comprehensive assessment tools aligned with standards (Snow, 2006). In addition, there are debates about the appropriateness of assessing young children and when and how to assess young children, particularly in terms of standardized tests (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2000; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004; Shepard, 1997; Shepard et al., 1998).

As a result, early childhood programs are struggling with finding tools that accurately measure program child performance outcomes as well as provide data to inform instructional decisions in the form of individual progress monitoring (McConnell et al., 2002; Snow, 2006). Early childhood teachers have generally relied on informal observational methods to inform instruction and scaffold learning (Bredekamp & Rosegrant 1992). These assessments tend to be criterion-referenced measures that may be aligned with the curriculum, but may not have high technical reliability or validity (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Shepard et al., 1998). The Work Sampling System (WSS; Dichtelmiller et al., 2001) represents a systematic way in which teachers can assess young children to inform instruction. It has been suggested that this critical skills mastery approach may have limited use in monitoring change and progress over time toward outcomes, limiting its usefulness in the classroom (McConnell, 2000; McConnell et al., 2002). This has led to increased calls for standardized progress monitoring tools that are linked to general outcome measures (McConnell et al., 1998), where skills in a particular domain are monitored frequently over time to determine the growth trajectory toward a larger long-term goal (McConnell et al., 2002). The Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDIs; Missall & McConnell, 2004) are one example of this type of assessment.
Early childhood programs and teachers may not know how to choose a quality assessment or how to use the resulting data for program improvement or classroom instruction. Although at this point assessment and external reporting of early childhood outcomes is not widespread throughout the early childhood field, there are indications that this will become more important, particularly as Race to the Top funding and quality rating systems that include early childhood student comes become more prevalent. Therefore, assessment is an ongoing challenge for early childhood programs.

**Incentives, Sanctions, and Motivation.** In K-12, SBR includes strong accountability systems where rewards and sanctions are linked to student performance on large-scale assessments. Public reporting of results on a school-by-school basis and rewards and sanctions linked to student performance are intended to provide the motivation for local school reform (Fuhrman, 2004). Sanctions and incentives act as policy levers to motivate all aspects of the system to focus on the goal of improving student achievement (Haertel & Herman, 2005). Teachers and schools are motivated to improve teaching because test scores are made public and rewards and sanctions are attached to performance (Chapman & Snyder, 2000; Mintrop, 2004).

In early childhood, these rewards and sanctions are not fully in place, although there is still pressure to reform. Early childhood programs are funded primarily through discretionary funds and are currently not mandated in most states. QRIS rate early childhood programs based on their quality, and programs with higher ratings are often eligible for more funding. QRIS focus on improving classroom quality so assessments tend to evaluate the classroom environment. While child outcomes are a factor in QRIS, it is not the focus. However, maintaining or increasing funding for programs is beginning to be linked to ability to demonstrate outcomes. Hence, programs increasingly need to assess children and report outcomes at a district, state, or federal level. Some in the field have raised concerns that if an accountability system similar to K-12 was implemented in early childhood, it could lead to raising the age of kindergarten entrance, higher kindergarten retention rates, more “readiness testing” and perhaps inappropriate instructional practices (Stipek, 2006).

**Effects of Standards-Based Reform in Early Childhood Programs and K-12**

These components discussed above are meant to work to create a coherent guidance system that is implemented at the local level (Smith & O'Day, 1991). When working as intended, it is expected that local programs will choose to implement curriculum aligned with standards, use assessments to guide instruction and program improvement, and offer quality professional development that is aligned with standards and curriculum and informed by assessment. One of
the intermediate goals of SBR is local level school improvement, which is comprised of local organizational structures, policies, and culture and local capacity for implementation (Corcoran & Goertz, 1995; Smith & O'Day, 1991). It has been argued that schools and teachers need effective and ongoing professional development, enhanced collaboration and communication, leadership, clear goals and vision, a collective belief system supportive of the vision, and an ongoing formative assessment system in place that complements the external outcome assessment system to have effective, comprehensive school improvement (Spillane & Louis, 2002).

As schools improve and develop the necessary structure and culture, it is expected that teachers within these programs will increase their capacity to teach effectively, essentially changing their knowledge and skills regarding effective instructional practices, understanding of content to be taught, and use of assessment data. The increased capacity of programs that provides guidance and structure for teachers to increase their own teaching capacity will result in more effective instruction and higher student achievement.

Investigations into the effects of SBR on early childhood programs are limited, but there is some information about the effects of implementing curriculum and systematic assessment on classroom practice. Ryan (2004) used qualitative methods to describe the extent to which teachers implemented a new curriculum model and found that the teachers tended to maintain their traditional teaching style while incorporating parts of the new curriculum. She concluded that teachers’ prior beliefs and experiences about teaching and learning influenced how teachers enacted the curriculum and that intensive professional development was needed to support changes in teaching practice (Ryan, 2004). Kowalski et al. (2005) examined the effects of adopting a state-wide assessment system on early childhood teacher beliefs using a survey design. Results indicated that teachers who used the assessment system thought the skills and behaviors it assessed were more important than other skills. In a pre-post design comparing teachers using the assessment to those not using the assessment, teachers implementing the assessment rated skills assessed by the assessment as more important on the post-test survey. In addition, teachers who used the IGDIs in their classroom to assess literacy skills reported that using IGDIs influenced their instructional practice in terms of enhancing progress monitoring, identifying children in need of additional support, and implementing and evaluating specific interventions (Phaneuf & Silberglitt, 2003). In a case study of a program implementing both large-scale early childhood outcome assessment and on-going classroom assessments, Kallemeyn and DeStefano (2007) found that, to some extent, the assessments created conversations about child outcomes, provided
accountability to various governing bodies, and contributed to decision making within the program and classroom.

Although there is little known about how SBR is affecting early childhood programs, studies of the effects of SBR on K-12 provide some clues regarding how early childhood programs might be affected by SBR. It appears that SBR has had some positive effects in terms of making school policies and strategies more aligned, changing school structures, and creating a more intentional focus on goals (Supovitz & Taylor, 2005). The use of high-stakes testing and assessment systems is associated with some positive effects, including better and more focused instruction (Yeh, 2005) and using data to differentiate instruction and inform professional development (Bruner et al., 2005). Assessment systems have also been associated with negative effects, such as focusing on so-called “bubble kids,” those students who are close to passing achievement tests, rather than on the students most at-risk, in order to improve school passing rates on standardized tests and avoid sanctions (Booher-Jennings, 2005). A common assertion regarding tests is that tests result in narrowing of the curriculum, emphasis on drill and fact-based learning, reduced teacher professionalism, and more time teaching test-taking strategies (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Settlage & Meadows, 2002). However, it appears that standards, stakes, content, and type of test (standardized or performance) all play mediating roles in the effect assessment has on classroom instruction (Mehrens, 1998).

In terms of student achievement, there is mixed evidence regarding the impact of SBR. In an analysis of state differences in National Assessment of Educational Progress tests, Hanushek and Raymond (2005) found that accountability has resulted in modest student achievement and no significant increase in special education placement, but the achievement gap appears to widen. Others have found SBR is associated with little effect on student achievement, but this may be due to a lack of power in the study design (Mintrop, 2004; Supovitz & Taylor, 2005). There is also some qualitative evidence that SBR, particularly assessments and accountability, is associated with an increase in special education referrals (Booher-Jennings, 2005).

In the literature regarding SBR in K-12, professional development and teacher learning emerge as important mediating factors in successfully implementing reform (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Mintrop, 2004; Pomplun, 1997). Although standards, curriculum, and assessment may be aligned, this still may not lead to substantive changes in instruction (Firestone et al., 1999; Firestone, Mayrowetz, & Fairman, 1998; Mehrens, 1998). Teachers may make superficial changes in their instruction as a result of reforms (i.e., teaching procedures, content, and organization), but without opportunities for professional development and teacher learning, more
sweeping or deeper changes in instruction may fail to occur (Firestone et al., 1999; Firestone et al., 1998).

Overall, it appears that SBR reform has had mixed success in meeting the goals of reforming K-12 and producing increased student achievement. One possible reason for this is variation in implementation of the reform at the local level. There is little information about how early childhood programs are implementing SBR.

**Implementation Processes**

There are a number of different theories that examine the process of implementation. Duke (2004) suggests a number of different perspectives for explaining implementation, or change, including: (a) historical, focusing on larger contextual, social, cultural, and temporal considerations (i.e., McDermott, 2007); (b) psychological, focusing on individual beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (i.e., Cohen, 1991); (c) social psychological, focusing on how informal and formal groups influence individuals (i.e., Coburn, 2001); and (d) organizational, or how organizational structure and culture contributes to change (i.e., Ingram, Louis, & Schroeder, 2004). In addition, Duke (2004) describes a variety of experiences that tend to occur during the implementation process, including feelings of accomplishment when implementation succeeds, disappointment and disillusionment when it is frustrating, and ambiguity or tension about the expectations. Implementation often includes elements of surprise and unexpected outcomes, as well as staff frustrations around lack of time or lack of leadership (Duke, 2004).

The tight-loose structure of SBR allows for local interpretation and response to the reform. It also means that local implementation is an essential mediating variable. A key part of implementation of a policy is understanding the intent of the policy. There is an underlying assumption that teachers and schools understand the goals of the policy and are acting in ways that lead to only positive consequences and improvement (Laitsch, 2006; Spillane, 2004). Policymakers may assume that the intent of the policy is clear and that implementation failure is a result of intentional interpretation to fit individuals’ agendas (Spillane et al., 2002). However, there is evidence that administrators and teachers are trying to implement the policies faithfully (Firestone et al., 1999; Hill, 2001).

Implementation is very similar to the constructivist way of learning in that it is an active attempt to bring existing knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes in line with new knowledge and expectations in order to make meaning of the new knowledge (Hashweh, 2003; Weick, 1995). Enactment and implementation of policies is therefore shaped by the meanings constructed by
administrators and teachers, both individually and collectively. The concept of individual educator knowledge and beliefs is a critical element of implementation. The beliefs and knowledge teachers hold about teaching and learning are essentially implicit assumptions about content areas, teaching, learning, and students that are influenced by education and experiences (Fang, 1996; Kagan, 1992). There are many different types of educational knowledge, including content knowledge, or the knowledge of a particular subject; pedagogical knowledge, or teaching methods; curricular knowledge, or understanding a range of curricula pertinent to the content; and practical knowledge, a range of instructional and classroom management methods derived from experiences (Beattie, 1995; Fang, 1996). As teachers incorporate different kinds of knowledge, including experiences, they develop a values and belief system that is dynamic, both informed by and informing practice (Beattie, 1995).

A number of studies have examined accountability policies, particularly in terms of testing, from an implementation standpoint. Using an intensity sampling of case studies of schools, Louis and colleagues (2005) interviewed teachers about curriculum, instruction, and assessment, as well as school culture, resources, and perspectives on accountability. They examined the ways in which power relations and school structure and culture influence how schools adapt to accountability, and concluded that although schools differed in their support for teacher learning, “collegial conversations” were important and changes in teaching was related to how teachers collectively interpreted policies (Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005, p. 198).

One important aspect of SBR is using data for school and classroom improvement. The interpretation of what is meant by using data to inform decisions can vary widely and can impact implementation efforts. For example, teachers and administrators in Texas limited data use to standardized test scores where the priority was placed on helping “bubble kids” or those students close to obtaining a passing score (Booher-Jennings, 2005). Through interviews and focus groups in high schools using a continuous improvement model, Ingram et al. (2004) explored how teachers used data to make a variety of decisions and found that teachers may hold beliefs about test data that make them skeptical or dismissive of the data and therefore they may be less likely to use it. To effectively engage individuals (and therefore organizations) in using data requires understanding prior beliefs and preconceptions about data, developing new understandings within a conceptual framework about data use, and having a way to reflect on new understandings (Katz et al., 2005). Katz et al. (2005) used the context of a professional development initiative aimed at increasing individual knowledge about data use to test these concepts and found that it is possible to obtain a “gestalt shift” in how teachers make meaning of data through professional
development. One significant finding was how a teacher changed from seeing data as one additional responsibility to seeing data as an integral aspect of her work (Katz et al., 2005).

In addition, the organizational context in which teachers work provides another layer through which implementation occurs. The way in which administrators interpret policies can affect how the policy is framed and the subsequent interpretation by teachers (Louis et al., 2005; Spillane, 2004; Spillane, Diamond et al., 2002). For example, Booher-Jennings (2005) found that administrators in one Texas school district came to understand the concept of data-driven decision making as the “right” way to achieve reform and interpreted this to mean using data to identify children close to passing and focusing resources on them. This was subsequently filtered down to teachers, who came to understand that using data to inform instruction also meant focusing instructional time on these “bubble kids.”

**Conclusion**

This review of the literature presented the history and current context of early childhood programs and SBR policy, along with perspectives on policy implementation. SBR is a part of the current landscape of education, and is aimed at improving classroom practice and student achievement. Initially focused on K-12, it has now come to early childhood programs. Good Start, Grow Smart and No Child Left Behind, along with the more recent Race to the Top grants, have catapulted the notion of school readiness and early childhood program accountability to the forefront of education policy. The predominance of testing, implementation of research-based curriculum, and alignment of practice to standards are all significant developments in early childhood programs. Although it is clear that SBR has arrived in early childhood programs, little is known about how early childhood programs are implementing SBR or the potential challenges and successes associated with the implementation process.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This research study describes how early childhood program staff implement standards-based reform (SBR). In recent years, SBR has affected K-12 education in a variety of ways, leading to positive reform and, at times, unintended negative consequences. Because SBR relies on program staff to implement a constellation of policy initiatives, one way to explain its various impacts is to examine implementation processes. The intent of this study was to explore how early childhood programs implement SBR components, including discussing the supports they put in place, the challenges they face, and the potential outcomes of implementation.

The concepts and policies associated with SBR have come to early childhood programs relatively recently. As a result, there is little research about how programs and teachers implement the components of SBR, the types of processes and supports used during implementation, or the range of effects. A primary goal of the study was to present a “thick description” of reform efforts and provide a preliminary understanding of how programs and teachers are responding. The theory of action of SBR, as described in Chapter 2, provides a theoretical framework for describing the mechanisms and components of the policy, along with potential outcomes.

The gap in the literature regarding the effects of SBR on early childhood programs leads to the following questions: If SBR relies on local control and local interpretation to allow flexibility in response, then how are early childhood programs responding? How do early childhood program staff understand and interpret the new policy environment, and how are programs adapting? To explore these areas of inquiry, the following research questions were used:

1. In what ways have early childhood program staff implemented standards-based reform? What are examples of different components of standards-based reform in early childhood, and how do they interact?
2. What factors are serving as motivation for early childhood program staff to implement standards-based reform?
3. How have early childhood program staff adapted to standards-based reform implemented in their programs?
   a. What challenges have programs encountered as they implement standards-based reform?
b. What role did existing program culture play in the implementation process?
c. What types of support did programs give staff during the implementation process?
d. What are some potential outcomes of implementing standards-based reform in early childhood programs?

**Research Design**

This study was framed as an exploratory and descriptive study to provide preliminary information about how SBR is affecting early childhood programs. A cross-program comparison, similar to a school-level analysis, was used to compare programs and develop themes both within and between programs. The selection of programs as the primary unit of analysis makes sense because the target of SBR is school change (O’Day, 2004). Although programs were the primary focus, implementation occurs through individuals, so program staff, including administrators, professional development trainers, and teachers, also significantly informed the analysis.

The research questions outlined above are primarily process questions intended to reveal the complexity of SBR as it is implemented in early childhood programs. In addition, the questions focus on how individuals interpret policy and create meaning as individuals and as a collective group. These questions are ideally suited to qualitative methods. Qualitative methods provide a description of a phenomenon in detail, looking at it in context and as a whole (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research is fundamentally naturalistic (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 2002), meaning “…qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2).

An exploratory, interpretive case study design was chosen for this study. Case studies are an ideal research methodology for exploring questions of “how” or “why” (Yin, 2003). These types of questions are tools to understand the process by which a phenomenon occurs within a particular context. Case studies are useful when there is a lack of prior research available on a particular subject of investigation or when the goal is to examine theoretical assumptions (Merriam, 1998). In addition, understanding and explaining processes of implementation are particularly suited to investigation using case studies (Yin, 2003). Merriam suggests case studies are used

…to gain an in depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in

The research questions identified previously are aligned with this purpose.

The primary unit of analysis for this study is school-based early childhood programs in Minnesota during the time frame of November 2007 to January 2008. This study is conceptualized as a comparative, holistic case study, where the “global nature of an organization or program” is examined (Yin, 2003, p. 43). Because of the holistic nature of the cases, a review of the context in which the program is situated, including providing an overview of the program and the community in which it is located and describing the program goals and philosophy, was necessary.

This study was also conceptualized as a multiple or comparative case study design. A cross-case analysis allowed for preliminary conclusions regarding how the theory of action of SBR was working in early childhood programs. Therefore, the study was exploratory in nature. Programs were chosen based on “intensity sampling” (Mertens, 1998) or because they were relatively stable and substantially implementing SBR. Data sources included interviews and document analysis at the program level and classroom level.

**Selection of Cases**

Since this is an examination of SBR in early childhood programs, it was necessary to find program sites that were in the process of implementing the components of SBR, including formal curricula, assessments, and professional development. It was also important to choose program cases with similar characteristics because the field of early childhood education is diverse. I wanted to ensure that there was enough similarity among the cases that any differences would become evident. The following criteria were used to select cases for this study.

First, the sites needed to be located in Minnesota. Because standards are decided at a state level and leadership for SBR ultimately resides in the states, understanding of SBR is better informed if it is limited to one state. Therefore, the overarching state context will be identical, allowing more reliable comparisons between and among local responses.

Second, an important component of SBR is implementing a curriculum that is aligned with standards. Therefore, sites must be implementing some type of curriculum that has a particular scope and sequence, is fairly uniform, is expected to be followed by all staff, and is

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4 In this study, “school-based” refers to the organization providing administrative oversight and primary financial responsibility.
written down. As noted in Chapter 2, curricula for early childhood vary from flexible, teacher-created lesson plans, to a formal curriculum created by national developers and marketed to early childhood classrooms. Therefore, I included several published curricula in my criteria, such as the Doors to Discovery (Wright Group, McGraw-Hill, 2001), as well as program-developed curricula. However, there needed to be formal documentation that it existed for me to define it as a curriculum.

Third, SBR uses assessment for reporting outcomes as well as for information and program improvement, so it was necessary for sites to be using a formal (not teacher-created) assessment. I defined “formal assessment” as an assessment that was program-mandated, where all teachers were expected to use it. I included tools created by the program or district that were aligned with their K-12 assessments, as well as externally developed assessments such as the Work Sampling System (Dichtelmiller et al., 2001), Individual Growth and Development Indicators (Missall & McConnell, 2004), and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-IV (Dunn & Dunn, 2007). I also sought programs that had a system in place to report aggregated student outcomes to an external entity (district, state, or federal), which is an important element of accountability in SBR.

Fourth, because professional development is the primary vehicle through which implementation and teacher learning takes place, I selected programs with some type of regular professional development or supports offered by the program (e.g., professional learning communities, a “coach,” an ongoing professional development series coordinated by a consultant, and/or regular staff meetings).

Fifth, I sought programs that were considered strong or quality programs by their peers and/or the state. Programs were identified by talking with staff at the Minnesota Department of Education and Early Learning Services and with experts in the field. Early childhood programs vary in quality, both in structural terms such as adult-child ratios, teacher education level, and class size, and process quality, such as learning activities, teacher-child interactions, and children’s interactions (Institute, 2005). SBR relies on the capacity of local programs to implement reforms, and there is evidence that schools with higher initial capacity are able to change more quickly (Mintrop, 2004; O’Day, 2004). Choosing programs that were identified as high quality ensured there was a base for SBR activities to be implemented.

Sixth, for the purposes of this study, early childhood programs eligible for participation needed to receive a significant portion of their funds from public sources. Much of the pressure for implementing SBR comes as a result of the need to be accountable for spending public funds.
In addition, programs were school-based, meaning that primary fiscal and administrative oversight was located in a local school district. There are differences between school-based early childhood programs and community-based early childhood programs, particularly in terms of administration at the state and local level, staff characteristics (i.e., educational background), and resources. Selection for this factor allowed certain variables to be similar across cases and ensured the larger context in which the cases were located (i.e., school districts) to be comparable.

Seventh, to ensure appropriate intensity in instruction, I included programs that met for at least three half-days per week for at least nine months. These programs also enrolled 3- to 5-year-olds because the goals and methods of teaching children younger than three are quite different from those for teaching older children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Additionally, this is the age range that is considered “prekindergarten,” where instruction tends to focus on school readiness, an important outcome for early childhood programs.

The process of identifying cases began soon after the research proposal was approved in June 2007. After discussions with Minnesota Department of Education personnel familiar with school-based early childhood programs, a number of possible programs became evident. I wanted to have a sample set of cases that were representative of school-based programs across the state and therefore chose a program located in greater Minnesota, a program located in a suburb of the Metro Area, and a large urban program. It was also important to include programs in different stages of SBR implementation and with different amounts of funding earmarked for SBR implementation. I then contacted the administrators of these programs and asked if they were willing to participate in the study. The administrators agreed, and I then applied and obtained permission to conduct the study with the school districts’ superintendents.

The final cases selected for inclusion in this study represented programs in different communities with different funding streams for SBR and in different stages of SBR implementation. The first case was a suburban school district located outside of the Twin Cities Metro area (River Valley), which had limited funds, but a long history of implementing a variation of SBR. The second case (Urban Central) was a large metropolitan school district and included two sub-cases within the program that had different funding streams and were in different stages of moving toward the same version of SBR. The third case study was an early childhood program in a school district in greater Minnesota (Lake District), which was in the beginning stages of implementing a specific type of SBR with a large infusion of federal funding.
All names of school districts, teachers, staff, and administrators have been eliminated or changed to maintain confidentiality.

**Selection of Interview Participants**

Once the cases were identified and school district approval obtained, I began to select interview participants. I spoke with administrators in each program to describe the purpose of the study. I felt it was important to include program administrators, teachers, and any professional development trainers consistently involved with the program to gain a deep understanding of the program and the way in which SBR was implemented, as well as the motivations for SBR and the challenges and potential outcomes of implementation. In each program, I asked administrators to identify at least two teachers for participation, one with fewer than five years’ experience teaching and one with more than five years’ experience. Experience can be an important factor in how teachers respond to new reforms and can also impact personal teaching philosophies. As mentioned in Chapter 2, developmentally appropriate practice, the foundation of early childhood education, has gone through significant changes in the last 10 years, and it was likely that younger teachers with less experience were trained in the more current version of DAP as compared to their older, more experienced colleagues. All program staff interviewed had obtained at least a BA degree, and the majority also held a teaching license issued by the Minnesota Department of Education.

In River Valley, I interviewed the administrator and three teachers. River Valley did not have an ongoing professional development program or a consistent trainer to be interviewed. Urban Center had a comprehensive professional development program consisting of trainings, coaching, and classroom observations, so I interviewed two professional development trainers and a coach. Urban Center also had two programs in various stages of implementing the same SBR model, so I chose to interview an administrator and two teachers from each program. Finally, in Lake Area I interviewed two administrators, one of whom was the overall administrator for the program and one of whom was responsible for coordinating the SBR model. In addition, I interviewed two teachers, the professional development trainer, and a coach. Lake Area was unique in that it had an outside evaluator hired as part of the SBR model, which was a requirement for federal funding. I included the external evaluator in my interviews because I felt they would provide an important perspective on implementation. It is important to note that the professional development trainer for Lake Area and Urban Center was the same. During my
interviews with this person, I asked about the general nature and content of the trainings, but then asked specifically about each program. A total of 19 people were interviewed for this study. Table 2 displays the characteristics of each of the interviewees by case, including their role, primary background, and experience.

Table 2. Interviewee Role, Background, and Experience by Case.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Experience</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>PE  EC</td>
<td>&lt;5 &gt;5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>River Valley</td>
<td>Admin 1.1</td>
<td>Program Administrator</td>
<td>X  X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher 1.2</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teacher 1.3</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher 1.4</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Center</td>
<td>Admin 2.1</td>
<td>School Readiness (SR) Coordinator</td>
<td>X  X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher 2.2</td>
<td>SR Teacher</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher 2.3</td>
<td>SR Teacher</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PD 2.4</td>
<td>Professional Development Trainer</td>
<td>X  X  X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>PD 2-3</td>
<td>Professional Development Trainer (same as Lake Area)</td>
<td>X  X  X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Admin 2.6</td>
<td>Early Kindergarten Project (EKP) Administrator</td>
<td>X  X  X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>PD 2.7</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teacher 2.8</td>
<td>EKP Teacher</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teacher 2.9</td>
<td>EKP Teacher</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lake Area</td>
<td>Admin 3.1</td>
<td>ERF Coordinator</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teacher 3.2</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teacher 3.3</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>X  X  X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>PD 3.4</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PD 2-3</td>
<td>Professional Development Trainer (same as Urban Center)</td>
<td>X  X  X</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Admin 3.5</td>
<td>Program Administrator</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluator 3.6</td>
<td>Evaluator</td>
<td>X  X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 PE=parent education, EC=early childhood education, Other=other background, generally K-12.  
2 <5= more than five years experience teaching; >5= less than five years experience teaching.
The documents reviewed for each program consisted primarily of assessment tools, curricula, and professional development materials. I also obtained examples of lesson plans and staff meeting notes.

**Data Collection**

I used three parallel interview protocols for interviewing participants. Interviews were semi-structured, flexibly worded, and open-ended, with no specific order, allowing for a free flow of information (Merriam, 1998). Program administrators, professional development trainers (if applicable), any other coaches or leaders in curriculum development, and teachers were included as potential interview participants. Interview questions focused on knowledge and understanding of SBR, perceived demands of SBR, resources and support needed and provided, and perceptions of implementation (Peterson, 1990). In terms of SBR, interview questions focused on how curriculum, professional development, assessment, and the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (i.e., the standards) were aligned and how staff perceived their effects on the program. Program context was also necessary for understanding how staff were interpreting SBR and was also addressed in the interviews. These questions were developed by reviewing the relevant literature. The full interview protocol can be found in Appendix A. Document review was also used to supplement and extend the interviews, allowing for triangulation (Yin, 2003). As noted above, documents reviewed included classroom curricula, professional development curricula, and assessment instruments.

The study description and interview protocols were submitted to the University of Minnesota’s Institutional Review Board and received exempt approval. I then began the process of piloting the questions with a selection of people representative of my three main categories: teachers, administrators, and professional development trainers. For each of the five pilots, I explained the purpose of my study and the purpose of piloting the questions and the role their answers would have in the study. I assured them that they would not be identified, and their answers would not be used as data. Rather, their answers would assist in fine-tuning the interview questions.

Interview protocols for administrators, teachers, and professional development consultants were piloted during October 2007. The first pilot was with an early childhood administrator in a western suburban Early Childhood Family Education program. The second pilot was with a professional development consultant who specialized in coaching teachers in
early literacy instruction. I also interviewed another Early Childhood Family Education administrator from greater Minnesota who had been involved in drafting the ECIPs. Finally, I piloted the interview questions with two early childhood teachers in a program that was implementing a version of SBR.

Overall, respondents reacted favorably to the questions and thought the study was interesting and needed. As a result of the piloting, I made a few slight changes to the interview protocols. I added a question regarding prior experiences in the early childhood field, as I felt the backgrounds of the interviewees provided important context. The protocols were initially designed to elicit answers indirectly regarding SBR and how administrators, teachers, and professional development consultants understood and adapted SBR in their programs. As a result of the first pilot, a question that directly asked about how they felt about SBR was included in subsequent protocols. The information gleaned from pilots also revealed that the K-12 context was an important element in school-based early childhood programs and should be addressed directly in subsequent interviews.

I conducted interviews for the three cases from November 2007 to January 2008. The administrators in each program provided me with contact information for the staff who were willing to participate. When I asked the administrators to contact teachers on my behalf, I specifically asked to interview at least one staff member with fewer than five years of experience and one with more than five years experience teaching. Administrators then provided me with contact information for the staff, and I contacted them directly to set up interviews. In all cases, the teachers, administrators, and professional development staff were willing to be interviewed and were given a consent information sheet. Because the Institutional Review Board deemed this study exempt, participants were not required to sign a consent form.

Virtually all of the interviews were conducted one-on-one and in person. One interview was conducted over the phone because the trainer was located on the East Coast and was not expected to visit Minnesota during the timeframe in which I was collecting data. All interviews were digitally recorded, and participants were asked for their permission to do so prior to turning on the recording device. I explained that neither their names nor the name of their school district would be used in my report and that the data would be kept as confidential as possible. Interviewees were also told they would have the opportunity to review the finished transcript and make any changes they thought necessary. Most of the interviews lasted approximately 45-90 minutes.
I personally transcribed 11 of the 19 interviews, while a professional service transcribed the remaining eight interviews. The transcriptions were verbatim, and I listened to the transcriptions to ensure they were correct. I sent each transcript to the participant for his or her review, and four participants responded with slight edits or clarifications. When I used quotations from the interviews in my findings, I made minor changes in syntax, grammar, and also removed the things we often say when we speak, such as “you know.” I believe this presents the participants in their best possible light while honoring the intent and meaning of their comments.

Analysis

I began analysis with over 200 single-spaced pages of transcribed interviews, which I uploaded into NVIVO, a data management program that assists in the analysis of qualitative data. NVIVO is useful for managing and coding a large quantity of data and allows data to be retrieved easily based on coding schemes. I also uploaded some documents to NVIVO, such as meeting notes, and these were included in the coding process. However, the majority of the documents reviewed, including curriculum, assessment, and training materials, were hard copies that could not be uploaded. These materials were organized in binders for each case and used to supplement the interviews during the coding and analysis process. I began coding data in May 2008, completed preliminary coding in June, and finalized coding in August, when I began writing the three cases.

Through the analysis and coding process, I developed a coding tree reflecting themes generated from the interviews. I began by using themes I expected to find, based on my research and interview questions, but through an iterative process, the coding tree changed and expanded. I let the interview data drive the process of organizing and developing the coding tree. I also kept a project journal throughout the analysis process that helped me organize my thoughts, define specific codes (or “nodes” as they are termed in NVIVO), and keep track of my progress.

Qualitative analysis requires both data management, or the way in which data are collected and stored, and data analysis, or the way in which data is “reduced,” displayed, and summarized (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Similarly, case study research requires meticulous notes, use of a protocol, and a transparent process of data collection and analysis (Yin, 2003). Analysis therefore consisted of developing and maintaining a chain of evidence that made the process of data collection transparent while also revealing the way in which data were analyzed. Analysis consisted of describing the data and constructing categories through the constant comparative...
method, looking for reoccurring themes (Merriam, 1998). Each case was analyzed individually, and findings were then compared across cases to define overarching themes.

**Limitations and Delimitations of Study**

There are a number of limitations to this research. First, this study investigated the ways in which SBR was implemented in early childhood programs. In this sense, the focus of the study was on the intermediate outcomes in the theory of action, not the ultimate outcome of student achievement. The main focus of the study was how early childhood administrators and teachers responded and adapted to SBR as they were situated within their larger program context. SBR was relatively new in early childhood, and it might have been too soon to expect significant changes in practice or in child outcomes. This study examined programs at one point rather than investigating programs over a longer timespan which limits the conclusions that can be drawn about the extent of program change.

Second, this study was limited to the perspectives of professionals currently employed in early childhood programs. Reviews of documents, interviews with administrators, and interviews with selected teachers in each program provided the main data for analysis. Selection of cases was limited to one state, with the primary focus for data collection placed on how administrators and program staff were responding to SBR. I did not examine student or parent responses to the reform.

Third, this study relied primarily on interviews with program staff, which means the quality of the data is contingent upon my own skills as an interviewer. I took care prior to beginning the interview to establish rapport with the participants, which was usually done using the common interest of early childhood education. My training and more than 16 years of experience working in classrooms teaching young children helped many staff to feel comfortable with me, and I believe this enhanced the richness of the data collected. In addition, my training in anthropological interview techniques during my undergraduate degree and my experiences during my graduate studies have honed my interviewing skills. On a less formal level, my experiences living and travelling throughout the world for almost two years gave me many opportunities to meet people, ask questions, and listen to stories. This innate sense of curiosity and an ability to ask the right questions and actively listen are critical skills for any interviewer. Nonetheless, it is important to be aware of potential subjectivity in the interviews.
This study also has one important delimitation. This study focused on school-based early childhood programs. The constellation of early childhood programs that exist in the state of Minnesota ranges dramatically and includes informal family, friend, and neighbor care; private in-home child care; and non-profit and for-profit childcare centers, in addition to school-based programs. Each of these settings has different rules, regulations, funding streams, philosophies, and staff characteristics. I purposely focused this research on school-based programs to maintain some semblance of consistency across the cases. This study focused on programs based in local school districts, with funding provided primarily by the state or local levy, and with ultimate administrative oversight provided by a superintendent and school board.

The focus of this study is to provide an in-depth description of the ways in which three different early childhood programs dealt with the demands of accountability and standards-based reform. The subsequent three chapters present case studies of three early childhood programs engaged in implementing standards-based reform. Chapter 4 presents the findings from the Lake Area case study, Chapter 5 presents the findings from the Urban Center case study, and Chapter 6 presents findings from the River Valley case study.
CHAPTER 4
LAKE AREA EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM

The Lake Area School District\(^5\) is located in a mid-size city near one of the Great Lakes. The district is primarily rural and covers an area of 337 square miles. During this study\(^6\), it served approximately 10,000 students in grades PreK-12. The district was primarily white, but had small percentages of American Indian (5%), Asian (2%), Black (6%), and Hispanic (1%) students. Only 1% of the student population was ELL, but 39% qualified for free and reduced price lunch. The primary goal for the school district, like many others, was to decrease the achievement gap. The mission of the district included goals such as high student achievement, creating a welcoming environment, and ensuring effective systems. The district’s long-range plan had six key elements guiding Lake Area’s strategic planning, including student achievement, or ensuring learning is engaging and addresses student needs; whole student development, or comprehensive programming; resource management, or technology and facilities; community engagement so Lake Area is seen as a community asset; staff learning and growing to develop quality professionals; and developing external partnerships to support the district.

Lake Area Early Childhood Program Context

The overall context of the Lake Area School district was characterized by budget challenges, declining enrollment, and old infrastructure. At the time of the research, the district was facing a $5 million deficit and declining enrollment. The district had a number of charter schools and magnet schools, and the area also had one private school that children could attend. However, declining enrollment in the school district was attributed to declining birth rates and fewer children overall, rather than a move toward private and charter schools. Declining enrollment meant that there was less per pupil funding from the state. These challenges meant fewer available resources in the district overall, and fewer resources the district could dedicate to early childhood programs. The administrator noted, “[The district] is looking at school closures and fixing [old buildings], and we have a lot of old, really rough buildings” (Admin 3.1). Despite the lack of resources in the district and the community, Lake District K-12 administration was very supportive of early childhood programs. Lake Area early childhood programs had a good relationship with the K-12 system and worked closely with the kindergarten teachers. Goals for

\(^5\) All names of school districts, teachers, staff, and administrators have been changed to maintain confidentiality.
\(^6\) Data from 2006-2007 school year.
the program centered on preparing children for kindergarten, developing a relationship with the community, and serving children in the greatest need.

The Lake Area Early Childhood program was composed of a number of different programs that served families and children in a variety of ways, including Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE), Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE), Head Start, School Readiness, and the Community Education PreK Preschool. The Lake Area early childhood program was unique in that Head Start, a federal program traditionally administered through community agencies, was administered through the school district. The administrator of early childhood programs in the district was primarily responsible for Head Start, ECFE, and School Readiness.

Head Start is a federally administered program that has been in existence since 1960. Head Start enrolls pre-kindergarten children who are low-income or have other challenges. It is a free program for those who qualify. Head Start is the focus of this case study. At the time of this research, the Lake Area Head Start program had recently received a very large, three-year federal Early Reading First (ERF) grant focused on providing intensive early literacy instruction to children at risk of school failure and was beginning the second year of ERF implementation. Components of ERF mirror Standards-Based Reform components and will be discussed in a later section.

**Relationship with K-12**

The Lake Area School District acknowledged an important role for early childhood programs. The relationship between K-12 and early childhood in the district was characterized as “good” by early childhood administrators. There was quite a bit of support for early childhood from the K-12 system and the superintendent. The district was beginning to talk about E-12 (meaning early childhood education through 12th grade) rather than K-12, demonstrating a shift in thinking about what education entails.

When I first started in Early Childhood we heard certain messages: Don’t teach them this. Teach them this. Teach them to walk in a line. Teach them to be quiet. We don’t hear any of that any more. They [say], “Oh, we’re so glad you’re here. We can tell the kids that are in Head Start.” …They really do see a difference, and we’re working very closely with our district reading specialist to do alignment and assessment results all the way through. (Admin 3.5)

The district’s administrative structure was inclusive of early childhood. The early childhood administrator in charge of ECFE, SR, and Head Start reported to the assistant superintendent of schools along with the other school principals and was also part of the district Leadership team.
She said she felt “valued” by the K-12 system. All of the teachers in Head Start and early childhood as a whole were on the K-12 master teacher’s contract. While this was a budget challenge, the administrator felt that having “highly skilled, highly trained people” was worth it because it “doesn’t take so much supervision” (Admin 3.5).

The Head Start program had a number of layers of administration and fit into the early childhood program structure in a unique way. Throughout the years, federal standards for Head Start evolved to include standards for curriculum, performance, and staff. The Lake Area Head Start program was unique in that federal and state funding came through the school district, not a community agency as is typical of most Head Start programs. There were pros and cons to this arrangement, as the administrator noted:

There’s a level of bureaucracy that’s involved, and we have to follow that, but we also have connections with all the district programming. If you’re in a Head Start with a CAP agency, or something, you have to make those connections with special education people in your local [school district], and it’s just really easy here. (Admin 3.1)

Head Start in Lake Area district was funded with a combination of state and federal monies. All of the early childhood classrooms, including Head Start, were co-located in the elementary schools. This co-location had certain benefits, particularly in creating connections with kindergarten and understanding its demands. A teacher discussed the benefits of being connected with the district:

[When I worked in a community preschool], I wasn’t in the school district, and I wasn’t in the school, and I didn’t know necessarily what the requirements for kindergarten were and how demanding it was. I worked more on social/emotional skills, and now that I’m here, I’ve really been able to understand [students] do need to know their letters and they do need to be able to recognize their names and practice writing them and work on their fine motor skills, not only their social/emotional skills. (Teacher 3.2)

Early childhood staff also talked with reading specialists and kindergarten teachers in the district to make sure the transition from early childhood to K is smooth.

Program Goals

The primary goal of Lake Area Head Start was to support children and families who were at risk or who were encountering significant challenges. Disadvantaged children and families have needs that are different from those of middle-class families. The role of the program was to support children and families, which in turn would help to decrease the achievement gap. As a result of this focus on supporting families, a priority in this program was to serve children in the greatest need. The majority of the children came from families who had multiple stressors, such as low income, homelessness, or disability status.
The Head Start children are at a disadvantage. When parents are stressed out about where the next meal’s coming from, or they have to change apartments, they’re not taking the time to do some of the things their peers in school get… We’re also educating the parents more, and what they’re doing in the classroom is just helping the children get so that they’re on the same playing field as some of their peers. (PD 3.4)

The staff noted that children often had significant mental health and social-emotional needs, along with challenging classroom behaviors. Teachers recognized these needs and made it a classroom priority to address them, as illustrated by one teacher saying, “Last year, with my high needs group, I closed the curriculum book for a month and did the Second Step\(^7\) curriculum” (Teacher 3.2).

Part of the focus on children with the greatest needs was the underlying belief that there were meaningful differences between children. All staff talked about how they wanted to do what was best for students, so they all had a similar goal of helping students succeed. Staff in the program were aware that some children had advantages and experiences that others did not have the opportunity to have.

Our goal is to help make sure that children who are in Head Start are able to start kindergarten even with their peers, because without that, the gap really doesn’t go away. What we’ve learned is the criticism of Head Start has been . . . the gains fall off by third grade, but really if you dig a little deeper, one of the components of that is that if there’s missing background knowledge, which is what we’re trying to build for kids, which my children got because we took trips and we had a lot of advantages in the world. Without that background knowledge, when reading gets more complex in third grade, and all the concepts, it doesn’t make sense anymore, and you’re reading something that you don’t have a place to put in your brain. (Admin 3.1)

Staff saw the need to “level the playing field” and create a rich environment for the children in Head Start. They recognized their students needed Head Start to supplement what they were learning at home.

I think they [Lake Area Head Start staff] are understanding the difference between at risk children and their needs, rather than just creating a rich environment. There isn’t an enriched environment for all kids because some really some kids need something from us that they aren’t getting from their families. (PD 2-3\(^8\))

While understanding that there may have been certain things that disadvantaged children needed that were different from what children from advantaged homes had, the administrator said, “You can do what’s right for kids, not what you think you need to do to get your scores higher. We

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\(^7\) Second Step is a curriculum that builds social-emotional skills.

\(^8\) The trainer identified as PD 2-3 was mentioned in the methods section as the person who did sessions in both the Lake Area and Urban Center program. She is consistently identified as PD 2-3 throughout both cases.
want to do what’s developmentally appropriate, what makes sense to kids, and how kids learn (Admin 3.5).”

**Head Start Philosophy and Culture**

The program philosophy of Head Start was based on a number of different components. Staff believed children needed to be emotionally and socially ready to receive instruction; therefore, social-emotional development was a priority. Another element of the program’s philosophy stemmed from the desire to help children at risk: staff sincerely wanted what was best for children and wanted to help families and children succeed. An integral part of the program was interaction with the community.

Head Start was conceived originally as a family and child support program, so the focus of Head Start has been on the “whole” child. Although more recently, Head Start moved toward a more academic focus, the performance standards continued to reflect the whole child, including nutrition, health, and safety information. Social emotional development was also a goal, as was supporting and empowering the family:

Head Start is a family support program. It’s a comprehensive program with a strong educational component for young children who are in poverty. That goal would be to help on all fronts: health, oral health, mental health, physical, everything, to have that child be as ready as they can possibly be to learn along the way. And it’s not to prepare them for school. It’s just to be able to take in everything they possibly can, to learn, because that’s how kids are wired if they’re healthy. We try to get them as healthy and stable and as secure as possible. (Admin 3.5)

The original goals of Lake District Head Start focused on social-emotional development and supporting children and their families with challenges to be as secure as possible.

Social emotional development was considered a large part of supporting children and families, along with mental health and behavior management. Self-help skills and being able to transition successfully between different activities were examples of social emotional skills needed for kindergarten. A teacher said:

I think the most important things are the things that are social-emotional. Be in a circle and be considerate of other people, use gentle touch…[Early literacy skills] make it great for getting along in school and then eventually in life, but if you can’t get along with people… (Teacher 3.3)

Examples of literacy-related skills children need for kindergarten in Lake Area school district included fine motor skills, being able to write their name, and recognizing 17 letters. Staff recognized that such academic skills were important, but placed priority on social-emotional skills. This was evident from another teacher who talked about her definition of school readiness:
Self-help skills that they need to have to be able to dress and undress, and to be able to cope and manage themselves in a group without one-on-one assistance from a teacher. They need social skills. All that kind of stuff is...more important than knowing all their letters because they’re not going to be able to function in a group if they can’t take a turn with something or stand next to each other without spitting on each other or pulling their hair. [They won’t] make it very far in that classroom if they can’t function. (Teacher 3.2)

It was clear that staff believed social-emotional skills and behavior management were essential precursors to academic skills. One of the professional development staff bluntly stated, “We can’t do the literacy in a classroom where children are climbing on top of furniture or throwing a chair across the room” (PD 3.4).

Staff also talked about the importance of relationships and promoting mental health as the foundation of much of their work. Prior to receiving the ERF grant, Head Start received a large grant to help teachers bridge mental health and education, which was prompted by an increase in children coming to Head Start with significant mental health challenges. Therefore, attachment and developing relationships was also a theme in the interviews:

We understand that if children develop a secure, supplemental attachment to a teacher, it’s healing. And even if it only lasts six weeks before they move, or even if it only lasts a year or even if they go home every night and get beat, there is something strengthening about that secure attachment. So we place a lot of emphasis on that. (Admin 3.5)

One teacher specifically characterized herself as a “relationship-based teacher,” saying:

I think in the beginning you really have to work on your relationship and all year long you have to work on that relationship, maintaining it and keeping it, knowing that… letting those kids know that they can trust you and believe in you and if that you say, ‘I’ll help you I a minute’ that you will help them in a minute; not just saying it but doing it. (Teacher 3.2)

Not only were the relationships with the children important, the relationships with staff and parents were just as important. Ensuring both children and parents trusted and felt that the classroom was a safe environment was a critical element of the program’s philosophy.

Community Interaction

The community that the district served was generally working class and middle class, and many of the families in the community were also challenged by a lack of resources. One of the goals of the early childhood program was to work with the community and be responsive to the needs of the families, particularly those families in greatest need of services. Part of the state funding for Head Start included partnerships with three child care centers in the community, as well as an innovative program to assist homeless families with young children.

In each child care center, a Head Start teacher was responsible for being a “mentor, coach, and family advocate for that center” (Admin 3.5), focusing on infants and toddlers as well
as preschool aged children. Teachers focused on adding quality elements to the child care centers, providing training to the child care staff, and paying for staff to have planning time. Although the Head Start teachers were technically there for families who qualified for Head Start, they played a role in helping all families. They also ensured that children were screened and assisted teachers in meeting the Head Start standards and other quality issues. The school Head Start program also helped pay for training and planning time for the child care teachers.

**Summary**

Despite budget challenges in the school district as a whole, Lake District Head Start was characterized by a strong relationship with the K-12 system, both in terms of structural supports and administrative involvement. Head Start classrooms were located in the elementary schools, and teachers were very aware of kindergarten demands and requirements. Program culture and philosophy was based on developmentally appropriate practice, social-emotional competence as a precursor to academic skills, and supporting children and families in the greatest need. The whole child was a large focus of the program, including social emotional development, mental health, health and safety information, nutrition, as well as academic information.

**Standards-Based Reform in Lake Area Head Start**

The Early Reading First (ERF) grant created an additional layer of requirements on top of the existing culture and philosophy of Lake Area Head Start. These requirements were at times compatible with the original goals, but also created significant challenges for the staff. The following sections describe ERF in Lake Area Head Start and the specific SBR components that formed ERF in Lake Area Head Start, including standards, curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessment. The large infusion of funding provided by ERF motivated Lake District Head Start to apply for the ERF grant.

**Early Reading First in Lake Area Head Start**

In August 2006, the Lake Area Head Start program received an Early Reading First (ERF) grant from the federal government to expand and enhance programming. Early Reading First was a federal competitive grant program that provided substantial funding to early childhood programs for three years. The primary goal of the program was to improve the school readiness of children at risk for school failure. ERF proposed to do this by providing support directly to early childhood programs, transforming them into “centers of educational excellence.” This meant that instruction and classroom environments were to be improved through research-based practices in early literacy. The fundamental assumption behind ERF was that “literacy is a learned skill, not a
biological awakening.” In other words, early literacy can be taught to all preschool children through skill-based instruction—early literacy is not dependent on whether or not a child is biologically or developmentally “ready” to receive instruction.

Increased funding for the Head Start program was a primary motivator for Lake District’s application for ERF. Funding and programming started for Head Start/ERF in late January 2007, and at the time of this research, the program was beginning its second year of providing services. Prior to receiving the grant, Head Start was a half-day program that included transportation; ERF instituted a full-day program without providing transportation. There was a coordinator for the ERF program who was responsible for the day-to-day management of the ERF classrooms, staff performance reviews, and coordinating professional development. Students attended for six and a half hours per day, five days a week. The requirements for ERF and Head Start enrollment were similar, so the population served in the program remained the same.

ERF provided an additional layer of goals, requirements, and demands that the program had to incorporate into its existing structure. Although the federal goals of the grant were focused on literacy, the Lake Area Head Start had a slightly different rationale for the grant: “The most important was going to all-day Head Start because parents told us this half day is crazy” (Admin 3.5). One of the provisions of ERF funding was to expand half-day programs into full-day programs, which was an incentive for Lake Area Head Start. ERF was focused primarily on ensuring children arrived in kindergarten with language, early literacy, and cognitive skills that would help them to be successful in school. This meant that the Head Start program, originally focused on providing family support and educational opportunities, evolved to include a stronger focus on achievement and literacy. The administrator noted that Head Start had reservations about this at first, saying, “We were very resistant at first about the militancy of the literacy piece until we got into it and began to make it our own” (Admin 3.5).

Another part of the ERF grant was the requirement to have an external evaluator. The role of this evaluator was to oversee the evaluation, conduct data analysis, write reports, and work with the program around the results. She did not collect actual assessment data, but she was very involved in helping the program determine its goals and targets and helping staff interpret and use the evaluation data once they were collected and reported.

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9 http://www2.ed.gov/programs/earlyreading/index.html
10 From this point on, the program will be referred to as ERF as well as Head Start.
Standards and Alignment

Lake Area Head Start had a number of different standards because it had layers of programming. These included the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs), the Head Start standards, and the ERF targets on specific literacy skills. The ECIPs were the state early childhood standards that reflected the developmental domains of Personal and Social Development, Language and Literacy, Mathematical and Logical Thinking, and Physical Development and Health. The Head Start standards were more expansive, including standards relating to nutrition, health and safety, mental health, and the role of parents in the program. Despite these differences, the ECIPs and the Head Start standards were aligned by the State Department of Education:

The Early Childhood Indicators of Progress mesh perfectly with Head Start in terms of what our outcomes are, what we expect, what our assessments are… I don’t know if teachers even think about the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress, because in some ways Head Start trumps that because they coincide so well. (Admin 3.5)

Because the ECIPs and the Head Start standards were aligned, the teachers tended to focus on the Head Start standards to guide their instructional goals.

ERF had specific performance indicators in the areas of early language and literacy, rather than broad standards such as the ECIPs. ERF focused on early literacy skills, such as phonological awareness, print awareness, oral language and vocabulary, and alphabet knowledge, and programs were expected to identify and meet performance targets on these specific skills. Therefore, Lake Area Head Start had to integrate the ERF language and literacy focus into the pre-existing whole child approach. Teachers saw the ERF standards as being aligned with the curriculum, so the challenges of integrating these different approaches were usually discussed in terms of the curriculum.

Curriculum

The Lake Area Head Start used the Creative Curriculum prior to Early Reading First. The Creative Curriculum was a fairly flexible, open curriculum that tended to allow teachers great flexibility in how, when, and what they taught. One administrator described it as “kind of creative; there are some guidelines, but each teacher could tweak it how they wanted (Admin 3.1).” A teacher concurred, saying, “You basically decided—within the parameters of what we need to do for Head Start—what you were going to do” (Teacher 3.3). Another administrator described the rationale for choosing the Creative Curriculum and how it was used in the program:

I think [the Creative Curriculum] was chosen because it was so very broad, but nobody ever checked to see what part of it they were doing or how they were doing it. So people pretty much just developed their own individual [curriculum]…. They did exactly what they wanted to do as long as they met the Head Start standards… so [the teachers] were
very creative. We had some very good teachers, but nobody ever said, “This is important: Unit One should end by now.” (Admin 3.5)

The Creative Curriculum was one of the approved curricula for Head Start programs to use, and it generally worked well in the program up until ERF began.

ERF required a different, research-based “boxed” curriculum11 that focused on literacy, so the program changed from the Creative Curriculum to Opening the World of Learning (OWL). OWL was chosen by the program after a process of piloting and trying out different options. Teachers liked the OWL and recommended it be incorporated into the program. The primary focus of the OWL curriculum was literacy, although there were math, science, art, and social activities. OWL was based on quality children’s literature and had areas of study as well as skill-based activities. The professional development trainer said, “The writers of the OWL curriculum have been thoughtful of national standards. They have woven them in” (PD 2-3).

The OWL was very different from the Creative Curriculum, particularly because it tended to be fairly rigid, structured, and scripted. It was a complicated curriculum, both in terms of the amount of materials needed and the way the handbook was written. One administrator said, “It’s a good curriculum, but…it’s challenging for folks” (Admin 3.1). Despite these challenges, the staff recognized the importance of a comprehensive scope and sequence that the OWL provided:

There is [a scope and sequence]. You can’t really leave out anything and hit it all. When we first were doing it, it was like, “Why do they have coloring unit four? They don’t know colors when they come in. That should be unit one.” But, a lot of the things they had in unit one were at an easier level than things that were in unit four. (Teacher 3.3)

The OWL also ensured that teachers were all on the same page across the district, which was important when the students served tended to be mobile.

Now we have a curriculum which is a scientifically-based reading research curriculum that everybody’s using at the same time. If a child goes from this school to [a different school in the district], they’re going to be pretty much on the same page. They might be a day or two off, but there are going to be familiar books and the schedule’s the same, and the parts of the day are the same. That’s been a big thing. (Admin 3.1)

The curriculum used by the Lake Area Head Start changed as a result of the ERF grant. Staff went from a creative, flexible curriculum that allowed individual teacher control over their classroom instruction to a research-based curriculum focused on early literacy. This new curriculum had a specific scope and sequence and was much more scripted and rigid.

11 “Boxed” curriculum refers to curriculum that comes with specific themes, a scope and sequence, clear activities, and day-by-day lesson plans and activities. It is much more scripted than the Creative Curriculum. Examples include Doors to Discovery and Opening the World of Learning, among others.
**Instruction**

With the change in curriculum, instructional strategies also changed. The teachers were expected to change their classroom environments to focus on literacy activities, implement small group instruction and differentiated instruction, and use data to inform instructional decisions. Instructional changes also included more use of intentional, explicit instruction; higher expectations for what children should be able to accomplish; and more intentional vocabulary development. This meant the staff were “changing their instructional practice toward a greater emphasis on how to build literacy for kids” (Evaluator 3.6).

A large part of instruction in early childhood education involves setting up the classroom environment with various “centers” or distinct areas that allow children to interact independently with the materials. ERF recognized these areas, but expanded them and gave specific definitions for the areas. ERF required that classrooms would be transformed into literacy-rich environments that provided multiple, diverse ways for children to use and practice their growing literacy skills. For example, the book area could not be used for anything except reading books. There needed to be a specific space for writing that was distinct from the art area. ERF also expanded what should be in the areas, expecting writing materials to be included in various areas, like a clipboard in the dramatic play area or a dry-erase board and markers in the block area. There also had to be a word wall with vocabulary words and other child-constructed literacy items posted throughout the room. To measure the extent to which their classroom was literacy rich and complied with these changes, teachers were observed using the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO), a classroom observation protocol.

Instruction occurred throughout the day in multiple ways, incorporated into the daily schedule. While daily schedules varied in classes, a typical example looked like this: Children gathered for a circle time where jobs for the day were discussed before they went to the gym or outside for large motor time. After returning, there was a longer group time, and then children were dispersed to “centers” or exploring the various areas of the room. Another short group time happened before lunch and nap/rest time. Finally, children had time in small groups and a last large group time where students sang songs, read poems, or read books before going home.

With the advent of ERF, teachers were expected to use more intentional instruction, meaning they explicitly focused on literacy and were mindful of incorporating literacy elements throughout the day.

If it’s just a math activity, we have to try to find a way to make it a literacy activity, too, whether we have to write something or read something. We’re always trying to add
that—talk, read, and write, which is part of our literacy training. Talk, read, and write, talk, read and write, all day long, we talk, read, and write. (Teacher 3.2)

An administrator described the concept behind “talk, read, and write”:

Our goal is to have talk, read, and write in every part of the day, so there are books in every area. There are writing tools and tablets in the block area, so you can plan what you’re going to build, or kids sign up for a waiting list if they want to get into [a learning center]. (Admin 3.1)

As can be seen, literacy development was a key focus of the instruction, with writing practice, independent and group book reading, songs, poems, and word/finger plays.

Another aspect of instruction was the use of small groups. While this was not necessarily new to the teachers, using specific strategies, such as grouping according to ability, was different from what teachers were used to doing.

Maybe this particular activity is too high for them at this level, but we can scale it back at this level. Instead of matching letters we’re going to match shapes or colors or something like that. We’re trying. It’s hard and then when you also put in their special needs because we have students on IEPs 12 or who have planned documented interventions. Their particular needs also impact and then each child you set goals with the parents about what they would like them to accomplish in Head Start. (Teacher 3.3)

Teachers were working with children with multiple needs and were aware they needed to balance skill-based activities with other individualized instruction. Small groups were one way to meet individual needs and also a way for teachers to differentiate instruction. The trainer described what should be happening in these small groups:

And if you are going to differentiate learning, kids learn from hands-on activities, and I would always say there should be some form of conversation, some actual activity where the child is to practice an intentional standard or skill, and then they should get to do some form of print or writing or something hands-on. (PD 2-3)

A large part of small groups was using assessment data to inform instruction, which is discussed below.

Assessment

Lake Area Head Start originally used the Work Sampling System (WSS) to assess Head Start outcomes, which was a requirement of Head Start. However, when ERF began, the program was required to use additional assessment tools, not only to assess literacy outcomes, but also to drive instructional decision making. ERF required the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT), a norm-referenced test to assess vocabulary and oral language development, and the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening for Preschool (PALS), a criterion-referenced test that assessed all

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12 IEP stands for Individualized Educational Program. It is a specialized intervention plan designed for children with identified special needs in conjunction with parents, teachers, and early childhood special education teachers.
domains of early literacy development. Both of these tests were new to the staff and considered “on-demand” assessments, meaning children were removed from the classroom by trained assessors and asked to do specific tasks. Lake Area ERF also chose to use the Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDIs) as a progress monitoring tool to drive instruction. Lake Area ERF staff continued to use the WSS while they did the other assessments required by ERF. ERF also required using the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) to assess classroom environments and the OWL fidelity measure to assess the extent to which teachers were implementing the curriculum as prescribed.

The ERF program used the different assessments in different ways, depending on the type of assessment. There were two main levels in which assessment was used: in the program as a whole, and in the classroom. The WSS and the IGDIs tended to be used as progress monitoring tools in the classroom to inform instruction, while the PALS and the PPVT were used as outcome measures for reporting needs and understanding the program as a whole. The way in which the program used these assessments will be discussed in more detail later in this case study. Table 3 describes the different components of SBR in Lake Area.

Table 3. Standards-Based Reform Components in Lake Area Head Start

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<tr>
<th>Standards</th>
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Summary

In summary, SBR in Lake Area Head Start centered around the federal grant program Early Reading First. ERF provided a large infusion of funding for Head Start to move from a half-day program to a full day program while also enhancing classroom instruction and assessment in literacy skills. Lake Area Head Start was in the first full year of implementation (but second year of the grant as the grant began halfway through the first year) at the time of the research and so was in the process of incorporating ERF requirements into current Head Start
practice. The changes ERF brought included a more intensive focus on language and literacy standards, intentional teaching practice to enhance literacy skills, including the use of small groups and differentiated instruction, and new curriculum and assessment protocols. The next section describes the supports Lake Area Head Start put into place to help staff implement ERF requirements, including professional development such as training and coaching. Table 3 shows the components of SBR (ERF) in Lake Area, pre- and post-ERF funding, including professional development, which will be discussed in the next section.

**The Process of Implementing Standards-Based Reform**

A key aspect of implementation was ongoing professional development that included training and coaching. This was intended to support the teachers as they applied the curriculum, developed a literacy-rich environment, and executed specific instructional strategies to increase literacy development. Clear expectations and classroom observations ensured teachers understood and did what they were expected to do. Evidence that children were succeeding, engaged, and doing well motivated teachers to continue to change. Despite supports implemented by the program to help staff make changes, there were still challenges and tensions as teachers implemented the changes. The curriculum required a large amount of materials and work to develop the activities, and the staff had to get used to balancing curriculum fidelity with professional decision making. Having such a scripted curriculum also meant that teachers were not able to be as creative in the classroom, and they had trouble making the curriculum their own. Integrating the diverse requirements of Head Start and ERF was also a challenge.

The Head Start/ERF program in Lake Area had clear expectations about the changes staff were required to make to their instruction and classroom observations to ensure that these changes were made. ERF required teachers to use a specific curriculum, assessed children on a regular basis, and used data to drive instructional practices. The program instituted a variety of professional development opportunities to support teachers as they implemented these changes. Clear expectations and strong leadership from the program, along with a structured observation process, helped to ensure the changes were implemented as designed.

Leadership was an important element in providing clear expectations. One administrator described the importance of leadership, saying:

There needs to be strong leadership, a shared vision of where we are, what we’re doing, where we’re going, and bringing people along in the process that education looks different. (Admin 3.1)
The value of nurturing relationships in Lake Area extended to the dynamic between administration and teachers. The professional development trainer noticed this aspect of leadership, saying, “The leadership is really firm and kind and there are teachers that have a lot of say” (PD 2,3). Strong leadership allowed teachers to have input into the process while maintaining clear expectations. One administrator described herself as a “good listener” and tried to “keep decision making as close to the classroom as possible” (Admin 3.5). Experience also played a role in leadership, which helped to put changes into perspective. As one administrator said, ‘I’m just a little more accepting of seeing the big picture, saying, ‘Oh, I’ve seen things like this before.’ You’ve seen that pendulum. It’s just the way it is” (Admin 3.5).

**Classroom Observations**

Classroom observations, using established protocols linked to the goals of the program, helped teachers be accountable for making changes while also providing information to the program as a whole about the implementation process. ERF had two main classroom observations: the ELLCO, and the OWL curriculum fidelity measure. The ELLCO was an observational assessment focused on literacy activities and a literacy-rich classroom environment. It had checklists as well as rating scales and was administered by the literacy coaches. A coach described the ELLCO observation protocol:

> It’s trying to get the environment. That was a big part because it’s many, many changes around environment. You’d think most people know how to set up an Early Childhood classroom, but it’s not always so, and that was one of the first things we were looking at and we used… the ELLCO. And part of that is about the environment and part of that is about the interactions with teachers and children. (PD 3.4)

The ELLCO results were then used to assist in the coaching process, determining areas of teacher strengths and weaknesses. The OWL curriculum fidelity measure rated the extent to which teachers were implementing the curriculum with fidelity in their classrooms.

**Training**

The training delivered by the professional development trainers for the teachers and the coaches had a number of elements, including providing knowledge based on research, defining expectations based on program protocols and goals, and demonstrating and modeling instructional practices. Teachers attended a six-hour training once per month that included information on the components of early literacy, elements of quality teaching, developmentally appropriate ways to enhance literacy, and how to use data to inform instruction. A large part of the training was providing evidence, both from research and from the program itself, and this evidence helped motivate teachers to try new strategies and change their instruction.
The content of the trainings centered on early literacy, presenting evidence-based strategies, and the research about effective strategies to promote early literacy. The trainings also included information about using the OWL curriculum. The literacy portion of the training was conducted by the same trainer used by Urban Center, so the content of these trainings was similar across the districts. However, the trainer was sensitive to the different contexts and tried to present information in a way that was responsive to the variations in curriculum, instruction, and overall philosophy. The administrator addressed this, saying, “[PD 2-3] has been very deliberate and intentional in making her training directed toward the OWL so that people don’t say, ‘Well, there’s [the training and] there’s this OWL’” (Admin 3.5). There was a conscious effort by the trainer to tailor the trainings to the specific needs of Lake Area.

Trainings tended to focus on creating a literacy-rich environment, becoming a quality teacher, incorporating the five components of early literacy into the curriculum, and using data to inform instruction. The “big five” emergent literacy skills included conversation, alphabetic knowledge, phonological awareness, book and print rules, and vocabulary and background knowledge. The trainer described the basis of her trainings as grounded in research-based practices and focused on developing “a common language, common vocabulary, common understanding, and this is where I really get buy-in from teachers” (PD 2-3). The trainings provided an opportunity for teachers to have a clear understanding of emergent literacy skills and effective classroom practices to promote these skills. As teachers developed the common knowledge together, the notion of scaffolding came into play, providing concrete ways to help teachers improve instructional practices. An administrator noted that while WSS and the OWL curriculum were helpful, they did not

…give you the information you need to scaffold back when a child is really having trouble recognizing something. You need the training to say, okay, well, if they’re not recognizing any letters, then let’s back up to here because they’re not ready to do that yet.

(Admin 3.5)

The goal for the trainings was to provide teachers with multiple strategies for teaching children that were based in research.

**Role of Evidence.** An important motivator for change was evidence—both from the research literature and collected by the teachers themselves. Research-based evidence was a critical component of the training, providing information to teachers about effective strategies to use in the classroom to improve student achievement. Much of the research was presented during professional development trainings and coaching sessions. Continued change was supported as teachers implemented the strategies and saw children positively respond.
A large part of trainings included providing scientifically-based research. This gave validity to the information presented. Research helped teachers understand why they were expected to implement new strategies:

Sometimes I feel like, “Can we stop talking about literacy and talk about why we can’t transition today?”—because that’s what kids need at this age is to learn how to transition. They’ll tell me, “You know, I understand where you’re coming from, but this is why we need it. This is scientifically-based research… The numbers show that if we do this, this will happen, and in order to succeed academically in this way that we have to do this and work on this and practice with this and there’s a way you can fit it in.” (Teacher 3.2)

Presenting research helped teachers understand what they needed to do as well as why they needed to do it. Showing evidence from other programs’ successes encouraged teachers to consider the new changes and implement them in their classroom.

As teachers began to see children’s positive responses to the changes in the classroom and their scores on the assessments improved, they become more willing to make additional changes. As one administrator explained, “Once they can see how much their kids are learning, they’re hooked” (Admin 3.5). As teachers made these changes to the environment, they saw that children responded differently. This administrator described how the changes to the environment, such as incorporating writing materials into all aspects of the room, provided children with more opportunities to write:

When you have instruments to use all over the room, you’re doing menus in the housekeeping corner. Maybe you’re drawing what you want to build with blocks, and writing words under there. Children love to write! They love it. To come in and sign their name in the morning, you’d think when they come in, and even if it doesn’t look like their name, they’re writing their name. It just is such power for them. (Admin 3.5)

Teachers and administrators noticed a difference in how children used materials and an increased interest in emergent literacy activities.

While seeing children interact differently was an important aspect for encouraging change, actual data from the program showing children’s scores on literacy assessment were also a factor. Children’s data were used “…to drive coaching, to drive teachers’ movement” (PD 2-3), and to encourage teachers to change. The trainer talked about the importance of individual child data that came from the program to inspire change:

Last time I did interactive writing and all of the teachers had to bring evidence of children’s work. And we plotted out the developmental chart. I asked questions like, “So what was [sic] your criteria for putting it where you did?” (PD 2-3)

The coaches also used program data and individual child data during coaching sessions with teachers, as the Administrator described, “[Data] also is [sic] part of our coaching piece. . . .
[coaches are] really skilled in giving ideas and helping support that, so that all of our kids are making progress” (Admin 3.1).

Trainings, therefore, were a large part of the professional development in Lake Area. However, the trainings were more than a one-time didactic delivery of a specific teaching component. They were ongoing, comprehensive trainings with a scope and sequence that explicitly showed teachers how to implement the strategies. Trainings translated research into practice while incorporating specific data from the program, which was an important motivating factor for teachers to try new instructional strategies.

**Coaching**

Trainings provided information and suggested strategies, while coaching helped the teachers manage all of the information delivered at the trainings and incorporate the strategies into their classrooms. After learning about instructional strategies and the research behind them and then seeing the strategies modeled for them in a training session, teachers were expected to go back to their classrooms and implement the strategies. Coaching allowed teachers one-on-one time with a trained coach to help them with specific aspects of their instruction and classroom environment. Coaching sessions had a specific structure that included a pre-observation meeting between the coach and the teacher, the observation itself, and a post-observation meeting.

The coaching sessions began with a pre-observation where the teacher and coach discussed specific strategies the teacher was working on and what the coach should focus on observing. The professional development trainer gave the rationale for this focused approach:

> Professional development, we would like it to happen overnight, but it just doesn’t. Teachers focus on a certain area. They might focus on their community circle, they might focus on their active learning, and really try and understand that piece. It is about reflection and understanding. So the coach calls and asks, “What do you want me to watch?” And the teacher might say, “I am doing day three of Read-Aloud and I am going to ask more deeper level questions, higher level questions about feelings, and I want to have more conversational turn taking.” (PD 2-3)

This pre-observation meeting allowed teachers to work on specific strategies introduced during the trainings. The actual observation was completed by the coach, focusing on the goal and using an objective observation form based on program protocols. Finally, the post-observation meeting was a focused dialogue between the teacher and the coach, discussing the observation. Both the teacher and the coach gave their impressions of what happened and used the program protocols to guide their discussion.

> Part of it’s an observation, and then part debriefing in the afternoon. When you debrief, it does focus around goal-setting, also, talking about what I observed with their input as to what they’re doing and how they’re feeling about it, and just always trying to move more
towards a very literacy-rich classroom and curriculum, and so sometimes that means changes or doing things a little differently. (PD 3.4)

At this post-observation meeting, the coach and teacher talked about what the coach observed, the coach gave suggestions, and the teacher set additional goals for the next coaching session. The teacher’s goals and the coaching sessions were aligned with the professional development trainings. For example, if the teachers had recently been trained in small groups, then the coaching session would be focus on implementing an aspect of small group instruction.

Similar to the training’s basis on where a teacher is at, coaching also needed to be done in a way that was sensitive and responsive. Coaches needed to differentiate their coaching, encourage reflection, and tailor coaching to the needs of each teacher. To that end, the coaches were taught how to coach by the trainer through a process of master coaching described here by the professional development trainer:

This is what a coach does, but how she does it is really important. [Coaches] need to be sensitive, responsive, need to ask questions, need to watch, wait, listen. [Coaches] need to do conversation. [Coaches] need to allow teachers to think and tell vs. just coming in. (PD 2-3)

The trainer emphasized that relationships between the coaches and the teachers were most important, and these relationships needed to be developed before successful coaching could occur. Relationship-based coaching that was sensitive to the growth curve of a teacher provided an important support. A teacher described how she perceived coaching:

I think it absolutely supports me because... it takes time to continue to process. When I leave it’s always in the back of my head. I’m not quite ready. I’m not quite sold. I get it, but I’m not ready, and it just keeps moving up and when it’s there, I finally use it. We have coaches who try to help us and guide us in doing more of that stuff, but they still respect what we can do as a teacher and what we’re ready to do as a teacher, too. (Teacher 3.2)

The evaluator also recognized the importance of coaching to support the process of change:

The other thing about the implementation is that they have the support of the literacy coaches in the classroom which I think is going to make it more likely that they will actually implement it because I think when you look at professional development people get all excited about what they learned and they go back and try to do it and it doesn’t quite work and they forgot some things and then there is nobody there to talk to or help them. (Evaluator 3.6)

Coaching, therefore, was an integral part of professional development, supporting the training and encouraging teachers to fully understand and implement the strategies.

**Implementation Challenges**

Despite the supports of professional development and coaching, staff encountered challenges as they implemented the changes. Staff felt overwhelmed by the changes and the
amount of work expected of them and struggled to find time to incorporate the changes into their
day. Adapting to the new curriculum and requirements meant staff had to learn how to balance
fidelity with the needs of their students, and they were not able to be as creative in the classroom.
Finally, teachers experienced grief as they let go of their previous practices and implemented new
strategies.

The teachers thought the training and the coaching was helpful to them in their practices,
but they also felt overwhelmed by all they were expected to do. They mentioned that they needed
time to process what they had learned. A teacher said, “You know what, I can only do so much in
this day. I just want to have a chance to try things before I have to learn something new.”
(Teacher 3.3). The evaluator offered this perspective:

Last year clearly the teachers were overwhelmed. I think it was a combination of new
curriculum, really intense professional development, moving to a full day, more emphasis
on setting up their classrooms differently, and new materials. And changing their
instructional practice. That is probably the biggest thing. Toward a greater emphasis on
how to build literacy for kids. (Evaluator 3.6)

However, the administrators in the program recognized this challenge and did what they could to
help teachers and understand where staff was at in the implementation process.

Some of what we’ve heard is, “Oh my God, I’m up to here, I can’t take anymore; I have
to integrate what I’ve already learned before I can take on more.” Just like we’re paying
attention to what kids need, we’re paying attention to what the staff needs, and so that’s
[why] we have some time to have them work in their teams and share ideas. (Admin 3.1)

The administrators recognized the struggles teachers had, but did not relax their expectations. The
administrators did realize that it takes time to implement change, and they were cognizant of the
need to give teachers time.

Another challenge was adapting to new and layered requirements. The requirements of
ERF overlaid the original requirements for Head Start. The teachers were responsible for meeting
both the requirements for Head Start and ERF. Teachers were expected to integrate many
different elements into the curriculum, including Head Start standards, ERF requirements, and
learnings from professional development. While ERF focused on literacy, Head Start was a
holistic program with performance assessments and standards reflecting the whole child. The
OWL curriculum and the expectation that it would be implemented with fidelity added another
layer of requirements to the program.

The new curriculum was a big change for the program. As one person put it, the
curriculum was holistic, but it was not perfect. The OWL curriculum was a major change for the
program and teachers because it was much more rigid and scripted then their previous
curriculum. The more scripted nature of the curriculum was thought to be at times too rigorous,
and the activities tended to need a lot of materials, so it was a lot of work to pull together the first year. An administrator noted that although she received some positive feedback about the curriculum, it was

…complicated, and it’s hard to follow, and it’s a lot of work. There are a lot of materials to gather, there’s a lot of preparation, and that sort of thing, but they see how children respond to it and then there’s no questioning. (Admin 3.5)

Implementing the OWL curriculum where “[p]retty much everything is set out for us—literally what we say when we read the books and where we start” (Teacher 3.2)—was a challenge for some teachers. Although teachers appreciated the planned activities at times, this also meant that it was more difficult to add things to the curriculum and “make it your own.” A teacher described this tension:

When I first got here and heard we were having this curriculum and learned about it and read about it, I thought, “Oh my gosh, do you know how much time I spend writing my own lessons up and thinking ahead, and looking on the Internet for new ideas?” So I was excited. But I’ve found that I only liked it for a little while because… I felt like a sense of who I was as a teacher, my philosophy and the activities that I did was [sic] kind of lost because it was just put out for me, how to do it. I would try to find ways to make it mine. I don’t think I was as passionate about it because it wasn’t mine. When you put so much time and effort and energy into thinking about what your day is like and your activity, you’re excited about it. You do it because you think it’s a cool activity and you’re excited it. But when you just open a book and read what you have to do, you’re not as excited about it. (Teacher 3.2)

Teachers were used to creating their own lesson plans and developing their own curriculum and activities. While the concept that it would be done for them was attractive at first, it also felt like they were losing a part of their professionalism.

In addition, the teachers were expected to implement the OWL curriculum with fidelity. Teachers questioned how to balance the needs of children and their own professional thoughts with the expectation to implement the curriculum as written. For example, the professional development trainer thought some of the activities in the OWL were inappropriate and were not necessarily consistent with the best practices in literacy development. She noted the teachers needed to balance fidelity with creativity:

That is the hard thing about a recipe and a defined curriculum, the scope and sequence. A curriculum is as good as the teacher that uses it… There are a couple [of teachers in Lake Area] that say, “That is not what the curriculum tells me to do.” In their resistance, they are not being as creative as they could. (PD 2-3)

Teachers had difficulty finding the balance between fidelity and professional decision making, particularly since the curriculum appeared scripted with little flexibility.

The process of observation using standardized measures was also new for Head Start in Lake Area:
Teachers felt like there were way too many people in their classrooms. It is disruptive and I think it stresses them out. I can’t tell if [feedback] is going well. And honestly, I think that is hard to do. It is like a new cultural piece to Head Start. But I think for some of these teachers who have been around for a while it feels too intrusive. (Evaluator 3.6)

Classroom observations were important to ensure accountability and inform coaching and ongoing training, but were also challenging for teachers. One administrator said:

Part of having literacy coaches is having people observe teachers in their classrooms, and that is not the norm… I think once people get through that initial “I feel uncomfortable having someone there bringing up all my inadequacies”… where they can work with their peers and observe each other and critique each other, that their level of performance improves, and therefore the kids gain. (Admin 3.1)

Knowing that a person would be observing in their classroom to determine the extent to which they were implementing what was learned in professional development was instrumental in encouraging change, even though the observation stressed teachers more than it helped at first.

Individualized instruction and small groups were another area where there were different requirements between what the training expected and what the curriculum provided. One of the reasons for this was the difference in philosophies between the trainings and the OWL curriculum. The OWL curriculum tended to be more “old fashioned, like if the area of study was wind, they made these blower things… more like an art activity. They are good activities, but they aren’t skill development small groups” (PD 2-3). The SEEDS of Emergent Literacy (SEEDS) training focused more on differentiated instruction, grouping students by ability and into skill-based groups. Therefore, the professional development trainer and the coaches had slowly been integrating the SEEDS strategies with the OWL curriculum expectations.

And the coaches, she’s coaching them to coach to the curriculum with some SEEDS strategies. Like, for instance, one example would be that in SEEDS, you make sure that any component of the day has talk, read, and write in it. Well, OWL does not. So what you do for a small group that’s an OWL small group is you always have paper and some sort of instrument to write with, and you incorporate a write part to that. (Admin 3.5)

You need to have some kind of conversation. In [Lake Area] where they did this windmill, what happened is they made the windmill and they were done literally in three minutes… If you are having three individual small groups at that time, how do you expand, extend their learning. I said, “First, why don’t you do some conversation about what windmills are, let them play with them, talk about them, vocabulary,” and then get them to draw it or do something with it?… But the core was that they had to follow the small group from the OWL curriculum. (PD 2-3)

Teachers also struggled with integrating the more expansive Head Start requirements into a curriculum and program focused primarily on literacy. Although the OWL curriculum was explicitly a literacy curriculum, it was still “truly weak in terms of any form of print. So teachers don’t talk, read, write with it (PD 2-3).” Therefore, the teachers had to add pieces from the
training. In addition, the teachers had to add a number of lessons and activities that addressed the Head Start standards. For example:

We have noticed that it’s [the curriculum] sort of weak in math, and so we’re working on that, and that Head Start has health and safety performance standards that we had a couple of teachers put together a book of activities that we can supplement, so that we make sure that we’re explicitly covering all those. (Admin 3.1)

I feel really comfortable with the OWL. I just feel a little bit concerned about getting in Head Start requirements. There are a number of things that we need to get in addition to being a literacy-rich classroom. Any time that I can think of a way to add to an activity or change the activity a little bit so that something can be offered that’s going to meet one of our requirements… The OWL, for example, has very few cutting kind of things. So we’ve added some things as offerings at center time that are cutting activities. It’s just really thinking about, “OK, we haven’t done nutrition stuff for a long time. I think we’re going to think about how we can have a cooking experience.” I would say there’s more to a child’s education than literacy. We have to find ways to do things that meet those other needs. (Teacher 3.3)

I think that they’re having to integrate a lot; but to me, in my mind, I don’t see it at all as being unbalanced or as not being really merged as an integrated whole. So I think it’s just a matter of teachers’ having time. And some people are there and some people just are still struggling, because they’re trying so hard to do that curriculum just right, you know. But it’ll come… They’ve all had to do a 180. (Admin 3.5)

The program had to adapt the curriculum, not only in terms of the needs of individual students, but also in terms of the various program requirements for which they were responsible.

Teachers also struggled with giving up what they had always done in the past and feeling a sense of grief or loss. The coach described this as a “deeply personal level” of change. This sense of loss in the staff was clearly articulated by the administrators and the coaches.

[Adopting the OWL curriculum] was very hard on them and still is on some who either don’t want to give up what they’ve been doing in the past because it’s what they know and they feel secure and they feel like they’re on top of what kids can do. I think it’s not easy, plus it’s that having to give up in your head. It’s a grief process, I think, of letting go. (Admin 3.5)

Coaches and administrators noted this was particularly difficult for teachers who had been teaching for a long period of time. Teachers wondered why what they had been doing was no longer good enough.

For people who have been working twenty or twenty-five years with us, one of the struggles has been what about what I used to do, then? That wasn’t good enough, that didn’t have any meaning? “I thought I was a good early childhood teacher and now you’re telling me this is what needs to happen, and what about all the things I used to do, what did they mean?” That’s just a personal struggle with any sort of change. (Admin 3.1)

Some teachers had a hard time understanding that what they had done in the past was good but not good enough.
When they hear “change” or “different,” it sometimes, not always, could put up a little block about the feelings of “I think I’m doing a good enough job”…That’s the major resistance that I see, or the block, just the past experience and what they’ve done and what they’ve put in of their own time and resources. You take a lot of time to make your own curriculum or your own props for it or go out and buy your own books around a certain theme. (PD 3.4)

At the same time that staff felt grief at letting go of their previous practices, they also were aware of the constant changing nature of education. One teacher who had a long history with the district said:

If you’ve been in any district for a long time, you’ve seen things come and go, and it, too, will pass. You really have to think, “Okay, this is what they’re asking me to do. What do I really believe is valuable in this? What can I do and feel really good about?” and which things will—when I don’t have to do it—will I say, “I’m not doing that. I have a better activity that will cover that same purpose and that’s what I’m going to do.” (Teacher 3.3)

She recognized that although teachers were being asked to do things differently, this was yet another layer of reform that came through education and therefore was a bit cynical toward the change process. The administrator also recognized that education was a constantly changing phenomenon, and she understood: “I’ve seen things like this before. I’ve seen that pendulum [swing]” (Admin 3.5).

In summary, Lake Area Head Start implemented a number of supports to help the staff change their teaching practices to align with the requirements of ERF, including intensive training and coaching. This training was specifically linked to the goals and expectations of the program and focused on evidence-based strategies. Using evidence in the training was an important component that encouraged teachers not only to try new strategies, but to continue new strategies in their classrooms. Ongoing coaching supported the teachers as they went back to their classrooms to implement the strategies. Despite these supports, staff still found the implementation process challenging. Having time to implement the changes with fidelity, especially the curriculum, was a challenge. Teachers also seemed to need to go through a grieving process of giving up old practices in favor of new strategies. Despite these changes, there was evidence that teachers were beginning to understand how to integrate new teaching strategies into their practice. The next section discusses how this change process led to the perceived outcomes of SBR in Lake Area.

The Perceived Outcomes of Standards-Based Reform in Lake Area Head Start
As staff implemented the expectations of SBR/ERF in Lake Area Head Start, certain perceived outcomes surfaced. Staff began to change their perceptions about school readiness,
raising their expectations and realizing children at risk needed different teaching strategies to ensure success. Overall, staff thought SBR was making their program stronger, but there were concerns about the “push-down” effect of having higher expectations. The ways staff used data in the program and in the classroom also began to change, which was facilitated by training and the use of an outside evaluator. Lake Area staff valued DAP and had a holistic view of the child, and staff began to achieve a balance between their previous philosophy and the need to incorporate the new demands of ERF.

**Higher Expectations and Needs of Children at Risk**

Lake Area Head Start, prior to ERF, served low-income children and children with other factors that put them at risk for school failure. Staff in Lake Area placed a priority on ensuring children were ready for school, while also focusing on the whole child and family dynamics. ERF continued to require the program to serve at risk children, but also raised the expectations for children’s outcomes, specifically on literacy. Teachers therefore needed to be more intentional in their teaching and “raise the bar” for children’s achievement.

Expectations about what children could and should be able to do when they reached kindergarten began to evolve as a result of ERF in Lake Area. Part of the reason for this change was the explicit realization that disadvantaged students, or students at risk for school failure, needed something from schools that they were not able to get at home. Teachers and administrators began to understand that providing rich opportunities for learning and social emotional development was no longer enough to ensure children were ready for school. The professional development trainer described the need for different strategies:

I think that it is really important for at risk children because middle class children have been leading the way for a long time, and that is not what our system needs. All children have a right to get a quality education. What we were doing in the past, developmentally appropriate just in general, was not meeting the needs of our at risk children. (PD 2-3)

One administrator talked about how the needs of children and families have changed over the past 20 years and explained that therefore early childhood classrooms also needed to change. This administrator acknowledged that “we have families with lots of challenges, kids who don’t have opportunities, and the gap is there, and one way to help close that is to use these strategies to explicitly teach about reading” (Admin 3.5). She went on to talk about how teachers did not realize how much children were able to absorb and accomplish until they began using the OWL curriculum and the strategies discussed in the trainings:

We didn’t know that kids could learn and really get what absorption is and be able to talk about it and use the right words. We didn’t know that they could understand that an umbrella repels water and that they love talking about that, because we didn’t use that
vocabulary with children. We didn’t know that reading books four times and changing the way you read a book every time elicits huge, deep understanding that carries on in conversation in the classroom for the whole year... So I’m pleasantly surprised at what our Head Start kids find exciting and get so enthused about when given the opportunity. (Admin 3.5)

Staff began to understand the concept of “meaningful differences” and that some children needed more and different instruction that what they had provided in the past.

Part of understanding the diverse experiences and needs of students was also seeing how expectations for kindergarten had been raised. Kindergarten expectations were no longer focused on social-emotional development, but now included academic expectations as well. Staff had higher expectations for what children could do and what was needed to be ready for school. The staff acknowledged that what they learned in school and their prior beliefs about what to expect from young children, particularly around literacy, were quite different from what they now did in their classroom and what they expected from young children.

Literacy-wise, yes [we are raising our expectations for what kids can do]. We came out of school with a different base. It was individual children, and they learn best by play and it’s kind of wrong to expect them to do ABC’s until they’re older. That just was how we set up... Now I would say that some direct instruction really can make a difference for kids, and it can help them come in at a more even level with other peers. (Teacher 3.3)

Staff realized that their idea of what it meant to be ready for school was changing and evolving as they implemented SBR. Staff had mixed feelings about this change in expectations, but acknowledged the reality of the situation.

You might help a child, but a lot of us that went to school many years ago, we were taught that wasn’t age-appropriate. That was kindergarten work; it wasn’t preschool work. And so that shift in looking at what their children can do and what is appropriate… Their comfort level has been pushed, and some of them have accepted it more and are seeing that, okay, kids are really okay with this and really like it, and the writing has just taken off in the rooms. (PD 3.4)

Despite understanding that children needed academic skills to be successful, there were some concerns about the requirements of kindergarten, particularly the academic focus of knowing a certain number of letters. One teacher said, “If you go into kindergarten and you have skills and you feel good about yourself, you’re much more likely to build on that, feel good about coming to school” (Teacher 3.3). Another teacher was more apprehensive about the changing requirements:

The requirements [for kindergarten] just keep changing and changing and changing. The kids need to know more at a younger and younger and younger age. When is enough going to be enough—when we keep our kids home from kindergarten as parents because we don’t feel like it’s appropriate anymore, that they have to go when they’re in first grade? (Teacher 3.2)
Although a few concerns were mentioned, overall staff felt that the need for higher expectations outweighed their concerns. Teachers and administrators shifted their understanding of what at-risk children needed and how best to support it in their program.

To meet the needs of children at risk of failure, particularly in a climate of increased expectations, teachers began to increase intentionality in instructional practices and curriculum implementation. It was different for teachers to use a “boxed” curriculum instead of the creative and flexible curriculum to which they were accustomed. The Creative Curriculum used previously in Head Start was much more flexible, allowing teachers to use their own judgment and expertise to develop activities and when to do them. The teachers “could be very creative with it, and nobody ever saw what they were doing, or [someone would] walk in and say, ‘You’re doing dinosaurs, great!’” (PD 3.4). Teachers were generally left on their own in their classes to develop their own activities and lesson plans based on the Head Start standards.

You’re in your own little world, and you think you’re doing the best you can for these children and getting them ready for kindergarten, and you have your supervisor come in just when it was time to evaluate you every three years or something, but other than that nobody ever asked to see much. (PD 3.4)

Staff compared their teaching practices before ERF and during ERF and could clearly see how they had changed. One administrator said that there had not been an “emphasis on talk, read, and write, [but now they were] being more explicit with directions about how to use materials, how to write a letter” (Admin 3.1). A teacher described her change in thinking:

When I started with the OWL, the very first year, this really struck me: They have vocabulary cards and there’s a picture of a crib. The kids called it, ‘baby’s bed.’ They knew it was for a baby, they knew the purpose for it, but they did not have a word for it. I was just floored. I would have never thought that they didn’t know it was called a crib. That kind of explicit information I realize I do a whole lot more of now than I ever thought to do before. (Teacher 3.3)

Overall, staff felt more intentionality was important and was improving the quality of their program.

**Using Data**

Staff were not only more intentional in their classroom teaching, they were also more intentional about using data to inform classroom practices. As a part of ERF requirements, Lake Area was expected to use a number of on-demand assessments (IGDIs, PPVT, PALS) in addition to the more authentic assessment (WSS) they were using prior to ERF. While there was some initial concern about the developmental appropriateness of the on-demand assessments, staff began to see the potential of being able to pinpoint quantitative child outcomes. Having an
outside evaluator assist with data collection and interpretation was helpful to the program staff as they implemented the new data system.

Lake Area used the WSS prior to the advent of ERF, and it was clear the staff felt comfortable using it. Teachers used the WSS to help set up the classroom environment and understand the needs of the class as a whole, as well as assessing each child on specific indicators. A teacher described how she used the WSS:

“It’s good one for me to do and just think about my kids in general. It helps me do environmental planning. If I look with my work sampling, if I see that a lot of them are having a hard time in the social studies skill area, like knowing what people’s jobs are and what it takes to do them, then I realize, “You know what? We need to change my dramatic play to a grocery store. We need to talk about what a store clerk does and what a grocery bagger does” and things like that. It helps me individualize as well, but it kind of helps me look at the overall picture of my class and the ways that I’m teaching and to see if there’s things that everyone’s really low on if I’m missing. (Teacher 3.2)

The WSS used a portfolio approach to assessing outcomes, and teachers were expected to design fun and authentic activities to do with individual children to teach and assess certain skills. One teacher noted that this was useful to her as she planned instruction because she was able to see clearly the strengths and weaknesses of each child. However, the WSS was not as precise as some of the other assessments they began using with ERF, which was pointed out by some of the staff. For example, the WSS had three ways to assess a child: Not Yet, In Progress, or Proficient. In Process could be fairly nebulous. A teacher said, “Sometimes you just assume, ‘He knows that. I know he knows that.’ But sometimes they just fall through the cracks…” (Teacher 3.2). An administrator echoed this, saying:

We had teachers say, “Oh my gosh, I’ve been work sampling for years, and I would check a kid off as knowing the alphabet, recognizing letters if they would say, ‘J is for Jacob’s name.’” And they could do that. They could read each other’s names. But it didn’t translate to knowing what the letter... pick it out. Pick out the J here, or tell us this letter, when it was just random. So what they realized is it wasn’t uppercase letter recognition; it was just a memorization of “this goes with this kid.” (Admin 3.5)

As teachers became more familiar with using other assessment tools that more precisely measured emergent literacy skills (such as the IGDIs), they began to recognize some gaps in the WSS assessment.

The IGDIs were new to the staff and were considered progress monitoring tools. Teachers were just beginning to use the IGDIs to drive instruction, and it was a learning process. IGDIs were like “taking a temperature” to see how children were progressing on certain literacy skills. Teachers used the IGDIs on all children three times per year, but they could be used more often to monitor the progress of students and adjust specific interventions for children not making
progress. Teachers then “use their IGDI information to split [children] into groups and to
scaffold” (Admin 3.1). A teacher described her use of the IGDIs:

If you were working on an individual goal with a child and you don’t know whether or
not you’ve been making progress, they have something there that you can use as a test to
see whether they did better than the last time you did it. Maybe it can help direct you in,
“Okay, we’ve made progress, so let’s keep doing it,” or, “You know what, we’re not
making progress.” I need to scale back a little bit and think, “What’s an activity that’s
sound-discrimination or something that they might be more successful at or that they
maybe need a chance to try.” (Teacher 3.3)

Because the IGDIs were fairly new to the program, the teachers were still in the process of
learning how to use them to inform instruction. The coach described this process:

I have the IGDI results on teachers, and we’re color-coding them to see… who’s far from
target, who’s close to target, who’s on target. It’s just around that time that this is what
we’re doing, looking at those scores, and how do you individualize for children far from
target? (PD 3.4)

The evaluator provided another perspective about the way in which staff used the IGDI scores:

One of the other things that we asked them about is the degree to which they used the
results from those assessments to plan instruction and differentiate what they do with
kids. I certainly don’t think they are there yet either. I think they are just getting a handle
on what do these results mean. It seemed like a real leap to “okay you give me this data
on this subtest area, but what is that connected to what I would actually do with the
kids?” I don’t think they are there yet. (Evaluator 3.6)

Staff understood the rationale behind the IGDIs and saw the potential for using them in their
classroom to inform instruction and monitor progress. This was the first step in becoming
proficient in taking the data and using it to individualize instruction for each child.

The external evaluator was instrumental in helping the program understand how to use
data, build capacity, and develop procedures around data collection and reporting. The evaluator
described her role in the program:

I think my role as an evaluator in a lot of cases is I make them pause. They never stop.
“Why would we have a retreat? I have so much left to do, or there is someone in crisis.”
But there is a cost to that. There is a cost to not coming together as a staff and learning
and planning and reflecting. (Evaluator 3.6)

The evaluator assisted staff to use data to understand outcomes, and having an external evaluator
ensured that they took the time to understand and actually use the data:

Well, [Evaluator 3.6] takes it and does all her magic with it, and then we look at it in
terms of staff development ideas, something that we might want to spend a little more
time on. It also is part of our coaching piece, so that the coaches will look at those scores
with an individual teacher and say, “Okay, look at these guys, they’re doing really well.
What about so-and-so? How are we going to move that, and how can we scaffold back?”
(Admin 3.1)
Part of the reason the program was able to use the data from the program in a more rigorous way was because of having an external evaluator. The evaluator described what she perceived as the benefits to the program of having her on board:

If you want to start with the basics, the first time they collected their child assessment data and sent it to me, I was like, this is a mess in terms of how the teachers were inconsistent in filling out the IGDI classroom results form. So we had to develop all of these codes… We talk about improving data collection procedures, [and] each time they do something, it is another opportunity to refine it and get better at it. (Evaluator 3.6)

Program staff learned how to assess effectively, the importance of being accurate and coding assessments correctly, and developing benchmarks based on the data. One administrator described the power of seeing results from the data: “We see data that looks good, that our kids are moving, and that’s hard to dispute, really” (Admin 3.1). Data provided the program with motivation to continue to make changes, and evidence that the changes were helping children improve their skills. As teachers and administrators began to use data in more precise ways, they began to understand the need for new instructional strategies.

Finding Balance

One of the overarching themes that emerged from the interviews was the lens of developmentally appropriate practice. The staff and administrators used the idea of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) as a filter for how they adapted to the new requirements. The professional development trainer consistently used a DAP lens during her trainings:

But what I’ve found is that when I have this lens and use this lens with teachers in professional development—moving children on the road, that it can’t be developmentally inappropriate. Children are driven to move forward, so if I am giving them props to help them move forward and they are fun, if you take out the fun, if you take out the teacher noticing and being aware of children, then it wouldn’t work. I can take anything the research gives me and put this lens on it and play with children, and if it doesn’t work then you have to back down the road. (PD 2-3)

One administrator described how DAP was used throughout this process, focusing on how children responded to the changes:

So what I try to do is just bring that approach to my work, which I guess, you know, helps to filter out to me what’s really important from what isn’t so important. And the reason I’m okay with doing assessments and work with kids is that I see them still flourishing. I see them still extremely attached to their teachers. I see them want to go with the assessment person and play a game. I don’t see any stress on them. If I ever saw stress on a kid that I thought was taken out for assessment, we’d say, don’t do it. It doesn’t matter. If they don’t want to go, don’t take them. So I think just having the philosophy that I have probably tempers, you know, that other much more rigorous, that whole No Child Left Behind mentality. (Admin 3.5)
Focusing on the whole child, secure attachments, and sound mental health acted as a “filter” for the staff as well:

And the mental health piece is just hugely important, and the behavior piece, and the social-emotional is part of conversation and expression, too. So sometimes I think it feels unbalanced to teachers because all the training focus now is on the literacy piece, and I think that they’re having to integrate a lot; but to me, in my mind, I don’t see it at all as being unbalanced or as not being really merged as an integrated whole. (Admin 3.5)

So it is about literacy, but when you’re in a classroom that’s falling apart, you do have to look at the social-emotional because they’re not going to be sitting there writing letters if they don’t know they can’t be climbing on top of the furniture and things like that. (PD 3.4)

Staff in Lake Area looked at the ERF requirements through a DAP lens and continued to adhere to their program philosophy. They continued to focus on social-emotional development and mental health, but were still able to integrate the increased requirements and focus on literacy demanded by ERF. Using this lens helped the staff see that the changes were developmentally appropriate and actually enhanced what they were already doing.

Staff found ways to balance their program philosophies and the SBR expectations. The program integrated new ideas and adapted through change. The professional development coach noted that this intentionality meant slight changes in how teachers taught, but the key was that it was still fun for students:

It can be fun and it doesn’t mean you get rid of your easel, you know? It’s like you can have literacy even at the easel. It’s like, yes, they write their own name on the back of their paper, and even if it’s a straight line or a scribble in the beginning, it’s still on the road and they have to do that before they can get to write their name. Just looking at everything a little different… but now it’s taking it a little bit further and maybe modeling the writing for them. (PD 3.4)

Some days I’ll look at [the curriculum’s] ideas, and I’ll throw my own stuff into it. You just got to kind of find a way. You can always sneak in a couple of songs here and there that are mine that [support] the curriculum. When there’s a book that just hasn’t been working—because with the curriculum we have four reads of a book—if there’s just a book that’s not working, I find a book that’s kind of related to the curriculum and I… throw that one in. You’ve got to do a lot of transitional things with the kids, too, so there’s a lot of my finger plays that I do and things like that. There’s room for it, but it’s not the same. It’s still not always the same. (Teacher 3.2)

In other words, the program included enhanced literacy opportunities specifically around early literacy skills, but staff were not losing sight of their focus of social emotional development and the whole child.

The program had reconciled the goals and demands of ERF and Head Start by incorporating the new goals into the already existing system. The manager described this process:
Yeah, the question is, “Are we Head Start, are we losing Head Start? Is it still Head Start if we…?” I see where people get that idea, but my answer to that is that we are a Head Start program first that got an Early Reading First grant that allowed us to make these changes to expand our day, to get more professional development, to help kids on the road to literacy, and we’ve never lost Head Start. But all the things that we’re doing, the curriculum and all the training, make us a stellar Head Start program. (Admin 3.1)

The program adjusted their thinking about what was developmentally appropriate and managed to reconcile what they saw as the needs of 3-year olds (to have adequate rest) and the requirements of the program (to be in the program full-day and participate in small groups).

I read a lot about NCLB and all the criticisms, and I see it so differently in early childhood, that if you do it right, and you use a tool that’s appropriate, that you don’t put pressure on kids, that you don’t… It’s all the don’ts. You don’t do what people have been driven to do in the name of adequate yearly progress that is inappropriate and they know. It’s like they’ve sold their souls to make their scores look good, and that’s not what we’re doing. (Admin 3.1)

Lake Area incorporated new requirements from ERF into their already-existing Head Start program. As a result, staff discovered new ways of teaching children from at-risk backgrounds that were intentional and raised expectations for children. Staff also changed the assessments used in the program, including more precise assessments focused on literacy that provided teachers with specific information to individualize instruction. An outside evaluator and the professional development trainer helped staff to enhance their data collection and analysis to make it more relevant to classroom teachers and the program as a whole. Throughout the change process, staff maintained a lens of developmentally appropriate practice and felt they were achieving positive results for children and improving their program.

**Conclusion**

The Lake Area Head Start program evolved in response to a variety of grants and programs, each with its own array of demands and expectations. As the program negotiated these demands and expectations, staff changed how they instructed children and, to some extent, what they believed best practices were in early childhood. At the same time, they maintained a core belief system that guided their adaptations and ensured they continued to focus on the whole child. The main areas of change for the Lake Area ERF included implementing a new curriculum, changing how the environment was arranged, using progress monitoring tools, and incorporating intensive professional development and coaching. As the teachers worked through the program requirements and saw the children responding positively, they gradually began to change their understanding and beliefs about the components of SBR, which continued a cycle of more deeply implementing the changes—a cycle of positive reinforcement. A focus on mental...
health and social-emotional development, both key components of developmentally appropriate practice, was important to staff, and this provided the lens through which they interpreted requirements.
CHAPTER 5

URBAN CENTER EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM

The Urban Center School District is located in a large metropolitan area of the upper Midwest. The district served approximately 40,400 students in the 2006-07 school year. Of these students, 74% were students of color, 69% were eligible for free or reduced price lunch, 17% were enrolled in special education, and 40% were English Language Learners. The district had a number of schools that did not made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under No Child Left Behind and also had a new superintendent. The change in leadership prompted the development of a new comprehensive strategic plan that incorporated a number of changes to the district in terms of structure, reorganization, and expansion of a new instructional reform model called the Academic Success Project (ASP) throughout the PreK-12 system. One aspect of the restructuring was decentralizing decision making and transferring responsibility to local sites, with the goal of creating a “system of schools” rather than a “school system.”

The Urban Center strategic plan included goals such as ensuring high academic achievement, promoting accountability, aligning resource allocation and priorities, and creating a stronger partnership with the community and families. The primary strategies to achieve these goals included ensuring that all students met or exceeded district targets in core subject areas, implementing ASP district-wide, providing a comprehensive professional development program, and creating an accountability plan. The strategic plan was intended to provide strategies, action steps, and measurable outcomes to guide progress toward these goals. In the district strategic plan, early childhood programming was targeted specifically and included in a number of strategies and action steps. Specific action steps that focused on early childhood programming included “consolidating all four year old programs under elementary education within the Office of Academics, increasing access to early childhood screening, initiating a school readiness campaign for families, and integrating ASP into all district programs, and creating an implementation handbook for all grade levels, including early childhood (CITE)” Early childhood was also included in strategies for creating a system of professional development and an accountability system.

13 All identifying information, including program or initiative names, has been changed to maintain confidentiality.
**Urban Center Early Childhood Program Context**

Early childhood was an integral part of the strategic plan of the Urban Central school district, and the reform model the K-12 system used was expanded to early childhood. The support from K-12 for early childhood was extensive and shown not only by words, but also by funding and administrative structure. One administrator said, “The district has taken [early childhood] on wholesale. Early childhood is getting lots of recognition… We are definitely players at the table. There are still challenges, but I don’t see any downsides” (Admin 2.6-EKP). Early childhood programs in Urban Center were diverse, served a range of families and children, tended to be co-located in the elementary schools, and aimed to ensure that children were ready for kindergarten.

The Urban Center program had a large number of early childhood programs for children birth through five years, including prekindergarten programs, Early Childhood Family Education programs, and School Readiness programs. The district also had many types of programs specifically for 4-year-olds, including programs designed and run by individual elementary schools, Montessori programs, Early Kindergarten Program (EKP), Early Reading First (ERF), Community Kindergarten, and School Readiness (SR). At the time of this research, each of these programs within the Urban Center School District had different funding streams, administrative structures, enrollment eligibility parameters, and program components and expectations.

The majority of the 4-year-old programs were located within elementary schools, and each elementary school had a different configuration of programs. The configuration of programs at each individual elementary school depended on the needs of the community in which the school was located and the resources available to the principals in the schools. As the 4-year-old programs were integrated into the culture of the different schools, they also were affected by the community in which the school was located and the challenges presented by that particular school. For example, if a particular school was on AYP, the 4-year-old programs were also affected, as one teacher noted: “I think the pressure of being on AYP and, of course, all the No Child Left Behind [requirements]… affects different schools differently” (Teacher 2.2-SR).

This research focused on two different 4-year-old programs in Urban Center: Early Kindergarten Program (EKP) and School Readiness (SR). These two programs provided unique insights into the process of SBR implementation in Urban Center. Both EKP and SR served children and families considered “at risk.” However, as this research occurred, EKP had been

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14 EKP and SR are program identifiers and will be explained later in this chapter.
implementing the Academic Success Project (ASP), the standards-based reform model, for over three years, while SR was just starting to implement ASP. The two programs had somewhat different philosophies and administrative structures and were at different stages of implementation. This case study tells the story of SBR in Urban Center early childhood programs through the lens of these two programs.

**Early Childhood Administrative Structure**

As mentioned above, Urban Center had many different programs for children under five. This diversity of preschool programs, with different names, different organizational structures, and different eligibility requirements, was challenging for the district and parents. During the study, the district was in the process of consolidating these preschool programs under the same administrative structure, with similar policies, procedures, and supports. School Readiness and Community Kindergarten, formerly administered by Community Education, were now under the Office of Academics in K-12. A director of preschool programs, part of the Office of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Supports, had been hired recently, with the administrators of SR and EKP reporting to her.

As the process of consolidation occurred, elementary principals became the instructional leads and supervisors of the preschool programs in the district. While EKP always had the principal in this role, it was a new configuration for SR programs. The SR administrator’s primary role had been to coordinate all of the School Readiness programs across the district and act as an instructional lead for the SR programs. In contrast, EKP teachers reported to the principal of the elementary school in which they were located. The EKP administrator described her role as:

> The liaison to the principals, the liaison to the district senior leadership about Early Childhood development, the liaison to the ASP, the supervisor of the coaches, [and] the person who sets up the professional development. [I am] the coordinator of all the different pieces. (Admin 2.6-EKP)

The consolidation of programs represented a departure from the previous role of the SR administrator, transitioning from a central early childhood coordinator to more localized control and administration based on the community in which the school was located.

The goal of consolidation was to reduce confusion for both staff and parents by ensuring all preschool programs were using similar curricula, terminology, and scheduling procedures. A teacher said,

> There are so many 4-year-old [preschool] programs. There’s Community Kindergarten, School Readiness, EKP, there are all these different programs, and that is too many programs for parents to understand. It is confusing for a person who is educated and has
English as a first language, and a lot of our families don’t. They are trying to support families in that so it is not so confusing when it is time to go into kindergarten. (Teacher 2.3-SR)

Consolidation of preschool programs was intended to make it easier for parents to understand the different programs available to their children in the district and make the enrollment system more streamlined and easier for parents to navigate. It would also make it easier for children and families to transition from one school or program to another, which was a common occurrence in this school district.

**Early Childhood Program Goals**

The motivation behind the reforms in the Urban Center school district was two-fold: ensuring that children were ready for school and closing the achievement gap. The stated goal of early childhood programs was to prepare children for kindergarten. The emphasis was on serving those children in the greatest need, or those who were at risk for school failure. The most common indicators of risk included income level, English language ability, disability status, and identified special needs. It was expected that as more children entered kindergarten prepared to learn, the achievement gap would be lessened at school entry. Theoretically, this would enable closure of the achievement gap as children move through school.

Serving children in the greatest need was highlighted both implicitly and explicitly as a goal of Urban Center. The eligibility requirements for Urban Center early childhood programs centered on children at risk of failure, or children who came from low-income homes, were learning English, and/or had special needs. It was clear that staff recognized that children came into school with “meaningful differences” and noted the priority for serving at-risk children.

Looking at the population that we work with, it’s a school that’s 93% free and reduced lunch, and I think working and living in an urban area, you have more kids coming to school who don’t have situations where parents are working with them or reading to them. I mean, they’re surviving and maybe don’t have the time to do things with their kids. And also there are a lot of students where English is not the first language, and so that affects everything we do. (Teacher 2.2-SR)

The EKP administrator described her experience observing an early childhood classroom serving primarily middle class students who have fewer risk factors:

The teacher was saying, “OK, we are going to have school tomorrow and then you are going to be off,” and she ticked off her fingers, Saturday, Sunday, Monday… She went through [the days they would have off]. How many days is that? The kids said, “Eleven!” She hadn’t been going one, two. And then she said, “What else will be different when you get back?” “It’ll be January! And it will be 2008!” This is all coming from the kids. And those aren’t particularly important things to know, but they were indicative of how much background knowledge is at the tip of their fingers. I was thinking of all of our EKP kids who are doing fantastic, but still there isn’t a single classroom that would know when we come back it will be January. (Admin 2.6-EKP)
This illustrates the concept of “meaningful differences” and highlights why some early childhood programs are focusing on children and families who may not have the same opportunities as other families.

The concept of “meaningful differences” was also noted by the professional development trainer, who strongly believed that children coming from backgrounds who were at risk for school failure needed something different from early childhood programs—and in fact it was the responsibility of early childhood programs to be intentional about providing experiences that children may not have received at home.

I think I have a good understanding of at risk families and at risk children—I have worked with them for a long time. I have a heart for moving them, and I know that they are different than middle class children who have had a lot of opportunity. Why do we need to look at children differently? Because there are meaningful differences. This is about children who are now, with tax dollars, coming to your program, and they are saying, “How are you going to make a difference in developmentally appropriate way?” …Some kids need something from us that they aren’t getting from their families. (PD 2-3)

Focusing on children with the greatest needs in order to close the achievement gap and ensure that children were ready for school was clearly an important goal for both EKP and SR. This goal also aligned with the goals of the K-12 system, enabling early childhood to be an integral supportive partner in the school system.

**Program Philosophy and Culture**

Both SR and EKP based their program philosophy developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) and best practices in early childhood. They wanted to ensure that teaching was meaningful to children, was based in their experiences, and used hands-on techniques. The professional development coach said, “The classroom is supposed to be fun and meaningful. It is supposed to be about play and [children’s] process” (PD 2.7). However, there were differences between EKP and SR. The SR administrators and teachers had a somewhat traditional view of early childhood education and tended to emphasize social-emotional development more explicitly than the EKP teachers. The EKP teachers and administrators were more aware of the requirements, demands, and need for academics. They seemed to understand more deeply what the children would be facing in kindergarten and were more aware of doing their part to close the achievement gap.

The School Readiness programs’ philosophy included that all children can learn; children learn best through hands-on, experiential learning; and social-emotional development formed the basis for learning. The programs believed that being able to function in a group, solve problems, listen, and be a part of classroom routines were all social skills that children needed for school and life.
To me, I still think personal and social skills are the number one. I think kids need to know how to go to school, know how to function in a group… how to wait, how to take their turn, [and] be part of a classroom. I think it’s the most important thing I do. They need to learn how to be a student and how to come to school and be comfortable in a classroom. (Teacher 2.2-SR)

SR also emphasized exposing children to the experiences of being in school and helping them feel comfortable with classroom and school routines. The experience of being in a classroom was more important to some teachers than standards and academics.

But the idea that all children are learners and they are curious and they can learn and they learn best by hands on activities and experiential learning and the social-emotional development is so really key and important in early childhood, and that is one of the things that people have been concerned about getting lost in this kind of a model. But that is still a very important part of our program. It is necessary for helping children learn early literacy and cognitive concepts and so forth. (Admin 2.1-SR)

While academics were part of the program, they came after the first priority of social-emotional development. There was some concern that the SR philosophy, particularly their emphasis on social-emotional development, would get lost as the program moved toward consolidation with other preschool programs.

In contrast, the EKP program had a slightly different philosophy. Although EKP staff also saw the importance of social-emotional development, they placed a priority on academics and using data to inform instruction.

Teachers, I think, for the most part have a pretty good grounding of, yes, we are all about social development, helping children become a part of a community, and allowing them their individuality, about helping them understand that we are all learners here, and we have to be responsible for each other. That is part of the training we have been doing, is responsive classroom-based community building and the principles of learning, accountable talk statements. (PD 2.7)

They haven’t focused on these kids are going to be reading in 3rd grade because of what we do now. (Admin 2.6-EKP)

The EKP administrators and teachers were more explicitly academic, placed more emphasis on evidence and data and had a data-driven focus. One of the EKP coaches attributed this to being in the schools and having principals as the instructional leads:

They are being driven by building principals that are very academically focused and very data driven at this point in this district and very outcome driven. If your scores are good, you are doing a good job. If they aren’t good, then something is wrong in your classroom. People aren’t looking at the social competency in schools as much. They are, but not as much as what used to be the focus of early childhood, now has become the underlying, “Oh yeah, and we have to do this, too,” especially in the school setting. (PD 2.7)
Although both SR and EKP recognized the importance of social-emotional development as the foundation for academic success, the culture and philosophy of EKP expanded to explicitly include an academic focus and use of data. There appeared to be more awareness in EKP that the teachers were expected to ensure that children performed well and met specific goals linked to future success in school.

**Community Interaction**

Another large part of the district context was the interaction with the community. There were a number of ways this manifested in Urban Center. The superintendent was hired in 2006, and one of her main goals was to involve the community in the school, seeing the “community as partners with schools and [holding] frequent community meetings” (Admin 2.1-SR). Although this administrator noted that early childhood programs always had a strong connection to the community, the message from the superintendent to the community was more targeted, focusing on “the achievement gap and specifically her concern is closing the achievement gap, but very specifically for African American children” (Admin 2.1-SR). This related to the overall goal of the early childhood programs to close the achievement gap by focusing on children in the greatest need.

Early childhood programs were also connected to the community through interaction with child care centers and home-based child care programs. EKP included community child care centers and homes in the professional development and reform models, inviting staff from the community child care centers to trainings and providing coaches from EKP to teachers. The child care centers were challenging because of high staff turnover, so EKP focused on training and coaching the administration of the centers rather than the teachers.

We are going to end the relationship we had with the centers we have been working with, and we are going to start over with a whole new crop of centers. We aren’t going to start with the teachers; we are going to start with the directors and the managers and give them 6 months of training before we start with the teachers to see if we can institutionalize it a little more up front. If managers/owners aren’t deep into it, then it goes when the teacher goes. (Admin 2.6-EKP)

The early childhood programs were trying to build capacity in the greater community and raise awareness about the importance of school readiness. Staff realized the best way to do this was to work with the leaders in the child care centers to encourage center-wide change.

In summary, the context of Urban Center early childhood programs was characterized by four notable aspects. First, there was a diverse array of early childhood programs for preschoolers, which previously had a range of funding streams, administrative structures, and program requirements. This changed as preschool programs were consolidated under the Office
of Academics. Second, the majority of preschool programs were located in elementary schools, and, as these programs were consolidated, the principals were becoming the instructional leads. Third, the goals of the early childhood programs were to prepare children for school and help to close the achievement gap, but the different philosophies of EKP and SR gave a slightly different meaning to this. Finally, early childhood programs had a strong base in the community, both in terms of being partners and also providing information to other community child care programs in the area.

**Standards-Based Reform in Urban Center School District**

In Urban Center early childhood programs, standards-based reform focused on how the district reform model, the Academic Success Project, was applied to preschool programs. The following section describes each of the overall components of SBR as they were defined in Urban Center school district, including standards and alignment, curriculum and instruction, and assessment. The primary funding for implementing the principles of ASP in preschool programs came from a grant received by Urban Center from a large Midwest foundation.

**Academic Success Project**

The Urban Center School District began an educational reform model in grades K-6 in 2001 called the Academic Success Project (ASP). The ASP was developed as part of Urban Center’s strategic plan, with the goals of ensuring high achievement, increasing accountability, aligning resources and priorities, and strengthening relationships with communities and families. The ASP had a number of different core elements, including standards-based curriculum and instruction, standards-based assessment, a focus on core academic skills, professional development that included ongoing coaching and peer support, and shared instructional leadership. Instructional leadership included having building principals act as instructional leaders and increasing the capability of district-level staff to be instructional leaders as well. Finally, the implementation elements of ASP included using demonstration sites within the district and gradually taking the project to scale throughout the district. In 2004, the district received a grant from a large Midwest foundation to develop and implement a preschool program aligned with the K-6 ASP reform model. This was called Early Kindergarten Program, or EKP.

ASP had 10 principles of learning on which administrative leadership, curriculum, instruction, and assessment were based: organizing for effort, clear expectations, fair and credible evaluations, recognition of accomplishment, academic rigor, a thinking curriculum, accountable talk, socializing intelligence, self-management of learning, and learning as apprenticeship. These
principles formed the foundation of the ASP and guided all implementation efforts, providing an overarching framework in which the school district operated. The ASP created new assumptions about what it meant to learn, who could learn, and how learning was achieved. Organizing for effort replaced aptitude with effort-based schools, with an underlying assumption that all students could achieve high standards with sustained and directed effort. High standards were clearly and explicitly defined with visible targets for students, providing clear expectations. Grading was based on these targets, and assessments were aligned with standards to ensure fair and credible evaluations for students. As part of the evaluation process, recognition of accomplishment, whether meeting standards or progress benchmarks, motivated students. Developing a curriculum organized around core areas of knowledge and actively engaging students in problem solving and thinking as this curriculum was taught created academic rigor in a thinking curriculum.

Accountable TalkSM promoted learning through a specific way of discussing ideas by using evidence and reasoning. Teaching, or socializing intelligence, included developing habits of mind, reasoning, and problem solving capabilities; and developing beliefs about capacity, rights, and obligation to understand the world. Students were responsible for their own learning, meaning that they developed and used a set of self-monitoring skills, leading to self-management of learning. Finally, learning as apprenticeship was promoted by modeling complex thinking and by providing coaching and mentoring opportunities.

Taken as a whole, these principles of learning provided an overarching framework and reformed traditional assumptions about teaching and learning. It was a powerful model in which it was assumed that all students had the capability and responsibility to learn deep content knowledge and complex thinking skills in an environment of accountability and coaching. As one administrator said, “It is all about these 10 principles, and if these 10 principles are operating in a school, then kids are going to engage in effort-based learning and take responsibility for their learning and the learning of their peers” (Admin 2.6-EKP).

The ASP’s goal was ultimately to raise student achievement, but the model hinged on improving instructional practices. The ASP expected to reform teaching and learning by changing the way in which skills were taught through ongoing, comprehensive professional development to support implementation. In K-12, the ASP first focused on reading and writing, but later expanded to other areas of the curriculum. The comprehensive nature of the ASP was such that it aligned curriculum, instruction, and assessment with standards; provided in-depth implementation support through professional development, coaching, and mentoring; and created principals and administrators as instructional leaders. This way, the entire structure of a school was changed to
reflect the ASP reform model. Although the ASP began as a voluntary program, it was eventually implemented in all of the schools across the K-12 system. As the reform model was successful, the district decided to expand the model to preschool programs across the district to extend continuity down to the younger grades.

**ASP in Early Childhood**

As part of taking the ASP reform model to scale in the district, the Early Kindergarten Program (EKP) was initiated in 2004. Funded primarily by a large Midwest foundation, EKP was to develop a pilot early childhood program based on the ASP, but adapted to the specific needs of children who were in their year before kindergarten. The EKP administrator described the rationale for this grant:

> Does the alignment with K-6 give kids a bump if they are using the same language in 4-year-old programs as when they go into K? Plus they are members of that school and the principal takes responsibility for [the classrooms], which is very different from the way School Readiness or Community Kindergarten where they… are more like tenants in the building as opposed to part of the building. (Admin 2.6-EKP)

The first years of EKP were focused on adapting the core elements of the ASP to the unique nature of early childhood education. As EKP was charged with merging the principles of ASP with best practices in early childhood education, the negotiation of including these two philosophies of education—while not incompatible—did mean changing ASP elements to fit with early childhood practices and adapting and expanding early childhood practices to include ASP elements.

EKP began by looking at Readers and Writers Workshop, a specific way to teach reading and writing and an integral aspect of the ASP. The structure and schedule of early childhood programs meant that this needed to be merged into one Early Childhood Workshop. ASP includes instructional strategies such as read aloud, shared reading, interactive writing, and active learning, and all needed adaptation to Pre-K. This was done in a systematic way, by first studying what was already taking place in preschool programs and looking at the ASP model in the elementary schools. One of the professional development trainers described the process in this way:

> It wasn’t an attempt to make a more academic pre-kindergarten program. It was an attempt to understand what is the best from where they are headed and what is the appropriate starting point the year before. And so we created a workshop hour, rather than Readers Workshop or Writers Workshop. That workshop hour allows for effective small group activities, appropriate supported developmental play and more focus on what do children know about phonemic awareness, letter learning, etc. (PD 2.4)

Throughout the process, staff, administrators, and trainers took into account best practices in early childhood instruction. One trainer explicitly acknowledged this, saying, “I have been careful to structure the workshops to maximize the principles of early childhood while also
providing for what the kids are ready to do” (PD 2.4). Determining how to apply the principles of the ASP within an early childhood instructional context was a process of negotiation. One administrator said the ASP had “fine instructional strategies for 4-year-olds, too; you just have to do it in a preschool way” (Admin 2.6-EKP). Another professional development trainer further explained:

There is an early childhood foundation that we kept that has that active learning component. Children are all about inquiry and discovery and constructing knowledge. We took all of those ASP principles of learning ideas and concepts and put academic rigor and Accountable Talk on top of that… [while] holding on to how do children learn. (PD 2.7)

The early childhood programs took the salient elements of the ASP and blended them with developmentally appropriate practice. The result was a number of changes to the ASP that were different from how the ASP was implemented in the elementary schools. It represented a merging of the ASP principles and language with early childhood principles of learning.

The ASP in early childhood had certain expectations. First, the environment should be arranged to promote independent learning with quality materials. Routines and rituals created a community and self-regulation. Early Childhood Workshop, an adaptation of Readers Workshop and Writers Workshop in K-6, structured the day and included Community Circle, Active Learning, Small Group Time, and a closing meeting called Regroup to Revisit. It was also expected that additional instructional strategies would be used, such as Read-Alouds, Shared Reading, Interactive Writing, and Accountable Talk. Each of these expectations will be explored below, along with the details of the implementation and change process in both EKP and SR.

Standards and Alignment

The centerpiece of the Urban Center early childhood programs was standards. Teachers knew the standards for which they were responsible, there were targets associated with some of the standards, and the teachers used the standards to guide their instructional and assessment practices. Standards tended to be skill-based, not content-based. Standards were explicitly stated in lesson plans and posted throughout the room. These standards were used to inform instruction, develop curriculum, and drive assessment constructs. As a trainer said, “It is all about the standards. All of their curriculum, all of the assessment tools, everything is focused on what do you want them to know by the end of the year” (PD 2.7-EKP).

The programs used two different sets of skill-based standards: The Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs) and the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) standards in speaking and listening. The ECIPs were the state early childhood standards that reflected the developmental domains of Personal and Social Development, Language and
Literacy, Mathematical and Logical Thinking, and Physical Development and Health. The NCEE
Early Learning Standards were developed as a joint endeavor by the National Center on
Education and the Economy and the University of Pittsburgh. The Early Learning Standards for
speaking and listening were part of a PreK-grade 3 continuum of standards based on oral
language development and provided a foundation for literacy success in elementary school. These
standards were more detailed than the ECIPs in oral language and listed skills such as conversing
on a topic, discussing books, explaining and seeking information, understanding the rules of
interactions, and increasing vocabulary.

The comprehensive list of standards was extensive and therefore difficult to manage, so
EKP took the standards and narrowed them down to those they determined were most important
for kindergarten readiness. One of the EKP coaches described this process and the rationale
behind it:

There is just no way we can expect our teachers to teach to all of the standards we have.
If you focus in on it, they will do a few well rather than a lot at a surface level. We are in
the process of getting them to narrow it down. (PD 2.7-EKP)

EKP narrowed their focus to ensure that teachers truly understood the standards and children
received the instruction they needed to enter kindergarten. The ECIPs were aligned with the
Work Sampling System (WSS), a critical part of the assessment battery in EKP and SR. EKP also
developed a table that aligned the standards with the EKP target, assessment tool, and assessment
schedule.

Standards were the centerpiece of both EKP and SR. Both programs recognized the
importance of standards and based their instruction and assessment on standards, and standards
formed the backbone of the curriculum for both programs. Teachers were aware of the role
standards played in their teaching:

Everything we do is based on standards: the ECIPs, the national standards. I mean we’ve
even got them in our lesson plan book to refer to, and WSS, the checklist, those are
basically the standards listed right there. It kind of helps to guide what I do. (Teacher 2.2-
SR)

From this we don’t have a set curriculum we follow, but from these guidelines we have
all of our standards and from here in each unit we try to work on the standards in the area
of study to plan our activities. (Teacher 2.8-EKP)

Standards guided curriculum development, assessment, and instructional practices. Standards
provided guidelines as to which skills children are expected to know and learn upon entering
kindergarten, and teachers had clear expectations about what to teach. These standards guided
alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment and also were correlated with expectations
for kindergarten. However, *what* to teach was different from *how* to teach. The following section describes instructional strategies and the relationship between standards and the curriculum.

**Curriculum**

The early childhood programs in Urban Center school district used standards as the foundation for the curriculum. They explicitly chose not to use a “boxed” curriculum, such as Doors to Discovery (Wright Group, McGraw-Hill, 2001), believing that teachers have more flexibility and adaptability when they have a curriculum “framework,” as opposed to a more scripted and rigid curriculum. The early childhood curriculum framework was based on three different aspects: the standards as described above; Areas of Study, or content areas; and emerging interests of the children in individual classrooms. Teachers were expected to develop their curriculum and daily lesson plans based on these principles, although they could draw on a variety of resources, including “boxed” curricula. The curriculum was rounded out by specific instructional strategies, based on the concepts of ASP. In this way, teachers knew what they needed to teach their children—and to some extent how to teach it—but with some flexibility to decide on specific content and activities.

Standards formed the backbone of the curriculum, with clear skill-based expectations. As one administrator said, “the standards are the curriculum” (Admin 2.6-EKP). The programs then integrated content knowledge, using Areas of Study. These content areas were suggested, not required, and were organized into meaningful areas for young children, such as Community, Building and Construction, Fall, Winter, and Self and Others. Teachers were responsible for identifying standards, key concepts, vocabulary, read-aloud books, and active learning center activities for each Area of Study. Finally, teachers had the flexibility to follow the children’s interests as they developed the curriculum. This idea of constructing curriculum was described by the EKP coach:

They do have parameters that they have to follow. They have to have an area of study that lasts a month. They do have to have a content [area], the “walk in the room and scream the theme” idea. You have to be able to see what they are studying. (PD 2.7)

The EKP teachers and the SR teachers both used standards to develop curriculum, but it seemed that the EKP teachers had more guidelines for content Areas of Study. An EKP teacher described her process for constructing curriculum as follows:

This program gives us a guideline of things, and we choose Areas of Study. These are the suggested areas of study that we should work on. And we get to as individual teachers choose what we want to work on from these [Areas of Study]... From this we don’t have a set curriculum we follow, but from these guidelines we have all of our standards, and from here in each unit we try to work on the standards in the Area of Study to plan our activities. (Teacher 2.8-EKP)
Note how she mentioned the suggested guidelines for Areas of Study and the use of the standards to plan activities. In contrast, a SR teacher thought of a theme (Area of Study) herself:

I have a theme that I think is important and that I do, and then I will gather materials or ideas or activities based on standards, based on work sampling to kind of fill in the pieces. For example, now we’re doing gingerbread, so I have themes for working on some math skills and some counting skills, and when I look through Everyday Math, I’m going to look for something that has more of a theme around bakery. (Teacher 2.2 SR)

Although both pieced together curriculum based on standards, the EKP teachers worked within more structure and guidelines.

The decision to have teachers create their own curriculum based on certain parameters had both benefits and drawbacks. The rationale behind this decision was based on the expectation that a flexible and adaptable curriculum would be more meaningful to students, particularly in the content information. A coach explained why the program chose to use a teacher-created curriculum rather than a box curriculum:

The idea [is to do] student-driven Areas of Study that are deeper than what you can get with a box. If you give teachers a box, they get stuck in the box, and they don’t think outside of that. They might not be able to put the standards into it, they might not be able to make that match. So if all you give them is the standards, and you support them with the activities, they will build something that is stronger than what we would have if we got a box. That was the idea—we want them to become strong thinkers and creators of curriculum vs. replicating what is in a box. (PD 2.7)

This represents a confidence in teachers’ professionalism—a confidence that the early childhood teachers would be able to meld the layered expectations into a coherent curriculum without reliance on a “boxed” curriculum. The coach went on to explain what she observed while working with both K-12 teachers and early childhood teachers:

In the schools, teachers have been trained to teach the curriculum; they have been trained to teach content, not to teach children. In early childhood we are saying we want you to teach content to children… I think elementary, middle school, high school teachers, they have been handed a curriculum and told, “OK, you have to reach these scores by the end of the year, start teaching, and this is what I want you to do.” It creates a framework of “I am teaching curriculum and the kids can get it or not because I don’t have time to pay attention to adapting my curriculum to that kid because he doesn’t get it. I have to move on.” That’s just an instinctual thing, and I have no proof of that, but that is what I see. (PD 2.7)

EKP, therefore, decided to allow teachers to create their own curriculum in the hope that the result would be a more coherent, meaningful, and experiential environment that meshes with children’s interests. It also would keep teachers focused on teaching children, not teaching curriculum, while acknowledging their professionalism as teachers.
Although some saw advantages in a teacher-created curriculum based on standards and children’s interests, some teachers were challenged by this. Some teachers were used to having a curriculum provided for them. It was a learning curve, as one teacher described:

EKP wanted you to create your own because they didn’t want it to get too artsy crafty and boxed. The second year they bought a curriculum, but they didn’t buy it for each teacher. They bought it for us to check out. At this new school, we don’t have a curriculum, and I kind of pull everything together, and I will use some of the Doors [to Discovery], then whatever I have collected online and [from books]. (Teacher 2.9-EKP)

While choosing to have teachers develop their own curriculum allowed the program and teachers to have flexibility, the program lost the comprehensive scope and sequence that would have been present with most boxed curricula. Having a scope and sequence would have reflected the continuum of skill development and assisted with scaffolding. As one of the trainers explained, “I think there is nothing like a scope and sequence that someone else has done, and then you get to support it with your individual standards, knowing who your children are” (PD 2-3)” Another potential problem with focusing on standards as the basis for the curriculum and allowing teachers to create their own curriculum was the difficulty of creating a comprehensive curriculum, including standards, content information, and rich learning opportunities. Boxed curricula tend to be built around areas of study, have a strong basis in books, intentionally develop vocabulary, and incorporate active learning areas that are linked to the area of study. The trainer explained:

Most of the teachers write the curriculum off the seat of their pants off the standards. But with that, they focus on one standard, and they are not comprehensive. So there are obstacles to whatever one you decide to choose. EKP is standards-driven, so they may pull a standard out, like children can count to 10. Well, then a teacher for three weeks works on one to 10 but doesn’t have a comprehensive curriculum, so the oral language, the vocabulary, the books are dropped. (PD 2-3)

In other words, teachers would end up teaching skill-based information, but delivering it in a way that lacked context or meaningful content.

Instruction

Teachers delivered standards and curriculum through the use of specific instructional strategies. One administrator described the connection between instruction and standards as, “They teach the standards through the Area of Study with these instructional strategies” (Admin 2.6-EKP). The ASP had specific instructional practices that teachers were expected to use in the classroom and provided a scheduled structure to the day. The day began with Ease into the Day, a transition time from home to school routines, which included Sign In, a specific activity that progressed as children became more proficient with writing their names. Other instructional aspects included Independent Reading, a time for children to read by themselves or in pairs; a
Word Wall, with familiar words and pictures sorted on the wall by the beginning letter; and the
incorporation of reading, writing, and talking into all activities, including active learning centers
and small groups.

However, Early Childhood Workshop (ECW) was the defining feature of the ASP and
included Community Circle, Active Learning, and Small Group instruction. ECW combined best
practices in early childhood with the structures and instructional methods that children would
encounter in Readers’ and Writers’ Workshops in kindergarten. The ECW lasted approximately
an hour and a half and began with Community Circle. Children greeted each other, and teachers
presented a lesson to the class as a large group, using strategies such as Read-Aloud, Shared
Reading, and Interactive Writing. Read-Aloud was a specific way of reading a book to a group of
children that focused on print rules and building vocabulary and encouraged children to interact
with stories. An administrator described the process of Read-Aloud:

I’ve observed teachers reading books to children for years, but this is such a very specific
way of reading books to children. They read the same book for 5 days. [They] do a
picture walk, vocabulary, concepts of print. (Admin 2.1-SR)

Shared Reading was another strategy to help teachers and children read together. It was usually a
short message, poem, or simple big book, and the teachers often used a pointer to help children
read along. Interactive Writing was a way to have teachers and students write and develop text
together. This sometimes included a short message, written together as part of the lesson.

At the conclusion of Community Circle, students were directed to Active Learning time,
where they interacted with the environment in a purposeful and meaningful way that was linked
to the lesson shared during Community Circle. The goal was to practice the skills introduced
during Community Circle and would be done through either independent or small group
activities. Active Learning was a large block of time that allowed children to explore
intentionally-created learning centers and often included Small Group time. Small Groups
allowed teachers to work more intimately with students, were planned in advance, and allowed
children to extend, introduce, or practice skills. The teacher was meant to act as a facilitator.
Finally, at the end of ECW, children met again as a group to review what they learned and plan
activities for the future.

Both EKP and SR implemented these components, but at the time of this research, EKP
had worked with this specific terminology and structure for much longer than SR, and the depth
of understanding and implementation was different in the two programs. SR was just learning the
ASP terminology, such as Community Circle and Active Learning, and changing the structure of
their day to reflect the ASP structure. EKP had implemented the ASP for much longer and felt
more ownership of the process and more deeply understood what it should look like. This was illustrated in how the teachers from the two programs described how they structured and implemented small groups. One EKP teacher described her small groups:

For example, this week one of the activities was we had sorted clothes by winter and summer clothes. And we did that in large group. In small group I had a piece of paper with flip flops and a stocking hat and earmuffs, and they colored the ones for winter and cut them out and glued them in their journal. That was what [the low kids] handled. Then with the higher group, they wrote the beginning letter for each word. The in-between group, I had them count how many they glued in their journal and had them practice writing the number. I was trying to vary it depending on their needs. That is how I scaffold it. (Teacher 2.8-EKP)

The SR teachers understood the need for small groups, but were not as clear about how to structure ability grouping. Small groups in SR did not seem as intentional as those planned by the EKP teachers, who focused clearly on skills and differentiating learning.

Yeah, skill-based, I think, is kind of the idea where they would like to go in ability. To be honest, though, we haven’t done that yet. It takes a very long time to get small groups established to begin with, and then to really figure out what you want to do when you get there… It hasn’t been specific in ability-based; it has been more this child could really benefit from this… I don’t know if that will change as the years go on, as we keep using it. I do know that it seems like the ultimate goal is for it to be ability-based, and I think there are pluses and negatives to that. (Teacher 2.3-SR)

Another SR teacher pointed out the differences between small groups in ASP and how she traditionally structured them:

As part of Early Childhood workshop, they want us to do small group instruction every day. And I have always done small group instruction; I’ve just done it differently. And now it’s driven by our assessment results… It’s the data-driven instruction, seeing where they’re at, what you need to work on and then planning your small groups to fit their needs and whatever skills they need to work on. And that part is different. (Teacher 2.2-SR)

While small groups were part of instructional practice in both SR and EKP, there was a difference between how they were implemented at the time of this research. It was clear that small groups should rely on assessment, although programs were in different stages of implementing this expectation. The next section describes the role of assessment in more detail.

Assessment

The Urban Center used a variety of assessments to determine children’s progress and classroom instructional quality. The intent of the assessment was both formative and summative, in that it was meant to inform program development and classroom instruction as well as to demonstrate outcomes. EKP and SR used a variety of assessments depending on the program. Table 4 summarizes the assessments used in EKP and SR.
To assess classroom quality, EKP used the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO), a measure of literacy environment; the Classroom Assessment Scoring System™ (CLASS™); a measure of overall instructional quality; and the EKP classroom observation tool, a measure of ASP implementation. EKP had been using these classroom assessments for quite some time, while SR had just begun using some of the EKP observation protocols. The program used these different classroom assessments to determine the extent to which teachers were following instructional protocol, to assess areas of teaching strengths and weaknesses, and to inform professional development opportunities.

EKP assessed student progress in three ways: portfolios of student work, the Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDIs), and a program-created form called the EKP summary. The EKP summary assessed the same types of standards as the WSS. As one EKP teacher described, “Of all the areas that we look at, the WSS, they took it and put it into a form” (Teacher 2.8-EKP). The EKP Summary also included the NCEE standards. The IGDIs, the EKP Summary, and the WSS were done three times per year in EKP. The SR program primarily used the WSS to assess student learning, although they were trained and began to use the IGDIs in their classrooms.

Table 4. Assessments Used in EKP and SR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Early Kindergarten Project (EKP)</th>
<th>School Readiness (SR)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) (Classroom literacy environment)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Assessment Scoring System™ (CLASS™; Overall instructional quality)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EKP classroom observation (ASP implementation)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Beginning stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Sampling System (WSS; Child assessment)</td>
<td>Portfolio only</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDIs; Child progress monitoring)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Beginning stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EKP summary (Child assessment skill checklist)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because of the variety of assessments, EKP developed a number of tools to assist teachers, including a table of standards with the corresponding assessment tool, when the assessment takes place, who was responsible for the assessment, and the EKP target for the standard, if applicable. This was included in a book with a calendar of all the professional development days throughout
the year and copies of their lesson planning guide. There was also space to check off when they taught the required standard. The use of these assessments in the different programs will be described later.

In summary, standards-based reform in Urban Center early childhood programs centered on a specific reform model called the Academic Success Project (ASP), which laid out specific principles of learning and instructional strategies to be used in the classroom. Funding to implement this model in early childhood programs came from a grant from a large private foundation. Like other models of SBR, standards formed the backbone of the model and the basis for the curriculum. Assessment included classroom tools to ensure that the classroom environment was of high quality and maintained the ASP standards and child assessments to monitor progress and demonstrate outcomes. Although there were slight differences between EKP and SR, in general, they were both working to implement the ASP, but were in different stages. The following section discusses the process of implementing SBR in Urban Center and the diversity of supports the programs put in place for the teachers.

**The Implementation Process of Standards-Based Reform**

The implementation process of SBR in Urban Center encompassed how staff perceived and enacted the SBR components in the classroom. Teachers, administrators, and coaches were all theoretically on the same page with similar understandings of what was expected, and this was a critical aspect of implementation.

One thing I do with the coaching and the consulting is that I have worked really hard to get programs to understand that they have to have clear expectations for teachers… If you want teachers to do something, what is it that you want them to do? And then you have to be real explicit about it so teachers can live up to that expectation. (PD 2-3)

However, having clear expectations was not always enough to ensure changes were implemented. Therefore, the Urban Center program had a number of supports in place to encourage implementation, including classroom observations, professional development trainings, individual coaching, and professional learning communities (PLCs). “You have to have all of these to have behavior change” (PD 2-3), said one of the trainers.

Professional development in Urban Center consisted of training, classroom observations, coaching, and formal and informal professional learning communities. This professional development was comprehensive, personally relevant to teachers, ongoing, and based in research. In addition, there were levels of professional development based on the different levels of staff. The teachers received training on classroom instructional strategies that were based on evidence
and research. The teachers were observed as they implemented these strategies and had coaching to assist in implementation. Coaches also attended teacher trainings and had coaching training where they were taught not only what to coach, but how to coach. Coaches were also observed by a master coach to help them improve their coaching. Finally, administration, including building principals, participated in “learning walks.” These guided observations provided a picture of implementation across the district and showed administrators what they should be looking for in the classrooms. These different layers of professional development are summarized in Table 5.

**Table 5. Levels of Professional Development in Urban Center**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional development</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Coaches</th>
<th>Administrators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>Classroom observation by coach and administrators. May go and observe other classrooms as well.</td>
<td>Coaching observation by master coach</td>
<td>“Learning Walks”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trainings</td>
<td>Ongoing training in Instructional strategies</td>
<td>Intermittent training in elements of effective coaching</td>
<td>May or may not attend teacher trainings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching</td>
<td>Ongoing coaching from coach</td>
<td>Coaching by master coach</td>
<td>Not officially</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Learning Communities</td>
<td>With other teachers</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While each type of professional development was intended to provide support and a coherent whole, staff mentioned that implementation was still not an easy process.

**Classroom Observations**

Classroom observations helped programs understand what was happening in individual classrooms and provided a snapshot of implementation across the program as a whole. Observation also kept staff accountable to the program protocols and helped to focus trainings on program areas of weaknesses. Urban Center had different levels of observation that involved teachers, coaching staff and trainers, and administration. Coaches observed classroom teachers and instructional practices, while Master Coaches observed coaches during the coaching process. Administrative staff also observed classrooms in many buildings across the district, to have the “big picture” of implementation.
To assist with the various observations, the program used classroom observation instruments that were aligned with the program goals. Three main observation tools were used, including the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO), the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS™), and an ASP alignment tool. The ELLCO focused on literacy instruction, the CLASS™ focused on teacher-student interaction and critical thinking skills, and the ASP alignment was geared specifically toward the EKP structure and instruction. Together, these observations formed a picture of classroom instruction throughout the program and provided a clear framework of expectations for the teachers. Teachers knew what they should be teaching and how they should be teaching it, and were held accountable for doing it. They knew they would be observed using these classroom assessment protocols. But, it wasn’t always easy:

That is opening up your classroom to another adult who then has ideas and things that they want you to implement in your room, which is fine, but they are only there for half an hour during the day or once every few weeks and they… aren’t there to see everything else. (Teacher 2.3-SR)

Administrators also conducted observations. These observations were different from the coaching observations, as one of the professional development trainers described:

We do what we call cluster visits… Nine principals are working together in teams of three to visit other classrooms, observe, and talk together about what is expected in early childhood. It is not just going in and evaluating a teacher in their own building, but it is looking across the district, which is always a stronger model. (PD 2.4)

The goal of these cluster visits and learning walks was to get a sense of ASP implementation across the district. It was a larger view than that of the coaches, who were focused on individual classrooms and teachers. The coaches also went on “cluster visits,” which provided them with a larger view of aspects of the program as well. For example:

One time we focused on small group instruction, so the day before we went around to 4-6 schools and looked just at small group instruction… By the end of the day, we had a pretty clear picture program-wide, about what we were missing or what kinds of things we needed to be thinking about. Because you would see patterns as you went through… it was a wonderful coaching support. (PD 2.7)

There were also times teachers would join coaches and administrators to visit a classroom together. This was a challenge for the teacher being observed, but it was a critical part of the professional development that helped the coaches and administrators understand how implementation was happening in the district and what kinds of instructional strategies and activities were developmentally appropriate in an early childhood classroom.

Both district-level cluster visits and individual teacher observations provided evidence about the extent to which ASP was being implemented, identified areas of weakness, and
informed further professional development. The EKP administrator collected observation and assessment information “every month to get a sense of [whether we are] using the ELLCO tool to change the classroom” (Admin 2.6-EKP). Classroom observations were also used to understand the process of individual teacher change and overall program change. The classroom observations were combined with child data, such as the IGDIIs, to inform future training.

We did observational assessment and taking that information and analyzing it and figuring where are our holes, what do we need to do next. And we take all of our IGDIIs data and we compile it, analyze it, [and find out] where do we need to do professional development for our teachers, where are our holes. [We use] the data to look at what needs to happen for professional development. (PD 2.7)

By understanding the program’s strengths and weaknesses, the program was able to intently focus their professional development on areas that were lacking.

Training

The training provided by the professional development trainers for the teachers and the coaches had a number of key elements, including providing knowledge based on research, defining expectations based on program protocols and goals, and demonstrating and modeling instructional practices. This focused professional development, aligned with the goals of the program, was a key element of implementation. Trainings not only had clear content, but also scope and sequence. A large part of the training was providing evidence, both from research and from the program itself, and this evidence helped motivate teachers to try new strategies and change their instruction.

Content. The content of the trainings centered on the principles of the ASP (discussed earlier), instructional strategies related to these principles, and early literacy development. The early literacy training gave teachers a common vocabulary and understanding about how children develop early literacy skills while describing elements of a quality teacher. One of the trainers described the content of the trainings as follows:

The core is built around solid research about how people move from knowledge to behavior change… It should be based on what science says, not just what someone feels is really important. So we’ve always tried to do that with professional development, always have as solid background of what science says. (PD 2-3)

The goal for the trainings was to provide teachers with multiple strategies for teaching children that were based in research.

Research and science provided the models for the instructional strategies the teachers were expected to implement in their classrooms. The training translated research into practical strategies that teachers could use. Specific instructional strategies were discussed during the
trainings, and teachers watched videos of the model being implemented in the classroom. The
trainer was explicit in what to watch for in the models and how to implement the strategies:

I have to first understand what teachers’ knowledge base is in that. I provide models, so
professional development always includes some form of demonstration—videotape,
pictures, teachers talking, thinking out loud—then teachers rehearsing, and then some
form of practice. (PD 2-3)

However, the models and the information presented in the training were meant to be a guide:

If I give every teacher this recipe [or model], then they move forward and adapt it. It isn’t
that teachers can’t be creative and they can’t use their own intuition and they can’t follow
children’s lead, because if [a teacher] is doing this and the children aren’t attending, then
[the teacher] needs to pull some tools that they have. (PD 2-3)

Therefore, each model served as a guide and a foundation upon which teachers could build.
Although using the model was important, just as important was a teacher’s creativity, classroom
management, and knowledge of the specific needs of the students. The trainers recognized that
the teachers were trained professionals, and they expected them teachers to use their professional
judgment to combine their previous skills with the new information.

Along with research as evidence, data from the program provided teachers with evidence
about how well what they were doing in the classroom was working. These data were both a
motivator for the teachers and also guided professional development trainings and coaching. One
coach said, “We always use data to drive coaching to drive teachers’ movement. If a teacher is
not moving in her classroom or not doing a program protocol, that evidence is what is used in
professional development and coaching” (PD 2-3). Often, the trainings used videos from
classrooms in the program and referenced program protocols:

Let’s look at the program manual to see what it says about small groups, or here is your
video of small group, or here is your colleague’s video. Our teachers have loved seeing
the videos from all of the other people. And then the data that backs up what they are
doing. (Admin 2.6-EKP)

Not only was solid, research-based evidence being used, that evidence was also personally
relevant for the teachers because it used data from their own children. General research
knowledge was therefore linked to the specific program, allowing the staff to make it applicable
to their own classroom and individual students.

Just as important as the content of the training was the way in which it was delivered.
Teachers were introduced to elements of the ASP in a step-by-step manner and then were
expected to go back to their classrooms to practice. It was a gradual process, and teachers were
expected to implement certain aspects in their classroom as they were taught them during the
training. The SR program was early in the training process and focused on implementing the ASP
principles of learning:
Last year was the first year that any of our 4-year-old programs focused on the principles of learning. We had some professional development around these. We focused on academic rigor and thinking curriculum and Accountable Talk. The district started with those, so that is our approach as well. (Admin 2.1-SR)

In contrast, EKP had been involved with ASP for much longer, and their trainings and focus for the year were different: “This fall, it has been differentiated instruction, how to do small groups based on what this group of 6 kids need and how you change that group, change those kids as needed” (Admin 2.6-EKP).

One of the professional development trainers described the process: “There is some understanding that I wouldn’t do data driven instruction until I knew the teachers had their curriculum down, because how much can one teacher manage at one given time” (PD 2-3). She also described training as a gradual process of implementation and a way to build on expectations:

First we want them to do it, do small group instruction—we don’t care if it is good or not good, we just want them to build it into their repertoire. Once they build it in, then how do you really get to a deep level of differentiation? If you have four children in your group, how do you know if they are getting it or not getting it, and how do you scaffold up, and how do you scaffold back? (PD 2-3)

The training, therefore, delivered information in a way that was respectful of teachers’ processes and development. Trainings scaffolded the learning, building on teachers’ prior knowledge and where they were in the implementation process. It was a gradual process, similar to a spiral, where information was presented repeatedly, each time delving a bit deeper into the principles and adding more complexity. As one professional development trainer said, “No one is fighting, no one pulling teeth, no one kicking and screaming, no one arguing in this team” (PD 2.4). She attributed this to allowing teachers gradually to incorporate practices into their classroom and by mirroring the scaffolding teachers were expected to use to teach children.

**Use of Data and Evidence.** Staff all mentioned the role of research and data as a motivator for change and using evidence to “move” teachers toward full implementation. Information presented in trainings was grounded in research, providing a strong rationale for why the strategies were expected to be implemented. Using the most recent research and evaluation gave the professional development credibility, and teachers were more likely at least to attempt to implement the suggested practice. This use of research and “what science says” played a large role in how the staff viewed the strategies:

[PD 2-3] has some research and results that show how effective that is with children. That is the impetus—“OK, we will do this and we will try it,” and knowing that it is going to take a while, and it will be small steps. We can’t do it all at once… She is showing how research shows how the small group is actually best because then the children feel free to
interact and communicate and then they are learning from each other in a small group. They have more opportunities than they would have in a large group. (Admin 2.1-SR)

The research provided a framework for the professional development that helped the teachers “buy in” to the professional development strategies. Teachers were convinced to try the new strategies by seeing the research evidence and then seeing the results when they implemented the strategies in their classrooms.

I think so many times as teachers we think, “I have been doing it like this, and it has always worked, and I am not willing to change it” …I felt like I tried a lot of things and at first, just like interactive writing—this is never going to work!—and after I tried it and maybe changed it a little bit and didn’t give up on it, I have come around, yes, it does work. I think it helps when we are getting development from people who have been out in the classroom, and they have tried it, and this works, and you see kids’ samples of work. And you think, “You know what, if they can do it, I can do it.” (Teacher 2.8-EKP)

Solid evidence of effective classroom strategies was highly motivational. As teachers went through professional development and began implementing the strategies in their classrooms and saw how children responded, they were more likely to continue to implement and continue to improve.

Once [the children] start to move, then the teachers get excited. The motivation hanging over this whole thing is the child data, but it also is motivation for me as professional development. I can look and see when the data comes back, where are we weak. So professional development has to be data-driven. Coaching has to be data driven. Teachers need data in order to move their classroom instruction. So everything in professional development should be a parallel process. What I do, what coaches do, what teachers do with children. (PD 2-3)

A large part of the training, therefore, was translating research into practical strategies teachers could use in their classrooms, while being clear about the science behind the strategies. However, the trainings were more than didactic delivery of teaching components. They were ongoing, comprehensive trainings, with a scope and sequence that explicitly showed teachers how to implement the strategies. Trainings translated research into practice, while incorporating specific data from the program.

**Coaching**

Coaching was one way the program helped the teachers manage all of the information delivered at the trainings and incorporate the strategies into their classrooms. After learning about instructional strategies and the research behind them and then seeing the strategies modeled for them in a training session, teachers were expected to go back to their classrooms and implement the strategies. Classroom observation, combined with intentional coaching, was intended to keep the teachers accountable and help them implement the strategies. The coaches’ role was to observe the teachers, keeping in mind the district and program expectations, and provide the
Coaching was composed of a pre-observation meeting where teachers defined a specific goal they were working on, generally related to recent trainings; the actual classroom observation, using tools aligned with program protocols; and a post-observation meeting where the teacher and the coach would talk about what happened during the observation. Coaching had primarily been an element of EKP; SR had not done much coaching. The intent was to implement more coaching for SR in subsequent years.

After the training, the teachers and coaches set up a pre-observation meeting in which they talked about an explicit goal the teacher was working on and what they would like the coach to watch. This goal would be based on something the teachers learned in professional development training. The actual observation was completed by the coach, focusing on the goal and using an objective observation form based on program protocols. Finally, the post-observation meeting was a focused dialogue between the teacher and the coach discussing the observation. Both the teacher and the coach gave their impressions of what happened and used the program protocols to guide their discussion. A teacher described how she perceived coaching:

In the beginning I was like, “Oh, having this coach observe me every week!” But now it doesn’t bother me anymore. They don’t come in and criticize my teaching. They come in and make me think about how I could do differently, how it would look; sometimes they videotape me, and I watch myself teach. That is always an eye opener. I think if I didn’t have the coach and the support I wouldn’t be at the level I am at. (Teacher 2.8-EKP)

Coaching, therefore, was an integral part of professional development, supporting the training and encouraging teachers to fully understand and implement the strategies.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Another aspect of professional development was professional learning communities (PLCs), both formal and informal. PLCs in Urban Center were designed like study groups. There was time for teams composed of teachers and learning support personnel to discuss the diverse ways teachers were implementing strategies in their classroom. It was a time to collaborate, share effective strategies, and problem solve, which allowed teachers to make it personally relevant to their work in the classroom. Often specific strategies were discussed during these PLCs:

So we put an idea out there in those learning teams… They take a problem, like, “What are effective Read-Alouds for the early childhood classroom? How high should they be pitched? What kind of language should be involved? How do we consider ELLs?” And they work on it together. (PD 2.4)

Although the trainings were an important component of professional development, PLCs became increasingly important. The PLCs were more focused on specific issues that emerged in the classroom and were based on the actual experiences of teachers in the classroom. They gave teachers an opportunity to work together with their colleagues. A teacher said, “In those staff
developments, we brainstorm and talk about ideas, and I think I could try it this way or I could try it that way” (Teacher 2.8-EKP). The administrator added:

> And we have developed what we call study groups within our 4-year-old program, where it is strictly the 4-year-old teachers meeting together, picking an area like alphabet knowledge, or rhyming, alliteration, oral language, and then looking at their students’ work and assessments and studying together instructional strategies that will help. (Admin 2.1-SR)

Evidence formed an important aspect of PLCs, allowing teachers to use the data from their classrooms to better understand where their children were and what kinds of strategies worked to move them forward. Teachers got together and shared their data and their instructional strategies, which allowed them to problem solve and get new ideas for implementation.

> [Teachers] bring data and student work, and we have small discussion groups about… using the IGDIs as their data to drive their conversation about where are your kids at, what are the kids you want to be working with, what do you know about them, and then having them share ideas about activities… In the process of doing that, they have started to rethink how to use data to drive instruction and what other things they could be doing. (PD 2.7)

After content was presented in trainings and teachers had an opportunity to try it in their classroom and be coached, the PLCs gave them an opportunity to talk with other teachers about how they were doing it. As one of the coaches said, “It is amazing what they get from each other” (PD 2.7). A SR teacher also described why she thought the PLCs were important:

> And that you need to talk with other teachers: “OK, how are you doing your small groups?” And I think a lot of people in my program are kind of struggling with it, so what does it look like? How are we going to implement it? You know, just figuring out the details. How is it going to work here? (Teacher 2.2-SR).

Professional, collegial discussions helped teachers understand how to implement the requirements. PLCs, along with observation, coaching, and training, provided a framework of support for teachers and guided the process of implementation. Although all staff felt the professional development was worthwhile and enjoyed learning new strategies, at times teachers encountered challenges with actual implementation.

**Implementation Challenges**

Despite the numerous professional development supports Urban Center put in place, staff, particularly teachers, spoke of struggling with the implementation process. Teachers made comments about the lack of time available to implement the reforms, feeling overwhelmed by all that was expected of them, and not always fully understanding what they needed to do. All staff talked about the importance of developmentally appropriate practice and maintaining a commitment to their beliefs about best practices in early childhood development. This commitment acted as a filter in how they perceived the reforms and helped them to strike a
balance between what they were expected to do and their own principles of early childhood education.

**Feeling overwhelmed.** While teachers usually enjoyed hearing about new research and found the evidence on their children compelling, they often were also overwhelmed by all they needed to do. One teacher said,

**YIKES!** A lot of teachers get burned out after 5 years of doing this. All of the stuff we are required to do… It is just overwhelming I guess. I feel overwhelmed as a teacher and especially with 4-year-olds. (Teacher 2.9-EKP)

Not only were teachers overwhelmed by what they were expected to do in the classroom, they were also somewhat taken aback at first by the number of people coming to their room and the number of different observations.

I have this coach that comes every week, and in the beginning, I am like, “This is more intense than when I was student teaching and I had the professor come out and observe me all the time!” I think you always feel like you have to meet that standard. (Teacher 2.8-EKP)

Teachers felt overwhelmed by what was expected of them and felt that they did not have enough time to implement all that the trainings taught. Finding the time during the day, both for prep time and for working changes into their classroom schedules, was also a challenge for teachers. A teacher said, “Now that we are in our 3rd year, I don’t know what else they can train us on because there isn’t time to do anything more in the classroom” (Teacher 2.9-EKP). Another teacher talked about the amount of prep time needed to assimilate all of the different expectations:

It is not only about time with the kids, it is about time outside of the kids. I can’t spend every waking moment away from the classroom trying to figure out how this standard aligns with this and how this piece fits in here. I could try, and I do try, to do a lot, and that is I think really hard. It doesn’t just happen overnight. You do have to build it into your group along with the other things. It is about exploring it with the kids, building those expectations with them as well as with us. (Teacher 2.3-SR)

Teachers talked about not having enough time during the day to implement all of the instructional strategies in a meaningful way, putting into place new classroom procedures, and ensuring there was enough time for appropriate classroom management and time for building social-emotional skills. They also mentioned that they often spent a lot of time outside of the classroom preparing for class and really understanding what they needed to do.

Not only was it difficult for teachers to find time to implement the instructional strategies, but finding time to conduct the WSS observations was also challenging. WSS hinged on teachers carefully observing children throughout the day and making notes about what children were able to do and what they need to work on. However, one teacher said that although
she loved WSS, “the documenting and the note taking and stuff is not realistic in our classrooms any more” (Teacher 2.2- SR).

Part of feeling overwhelmed was a feeling of not being sure they were “doing it right” or trying to implement all they were learning. Despite the large amount of training and coaching, teachers still were not 100% confident in what they were doing:

One person came one time and talked about Interactive Writing—still sometimes I wonder if I am interactively writing correctly—because at our training one person said, “Well, if they are not creating it on their own, then it is not Interactive Writing.” (Teacher 2.9-EKP)

Teachers were also sometimes challenged by trying to figure out how to implement what they were learning into the classroom. The diversity of professional development and the number of strategies teachers were expected to implement sometimes made it difficult for teachers to understand completely how these elements worked together in their classrooms. One teacher said, “I do struggle with it because it is so many different things” (Teacher 2.3-SR). Another teacher concurred:

It’s figuring out the logistics: How is this going to work in my classroom? How am I going to do it? How am I going to make it work? I think that is one of the hardest things about implementing new things—figuring out the logistics. And those are usually things that when you’re in your trainings, you don’t hear about or you don’t get help with. You get the philosophy and the reasons why and we need to do things this way, but the actual how do you implement it in your classroom, those parts are usually left out of workshops and trainings. (Teacher 2.2-SR)

The amount of professional development, while supportive and necessary to make changes, was overwhelming to teachers and not always as helpful as it could be.

Looking through a developmentally appropriate lens. Early childhood education has always had a strong grounding in developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), and Urban Center programs were no different. This provided a lens through which all reforms were seen and interpreted. One of the trainers described this as, “I have this film over my professional development” (PD 2-3). This lens provided a way of helping staff “move” and change their teaching practices.

I have to say that in all of the professional development [I’ve done], no one has ever really challenged or disagreed. I’ve had to move people, but in the end, because it was based on science, and because it was done in a developmentally appropriate way, it has only been professional discussions. I’ve never had a teacher say, “I am not going to do this, it is wrong.” In this day and age that is really unique. And one of the reasons for that is that it is based… [on] an understanding that the teachers move children. (PD 2-3)

This lens was an important element of change in Urban Center. Despite the challenges the teachers mentioned, the professional development trainers noted that teachers were making
changes to their instruction and attributed these changes to being respectful and maintaining a grounding in best practices.

Part of looking through a DAP lens was understanding that DAP could grow and change. One professional development trainer talked about this change as “the difference between operating in the zone of proximal development or operating in the stage theory and that shift is part of the shift we are making” (PD 2.4). DAP was not static. As staff learned to implement reforms, their understanding of DAP was gradually changing and expanding.

The first time I took writers’ workshop, I got—this doesn’t have to be a fight. There doesn’t have to be an argument here. There can be academic rigor that is definitely kid appropriate because it is really getting kids to think. And image themselves as learners and specifically to image themselves as readers and writers, and that is not stifling them. (Admin 2.6-EKP)

This shift in understanding, or expanding the notion of DAP, represented a larger shift in the early childhood field, according to another professional development trainer:

There is a real commitment on some folks’ part to Piagetian—and I don’t even want to characterize it as only that—readiness philosophy vs. the Vygotskian constructivist philosophy. And those two camps have always been present in early childhood and not been able to reconcile their ideas of whether development drives instruction or instruction drives development. That is the root of the philosophical argument. Vygotskian perspective talks about how constructive play and socialization will actually drive development and I think it is a different vision of early childhood. (PD 2.4)

The tension between the two camps represented different ways of interpreting DAP, and it seemed that as Urban Center staff received professional development and implemented new strategies in their classrooms, their understanding of DAP began to change.

In summary, Urban Center early childhood programs provided a variety of professional development opportunities for teachers. These ongoing, comprehensive, and relevant supports helped teachers understand what was expected of them and encouraged implementation of the expectations. All of the elements of the district’s professional development included the use of evidence, both from a larger body of research and from teachers’ specific classrooms, which provided both rationale and motivation for implementation. Implementing SBR, for both EKP and SR, was not always a smooth process. Administrators, teachers, and professional development trainers all talked about a variety of tensions that emerged throughout the process. While all discussed the importance of professional development and how important it was to learn new techniques, they also acknowledged that they were being asked to do a lot and were feeling overwhelmed. Supporting teachers was a key aspect of successful implementation: “One thing [Urban Center] needs to be credited with is taking a true leadership role in professional development” (PD 2.4). Teachers were at times skeptical about the strategies they were learning
and the expectations. However, the solid research base of the professional development and watching their students grow provided a strong incentive for them to continue to improve and change their practice.

**The Perceived Outcomes of SBR/ASP in Urban Center Early Childhood**

Staff discussed three primary perceived outcomes related to SBR: (1) changes in the interaction between K-12 and early childhood; (2) increased instructional intentionality, including expanded notions of school readiness; and (3) increased use and rigor of assessments. The theme of finding a balance between what staff were being asked to do and what staff believed about best practices was woven throughout all of these outcomes.

**Interaction with K-12 System**

The incorporation of preschool programs and implementation of SBR into Urban Center school district resulted in changes in how K-12 and early childhood programs interacted. Early childhood programs received increasing credibility and respect from K-12 as a whole and were beginning to be seen as an integral part of the school district. Respect for early childhood philosophies, procedures, and instruction was increasing, although early childhood administrators and professional development staff saw this respect more clearly than teachers. However, staff were unsure what all of these changes would eventually mean for early childhood programs in the district, particularly in how early childhood programs were structured.

Administrators and professional development coaches in EKP were the most aware of how the view of early childhood was changing in the district. One administrator said, “We are definitely players at the table (Admin 2.6-EKP).” The EKP coach agreed, saying that early childhood was finally getting the recognition she believed it deserved:

I also felt 20 years ago when I started doing this that early childhood teachers were not seen as teachers. They were seen as child care providers or a place for kids to go and get socialized, or whatever…. [EKP has] created this credibility for early childhood as being the place where it all starts. (PD 2.7)

The EKP teachers also saw that they were getting more recognition, particularly from parents:

[Standards] has also been a guide for when parents ask the question, “What do they do in PreK?” or “What are they going to learn in PreK?” A lot of these things are tangible, and you can let the parents know that. I think before we just said socializing, and for some kids they maybe needed to go beyond that. (Teacher 2.8-EKP)

Early childhood staff, including teachers, were beginning to be recognized as professionals in the district, both by their colleagues and the parents of the children with whom they worked.

Administrators noticed that early childhood program staff were increasingly included in district initiatives and decisions and seemed to garner more respect. This meant that early
childhood was able to share their perspectives and philosophy with the K-12 system, particularly in the early childhood professional development support system. As a result of what was done in early childhood programs, the rest of the district learned how to coach from the early childhood coaches.

We are starting to be invited in as the experts in the districts because we are the only coaches that have had a protocol to follow, the only coaches who have been using data to help support teachers in making changes, and we are the only coaches who really have done formative assessment to drive our professional development. (PD 2.7)

Early childhood was also “leading” K-12 in terms of standards. As the district became more skilled at reaching children in the greatest need, they found that the achievement gap, at least at kindergarten entrance, was diminishing. This meant that there was a need to “re-look” at and align the PreK and K standards so they were closer together. A professional development trainer described this:

The children are coming in with a lot more letter knowledge and phonemic awareness, and the K program was paced to children who may not be coming in with that level of ability or strength. So the K programs are in the process of adjusting their pacing based on what the children are bringing…. There is a place where the PreK standards are slightly ahead of the K standards in terms of the scope of the task and how it describes what is expected for the children to take on. (PD 2.4)

There was a need to continually reevaluate and adjust standards to create alignment between K-12 and early childhood, which came with recognition of the perception that children’s skills were changing as a result of early childhood programs.

Despite the positive contributions to K-12 and increased credibility and recognition of early childhood as a profession, some teachers still thought they were perceived by the schools as babysitters and did not feel they were any more respected than before. Some viewed this as an opportunity to educate K-12 about early childhood, while others wondered if early childhood principles would be compromised as they were folded into the K-12 system. Some teachers were concerned that the increased consolidation with K-12 would mean that early childhood principles would be compromised. They noted that things were changing, but that it was a gradual shift. One of the school readiness teachers described how she thought many people see early childhood:

I’ve always felt the need to kind of educate people about early childhood, because my experience of 20 years is that people never get it. They don’t understand. I mean I think they do, but they don’t…. So I guess if standards and using assessment tools makes us seem more like “real teachers” instead of “pretend teachers,” then I suppose that’s a good thing, but I worry about it getting to the point of not being developmentally appropriate any more, that we’re so focused on skills. (Teacher 2.2-SR)

This same teacher went on to say that although there was some evidence that the view of early childhood was changing, the children in early childhood programs were still referred to as “the
“babies” in the schools. She saw educating people on the value of early childhood as ongoing. Another school readiness teacher also noted this challenge, saying, “Things are changing and it’s not that anymore. It is a major part of educational experiences now. I think that is an ‘ah-ha’ for other people, but it is something that I have always believed” (Teacher 2.3-SR).

Administrative restructuring of early childhood programs created some questions about what would happen to SR programs as they were included under the elementary leadership umbrella. There seemed to be a disconnect between teaching staff and administrative staff regarding the way early childhood programs were perceived in the district. Administrators and coaches, those who were closest to the larger picture in the district, saw the district making progress toward viewing early childhood as a profession and valued part of the district. However, the teachers who were “in the trenches” did not seem to see this as clearly in their interactions with other teachers in their schools.

Higher Expectations

Both EKP and SR staff spoke about how classrooms were changing, particularly in terms of having higher expectations for students to achieve. This meant the definition of school readiness was expanding to include more traditionally academic aspects and also that teachers needed to be more intentional and effective in their teaching to ensure that children were ready for school. While higher expectations pushed both teachers and students to perform at their best, some staff voiced concerns about the “push-down” effect and had questions about the developmental appropriateness of the expectations.

Early childhood standards were primarily skill-based and increasingly aligned with K-12 standards. Incorporating standards into the early childhood classroom gave teachers a clear and expanded notion of school readiness that included both higher academic expectations and the traditional view of social-emotional development. Teachers described how standards contributed to this expanded view of school readiness and raised the expectations of children in preschool programs.

When I first started teaching, I would plan lessons around “this will be a cute thing on the bulletin board, and this will be fun.” It was a lot of cutting and pasting and craft projects, and everything was cute, and the activities went with the story, and everything was cutesy, but I am not sure how much learning they were actually getting with it. Now with the standards, I feel like I know where they need to be at the end of the year, or where I need to take these kids to get them ready for kindergarten. (Teacher 2.8-EKP)

A heightened awareness of the kindergarten requirements and a need to be intentional pervaded the interviews. Teachers were all aware of what children needed to know as they entered
kindergarten and were cognizant that their responsibility was to ensure that children were ready for kindergarten.

Since I’ve started, it’s been much more academic, because kindergarten has been much more academic, and we have to provide for these kids the skills that they need for when they go to kindergarten, because kindergarten is going to be a nightmare if they’re not prepared for the academics. (Teacher 2.3-SR)

Staff acknowledged that what students were expected to know when they entered kindergarten had changed and expanded, meaning the definition of school readiness had also changed across the district. Before the ASP, teachers focused more on social skills and routines, and after the ASP, they tended to focus on school readiness and academic skills, as well as the social skills.

Since the advent of the ASP, early childhood programs became more academic, not only in what they were expected to teach, but also in the strategies teachers were expected to use in their instruction: “The way you think about how you teach, what you teach, it’s changed a lot” (Teacher 2.2-SR). Teachers were not only more aware of what they needed to teach, but that they needed to be intentional and specific in how they taught the skills and concepts. The EKP administrator described being intentional as:

I guess that is one of the biggest switches is asking these EKP teachers to be very intentional, pretty much from when those kids appear to when they leave. You don’t just sit down and have lunch, you have lunch and conversations during lunch. You don’t just line up, you are actually doing a little rhyming or alliteration while they line up…. Supposedly there isn’t any downtime. [Active learning] has structure by what has been placed in the environment, but the kids are choosing how to use the environment at that time. And even when they go outside for the playground or the gym, we are asking them to be inserting conversation or math or something. (Admin 2.6-EKP)

Focusing on standards, having clear expectations, providing intensive and ongoing professional development, and assessing children were all part of the SBR changes Urban Center implemented, with the expected outcome that teachers would be more intentional in their teaching. Both EKP and SR teachers acknowledged this change. One EKP teacher said, “Everything is so intentional the way we teach it in PreK. When I first started teaching, I don’t know if every moment was intentional” (Teacher 2.8-EKP). Another SR teacher expanded on this notion of intentionality, saying:

I think the way that I’m seeing it is we’re just being so much more intentional about what we’re doing throughout the day, so that when we are saying good morning and we’re reading our message, the kids are all reading their message, and the more that we jam-pack it into the day, the more they’re going to go to kindergarten with. (Teacher 2.3-SR)

Increased intentionality meant that teachers were not necessarily changing what they had traditionally done in the classroom or compromising their principles of teaching and learning, but rather they were thinking differently about how they taught. For veteran teachers, it was
challenging to rethink how they did things in the classroom, but teachers tended to feel it was worth it. An EKP teacher described how her thinking changed over time:

In the very beginning I was hesitant about it and I didn’t really agree with it. Over time and actually doing it and getting in the trenches, my attitude about it has actually kind of come around now…. I was teaching that when I first started, but I didn’t actually have a standard that said I needed to teach them. I think the standards have helped make my teaching more intentional and a little bit more envisioned, like I know where I am starting from and where I want to go at the end of the year. (Teacher 2.8-EKP)

This was illustrated in the process the teacher went through to reach this stage of her implementation and understanding of SBR. This teacher described a process of change where her understanding of the requirements developed over time as she implemented the changes in her classroom. Despite the challenges of implementing SBR and the work required of the teachers, this teacher seemed to feel the change was worth it.

However, not all teachers thought the changes were positive. A few staff were more apprehensive of the changes, thinking that early childhood was becoming more like kindergarten. They voiced concerns about “push-down” or having what was traditionally kindergarten content being forced into early childhood programs. Their concerns focused on whether this would compromise the best practices in early childhood, such as learning through play.

I think that early childhood has changed… It used to be play is learning. I believe that it still is, and I’m holding onto that, and I’m really trying to make that still be the case, because it’s not kindergarten, and I don’t want it to be kindergarten, but I know that when you go to kindergarten sometimes they don’t have the kitchen anymore, and they don’t have blocks anymore, and I know that’s the direction that it’s moving and that scares me, because this is that opportunity for them to learn through their play. (Teacher 2.3-SR)

And I feel like just in general, talking to other teachers and kindergarten teachers, too, they feel it; like they feel like they’re first grade teachers, now. I mean it’s trickling down, and they don’t have time for active learning, free choice, here in kindergarten. (Teacher 2.2-SR)

The professional development coach was generally highly positive about the changes in the program, but she noted there were some problems:

I still have some problems with the system and thinking if we have a gap, let’s just back it up a year. So 20 years from now, do we back it up another year, and we have 3-year-old programs in all of our schools, and then we have 2-year-old programs in all of our schools, and what happens to the responsibility of the parent? How do we make sure we don’t forget the family is the most important, strongest asset to children at this age, not take that and just say, well, educational systems are better than family systems and therefore we should just take over their responsibility. (PD 2.7)

These two perspectives—the value of higher expectations and more intentional instruction versus the fear of becoming less developmentally appropriate—were evident in the interviews with staff, particularly teachers.
Assessment Use

One important change staff discussed was the increased use of assessment information, both in the program as a whole and in the classroom. Early childhood programs in Urban Center were increasingly using assessment results to guide instruction and enhance accountability for results. This meant that programs had to find ways to assess children that provided the evidence necessary to inform instruction and demonstrate outcomes.

A key aspect of ASP was using data to inform instruction, also known as progress monitoring or data-driven decision making. This represented a large change for Urban Center. The professional development coach described this shift:

[When I was in school] we didn’t even talk about targets or what we thought kids should know beyond kindergarten readiness being alphabet knowledge and being able to write their name and tie their shoes, self help skills. The whole idea of taking a list of standards and tying them to some kind of a target and then doing data collection on your kids and thinking about how you are going to do lesson plans around it? That wasn’t even a part of my thinking when I started in early childhood. (PD 2.7)

Intentionally using data to drive instructional practices and also putting in place measureable targets based on standards was new. The Urban Center early childhood teachers were expected to use the results of child assessments for progress monitoring, skill-based small group formation, lesson planning, and curriculum development.

The Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDIs) were one way both EKP and SR used data to inform instruction. The IGDIs were administered at least three times per year and assessed key elements of early literacy development. The EKP staff used the IGDIs as one of the primary indicators for how they formed their small groups and planned small group instruction. One EKP teacher described using the IGDIs to form small groups:

We do [the IGDIs] three times a year… I looked at where they were at this fall, and as I see they are making progress then I change [small groups] around. Initially it started out this fall by looking at the IGDI scores, and the kids who weren’t scoring anything were lumped together and kids that were doing well were in the higher group. (Teacher 2.8-EKP)

The coach who worked closely with the EKP teacher described how she saw teachers change how they thought about data and used data to inform instruction:

I had two teachers of mine do reflective journaling in their classrooms for one week just to write down their ideas and thoughts about small group instruction and how they were going to use data to drive instruction. In the process of doing that, I had one teacher who made an unbelievable transformation in a week in understanding how data could impact
her small groups and how she was going to plan her lessons based on what she watched her kids do the day before. (PD 2.7)

The EKP teachers used the IGDIs to understand students’ skills, inform small group composition, and decide appropriate and effective instructional strategies for each child.

The SR teachers had just started using the IGDIs and had mixed feelings about them. One teacher thought she needed more time to work with the IGDIs before making any comments, but she did mention it was difficult to find time to assess each child. She went on to say, “It’s really a time-consuming thing, and it will screw up small groups” (Teacher 2.2-SR). Another SR teacher thought it was fun to have a tool that helped teachers see exactly where children were and the progress they were making in the classroom.

I am doing IGDIs on my kids—vocabulary is what I am working on right now. The jumps in these kids already, a couple of months, it’s huge. Part of that is natural in the way of as they get older, as they understand the test, and that is part of that, too… We are still needing to monitor their progress, and this is just another way to do it. (Teacher 2.3-SR)

The EKP teachers had been using the IGDIs for much longer than the SR teachers, and the way the two groups of teachers felt about the assessment and used the data reflected their familiarity with the assessment.

The Urban Center program used the results from aggregated child assessments across the program to determine their program strengths and where students overall needed more support. The EKP administrator said, “We have program targets for skills that we keep track of. We look at those reports and we see what we might be worried about” (Admin 2.6-EKP). The SR administrator also talked about how they used data as a program:

Up to this date we have only used WSS. So she has taking our work sampling results and analyzed those and presented those results to the teachers. But like this fall, she worked with the teachers, brought them the results, and we started not only looking where the children were at last spring, which is interesting information, but where are they at in the fall when they come in and what are the areas they need the most support. (Admin 2.1-SR)

Often, this information was then used to inform professional development trainings and other professional development opportunities. Using assessments in a variety of ways—to inform instruction and demonstrate outcomes—was another example of increasing intentionality.

**Finding Balance**

A pervasive theme throughout the staff interviews was finding a balance between program expectations and their own beliefs about teaching and learning in early childhood. Staff felt pushed in different directions, as a coach noted:
[Teachers] are being driven by building principals that are very academically focused and very data driven at this point in this district and very outcome driven. If your scores are good, you are doing a good job. If they aren’t good, then something is wrong in your classroom. People aren’t looking at the social competency in schools as much. They are, but not as much as what used to be the focus of early childhood, now has become the underlying, oh yeah and we have to do this, too, especially in the school setting. (PD 2.7)

Teachers were being asked to be more intentional in their instruction, use data to inform instruction, and demonstrate outcomes. This focus on data and on measurable skill-based academic standards was one message staff received. However, the coach went on to say that social-emotional development continued to be a priority in early childhood:

Teachers, I think, for the most part have a pretty good grounding of, yes, we are all about social development, helping children become a part of a community and allowing them their individuality but helping them understand that we are all learners here and we have to be responsible for each other. That is part of the training we have been doing, is responsive classroom-based community building… But we have to really… support teachers because they are getting the push from the other side to think only about the data. (PD 2.7)

The tension between focusing on academic skills students needed to be ready for school and the social emotional skills students needed to be successful in school was evident from the interviews. At times, staff struggled to find the appropriate balance.

There was also tension between the expectations to use intentional instructional strategies while maintaining a developmentally appropriate, experiential classroom. As a result, teachers talked about creating a balance between what was expected of them and what they actually did in the classroom. One way teachers found balance was by picking and choosing what or how to implement instructional changes or reinterpreting what they already did in the classroom:

I look at the standards and I think okay, this is happening all day long everywhere, here, and there, and there, and there, and so I think the biggest struggle is pulling it out and saying okay, I’m working on this right now… I feel like it’s not new stuff, it’s not reinvented in any way, it’s just on paper, and we need to be more aware of it. (Teacher 2.2-SR)

Another teacher described how she enjoyed learning new research and new techniques, but also said, “It is all about exposure. We as teachers get exposure to all of these things, and we choose what we want to use in our classroom and what not to” (Teacher 2.3-SR). Teachers also struggled with finding balance and choosing what they implemented in their classrooms. They mentioned cutting some aspects of the day and wondering what the trade-offs were:

Our active learning does get cut, which is sad, because that’s the time of day that you should have the most time, because by the time you get them into something, it’s time to clean up, so that’s hard. We see the bonuses in small group, we really do, so that’s another balance piece, because we’re constantly trying to figure out what we want to do for small group, and oftentimes try to pull some different things in just because there’s just so much going on during the day. (Teacher 2.2-SR)
Teachers acknowledged the importance of academics and the need to be intentional, but struggled sometimes with what was expected of them. There were also some concerns about ensuring that children still had time to play and be creative. A teacher worried, “We are going to lose artists, builders because we aren’t letting them be creative, I think” (Teacher 2.9-EKP). This same teacher said that she tried to make learning fun and engaging, while also working on academics.

Despite concerns, the majority of staff felt that they were able to achieve balance in their teaching. It was clear that staff maintained a commitment to core beliefs about early childhood teaching and learning, although it was a “juggling act, and we do it all day long, every day” (Teacher 2.3-SR). Social skills continued to be a priority for the program. The trainers saw the reforms in a different light, describing them as encouraging more developmentally appropriate practices because they focused on meeting children where they were and then scaffolding up. One trainer explained this, saying:

They really understand benchmarks and where they are at each point in the year. It is interval rather than daily and primarily because of the assessments. And so they are not willing to follow a single course, but to actually follow the learner. These folks are really learning to follow the child, which is why developmental polar issues have been minimized to an extent because following the child IS what development is all about. (PD 2.4)

With the support of professional development, teachers were able to make academic activities fun and meaningful for children, achieving the balance of teaching core skills in a developmentally appropriate way. Overall, it seemed that staff found ways to integrate the expectations about teaching, learning and assessment into their existing framework of developmentally appropriate practice.

I still believe play is learning, I still believe they will learn best with hands-on activities, I still believe that it has to be fun, engaging, exciting. It can’t just be flash cards with the kids… We’ve talked about the standards, we’ve talked about the WSS goals and that is just what your room is made up of. That is what we do every day. But the kids don’t feel like we are working on this thing right now. I think that is the fine line in between accomplishing those goals and still making it seamless for the kids. (Teacher 2.2-SR)

I think through professional development and observing what is happening in the school district and seeing the results with the children, I have become much more clear as to why we need to be so intentional. But that has been a big shift. There is so much talk around DAPs, but my belief has come to be that you can be still developmentally appropriate in this kind of a model. (Admin 2.1-SR)

In the end, staff understood that the goal was to ensure that children were ready for school, and, despite some reservations, felt that they were able to maintain a balance between academic skills and social-emotional development as well as a balance between experiential learning through
play and more intentional instruction. A teacher said, “If they got to kindergarten without those [social] skills and they know all their ABC’s, I haven’t done my job” (Teacher 2.3-SR).

Conclusion

Urban Center early childhood programs were in the midst of a number of significant changes, including a changing administrative structure and the implementation of a standards-based reform model called the Academic Success Project. Teachers were using standards and implementing new instructional strategies and were expected to use assessment data more intentionally. The program put supports in place to assist teachers with making these changes, including ongoing, intensive professional development training, coaching, and professional learning communities. A number of changes occurred in the program that could be attributed at least partially to the ASP. Standards and assessment were linked to being more intentional in the classroom. Skill-based standards gave teachers a clear framework of what to teach, while intentional instructional strategies gave teachers a framework of how to teach. Staff were also more consciously and explicitly aware of data and the uses of data in their program to demonstrate outcomes, drive classroom instruction, and guide professional development. Although staff had some concerns about the changes in the classrooms, for the most part they felt they were able to maintain a balance between the expectations of the program and their own ideas about best practices of teaching and learning in early childhood.
CHAPTER 6

RIVER VALLEY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM

River Valley School District is a suburb of a large metropolitan city in the Midwest and covers an area of approximately 110 square miles. In the 2007-2008 school year, River Valley served approximately 28,000 students in early childhood through 12th grade, including 20% students of color, 5% English Language Learners, and 15% students who received free or reduced price lunch. The district had a growing population of ELLs and students and families with personal or financial needs. In the 2006-2007 school year, Bridge to School, the district preschool program that is the focus of this case study, enrolled 50% of its students as ELL. This was an increase from 33% in previous years and an indication that the families with diverse challenges were gravitating to the district. One of the primary issues and concerns facing River Valley School District was finding and serving children and families in greatest need before they arrived in kindergarten.

River Valley Early Childhood Program Context

The early childhood program context of the River Valley school district in 2007-2008 was similar to other suburban school-based early childhood programs in this upper Midwest state. The suburbs were seeing increasing numbers of families with a variety of challenges, and therefore, River Valley designed a variety of early childhood programs tailored to the different community needs. Early childhood was a valued part of the River Valley district, particularly in terms of ensuring a smooth transition to kindergarten. The notion of developing relationships—the relationship with the K-12 system, a relationship with the larger community, relationships between children and teachers, and relationships between families and the school—was an overarching theme of the River Valley Early childhood context.

The early childhood program of River Valley School District was composed of a number of different programs designed to serve families with a range of needs in a variety of ways. The programs included Family School, Early Childhood Family Education, Bridge to School, and Preschool Discovery. Family School was a type of Family Literacy program for English Language Learners where children came with their parents four days a week. Parents had Adult Basic Education classes and English classes while children were in a preschool setting. Early Childhood Family Education was a universal-access program for parents and children birth to five that met one half-day per week. Children attended infant, toddler, or preschool classes while
parents attended parenting classes. Preschool Discovery was also a universal-access program for children aged 3-5 that met two half-days per week and included a parent component once per week. Preschool Discovery and Early Childhood Family Education classes were generally held in a specialized Early Childhood Center.

Bridge to School (Bridge) was the focus of this case study. Bridge to School was a year-before-kindergarten program for children aged 4-5 with priority given to children and families who were low-income, English Language Learners, or had other special family needs. Bridge met two or three times per week for two and one half hours, September through May. Early Childhood Special Education students were included in many classrooms, either as a small proportion of a regular education classroom or as a co-taught classroom where half of the students were special education students and half were community students. Bridge classes were more likely to be held in elementary schools or other community locations throughout the district rather than in the early childhood-specific family center. Both Bridge and Preschool Discovery were considered School Readiness programs and funded through a combination of state aid and participant fees determined by sliding fee scale. Because these programs were funded primarily by the state, they were subject to vagaries in the funding priorities of the legislature, resulting in inconsistent funding levels from year to year.

Bridge had a particular philosophy and culture centered on supporting families and children and providing a creative, developmentally appropriate environment for preschoolers. Bridge to School had connections to both the K-12 system and the greater community to ensure children in the greatest need were ready for kindergarten. Bridge had taken a gradual approach to implementing SBR, characterized by two phases. This case describes how River Valley’s Bridge program had implemented the various components of SBR without a large infusion of funds from public or private sources.

**Administrative Structure and Relationship with K-12**

Early childhood programs in River Valley had a strong connection with the K-12 school district in terms of structure, policy, and staff. Many early childhood programs were housed within the elementary schools, and early childhood teachers were included on the K-12 master teacher contract and in K-12 district professional development opportunities. The early childhood administrator was part of many different district committees, and early childhood also had a strong link with the kindergarten in the district.

The River Valley early childhood programs were administered by the River Valley school district, although they were housed in and funded through Community Education rather
than the K-12 system. Because teachers in early childhood programs were included in the K-12 master contract, they had the same benefits, salary schedule, and union representation as K-12 teachers. Teachers in early childhood programs were required to have a license to teach Early Childhood Education, which included a BA degree and ongoing professional development to renew their license every four years. This placed the early childhood staff on an equal footing with K-12 teachers and presented an opportunity for staff to participate fully in district activities, decisions, and committees. Early childhood staff were valued as professionals and for their role in ensuring children in the district were ready for kindergarten.

The early childhood administrator served on district committees, including an early childhood committee and a task force on raising student achievement. This task force addressed “…student achievement issues in our district, and I am pushing for them to also look at the issue of how our kids are coming to kindergarten and [whether] we need to put more resources into early childhood” (Admin 1.1). As part of this committee, the administrator advocated for additional funding for district early childhood programs. The administrator was extremely active in the district and a strong advocate for school-based early childhood programs in the district and in the state as a whole.

Because early childhood had representatives on committees throughout the district, early childhood contributed to district policy. One committee researched the practice of “redshirting,” i.e., delaying entrance to kindergarten for children—particularly boys—with summer birthdays. They compiled the research on redshirting and found little evidence of its effectiveness. Bringing this research to district committees “helped… a lot with [the administrator’s] role in the district and relationships” (Admin 1.1). It also directly contributed to the new district policy that a child of eligible age for kindergarten (meaning five years on or before September 1st of that school year) was ready for kindergarten and should attend, regardless of the parents’ perceived “readiness” of the child. The district did an informal survey of neighboring districts and found that River Valley was the only district in the area taking a stand on the issue of redshirting. However, not all teachers were in agreement with the policy. As one noted,

The district policy is that if [children are] five, they should go to kindergarten. I’ve been to many workshops, and if you go to a workshop with a group of kindergarten teachers, they agree. [But] individually, when you go out to schools, some disagree with district policy. I’ve talked to them. They follow it, but personally maybe don’t agree with it. (Teacher 1.3)

This example illustrates how early childhood programs were linked to the River Valley K-12 system, helping to inform district policies, but it also shows that sometimes individual beliefs deviated from stated policies, despite public agreement with the policies.
The early childhood programs in River Valley also had a strong connection to the kindergarten teachers and the kindergarten programs. Although not all of the early childhood programs were housed in the elementary schools, most of the Bridge classrooms were, providing a direct link to the K-12 system. In addition, early childhood teachers observed kindergarten teachers and met with them to discuss standards and curriculum.

A couple years back, we did visits to kindergartens, once in the spring and once in the fall, to know what the kindergarten teachers are teaching, and then I was also part of meetings where we met with kindergarten staff and learned more, so now we have written a grid that says [kindergarteners] should be able to count up by 10; that’s our expectation in preschool. (Teacher 1.4)

These visits to kindergartens helped early childhood teachers to be aware of district expectations for kindergarteners, which in turn informed the expectations early childhood teachers should have for their own students.

Last year we each took time to go and visit kindergarten rooms, and one of the things that we heard over and over from kindergarten teachers was, “What we really want for them is to be able to be independent, be able to take care of their backpack, put on their own coat, and their social skills, how do they get along, interact with each other, interact with the teacher.” (Teacher 1.2)

Meeting with kindergarten teachers and observing kindergarten classrooms helped staff to develop an understanding of kindergarten expectations and link district and early childhood standards for learning. These observations helped the early childhood teachers to understand how kindergarten was changing and what children needed to know to be successful in kindergarten.

[Early childhood teachers] could see what differences there were among kindergarten teachers and what they were doing in classrooms and how did that fit with what they were doing. They had questions they asked themselves when they went out and we processed it at a staff meeting together. That was a very beneficial experience to keep working to make this transition work more smoothly. (Admin 1.1)

The concept of creating a smooth transition to kindergarten was important to the staff in River Valley. In addition to familiarizing themselves with current kindergarten standards and practices through observations, the early childhood teachers also met with kindergarten teachers as a group and individually. These meetings allowed early childhood teachers to communicate with kindergarten teachers about the children in their classes and help to make the transition easier. Early childhood staff also encouraged kindergarten teachers to observe their classrooms.

**Early Childhood Program Goals**

The strong connection to K-12 provided the context for the main goal of River Valley early childhood programs: ensuring all children were ready to enter kindergarten. This often meant serving children in the greatest need, and finding and serving families in need was one of the most important goals of the River Valley program. One of the challenges around this was
ensuring people in the community knew about the different early childhood programs available to them through the school district.

It helps to be in elementary schools... if [the teachers] know families that could use our services, either the teen young parent program or Bridge to School. Like our ELL students: Today I noticed some English I understood, and I’m thinking, this is November and he’ll get better as year progresses. It’s nice he’s here now because if he walked into kindergarten knowing as little English as he knows now, he would be behind. Now he is picking it up. He’s going to be ahead when he gets to kindergarten. There are lots of kids out there that could benefit from us that don’t know about us. A teacher [in K-12] may know about the child, but not know that we exist. (Teacher 1.3)

Being a part of the elementary schools brought additional exposure to the early childhood programs and increased referrals from elementary teachers, which helped assist the early childhood programs find children in the greatest need.

The primary intent of River Valley early childhood programs was to find and serve the children and families in the district with the greatest need so they arrived in Kindergarten ready to learn. Although there were many definitions of what it means to have the greatest need, ELL, low-income, and special education eligibility were the most common indicators. In the 2006-2007 school year, the River Valley Kindergarten classes had 172 children identified as ELL, and, of those 172, 101 were in Bridge to School, Family School, or Head Start. This meant that 71 children were not identified for ELL services before they went to school, demonstrating why the administrator and the school district as a whole placed a priority on finding and serving the children with the greatest need.

Even though we are trying to reach the kids in greatest need, sometimes the greatest need is just about helping parents really know what is good for kids. High income families sometimes have issues that also need to be addressed. (Admin 1.1)

The early childhood program took a broader view of the definition of “greatest need,” acknowledging that families of all income ranges may have faced these challenges.

School readiness was also an important goal for River Valley staff. Staff knew that as more children came to school prepared to learn, they were less likely to fall behind or stay behind their peers. Therefore, preparing children for kindergarten was an explicit goal of Bridge. However, what it meant to be ready for school was somewhat contested in the district. As the administrator described, defining school readiness was difficult:

We’ve even asked kindergarten teachers, and there is a debate right now about what we offer to preschools in our community to help them understand our district’s kindergarten. So, what do kindergarten teachers want kids to know when they come to kindergarten? And kindergarten teachers can’t come to an agreement on that. (Admin 1.1)

Although early childhood staff talked about the importance of academics, they also felt it was not necessarily the most important aspect of school readiness. The district kindergarten standards
played a large role in determining what the River Valley early childhood program defined as school readiness.

If we are hoping the kids at the end of kindergarten know certain things, what do we want to teach them so that at the end of preschool they will move into kindergarten at a level playing field with other kids and be ready to learn and adapt to the kindergarten curriculum and routine? I think there are still a lot of people that think we should be doing “academics,” but I do believe we are doing a lot of pre-academic skills or could be defined as academic by some people. We are teaching kids basic skills they need to know. So, we do it, but some people think academics means you need to do a worksheet at a table. (Admin 1.1)

The district standards defined what children should know and which skills they should be able to do by the end of kindergarten, and ideally those standards should have informed what was taught in early childhood. That often entailed what was seen as “academics.” However, a teacher offered a different viewpoint about school readiness that focused on independence, play, and social skills:

I think oftentimes school readiness equals academics. But I have heard from a number of kindergarten teachers and even first grade teachers who talk about other things as being what is really important. That has been the philosophy in early childhood for a long time—the importance of play and that the academics will come, but the social pieces and those kinds of things are what is important for them. (Teacher 1.2)

Staff heard from some kindergarten teachers that social-emotional skills and the ability to function in the school culture were most important—“the academics will come.” These skills included conversing with each other, following routines, sitting in a group, taking turns, and being more independent. The ability to be less teacher-dependent was an important aspect of school readiness and one that the staff heard from kindergarten teachers. Yet there was also an expectation from the district that children should be academically prepared for kindergarten. These two different definitions of what it meant to be ready for school, while not necessarily conflicting, presented different messages to the early childhood staff.

**Program Philosophy**

A focus on the social-emotional aspect of school readiness permeated the culture of Bridge. Like many early childhood organizations, the River Valley early childhood program had a particular philosophy that formed the basis of programming. Key aspects of this philosophy included a whole-child perspective with a particular focus on social-emotional development, supporting families as the foundation for supporting children, encouraging exploration and creativity, and using developmentally appropriate practice to ensure that children were engaged. Not only was this philosophy implicit in how staff talk about their program, but it was also explicitly acknowledged:

Now we have two newer early childhood teachers on staff. One came from a different program, and one is new out of college, and so they are learning the philosophy and how
we think about kids and what’s good practice in the classroom. They have veteran teachers to learn from. (Admin 1.1)

The administrator recognized that their program had a particular philosophy in which staff worked and provided a lens through which they viewed any changes to the program.

A distinguishing characteristic of this program was the explicit focus on supporting families. The administrator came from a family education background and believed the family was integral to early childhood education. She said, “You have to be supporting the family and helping parents be the best they can be to help support their children’s development” (Admin 1.1). Therefore, the program worked hard not only to build relationships with students and K-12, but also with families. Relationships were the cornerstone of River Valley’s philosophy, including relationships developed with children and relationships with families.

You have to build that relationship with each student. So I try to remember things about brothers and sisters, for example. Doing open houses with parents and getting parents comfortable so parents feel comfortable calling. First experience for children a lot of the time, first school experience for parents as well. We do a lot of hand holding, like with the folders, so to get parents into that habit, too. (Teacher 1.3)

There was an explicit culture of creating a positive relationship with students and helping parents feel comfortable in the school setting, not only in terms of working with the child, but also being respectful of and working with the family from which the child came. As the administrator said, “The basis for everything we do is about relationships, and it is about kids’ relationships with teachers and kids’ relationships with their parents” (Admin 1.1).

Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) was also an important aspect of River Valley’s philosophy, along with process-oriented activities that encouraged creativity in children. River Valley early childhood programs provided meaningful activities that were engaging for children. The final product was less important than the process the child experienced as the child made the product.

I think DAP is pretty broad, but we are very much about process-oriented activities, learning through play, somewhat directed play. Most of our teachers use themes, but there is so much that can be woven into themes that keep supporting the learning and for kids. (Admin 1.1)

One of the teachers in the program also mentioned the importance of creativity and process-oriented activities, demonstrating how important this particular aspect of DAP was to the program.
I would say one of the big influences I’ve had over the years is Bev Bos\textsuperscript{15}… I guess I have tried to bring creativity into the classroom or find ways to help kids be creative. She lets kids explore, and she’s not so you have to do things a certain way, which is I guess where I have learned some of the things that I have brought into the classroom. (Teacher 1.2)

Process-oriented activities meant that teachers were seen as facilitators in the classroom, setting up an engaging classroom environment and letting children explore while being accessible to guide them through any problems or questions they had.

[My role is] facilitating play among the children. A lot of the times at the start of the year, especially the eight children that I have, have usually never had a preschool experience before, so [I’m] helping them find something to play with that they’re comfortable, and then encouraging them to make their own choices. (Teacher 1.4)

I walk into classrooms, and I see kids engaged and excited and playing together and working together and moving from one activity to another, and nobody needs to make sure they are doing it. They are doing it because they love it and because it is developmentally appropriate… A lot of it is process, a lot of it is scaffolding and moving kids, and sequencing it from a lesser difficult activity to greater. A lot of [it is] language, of course, and exposure to different activities, different mediums, different ways to do the same things. (Admin 1.1)

Maintaining time for children to play and to explore the classroom was also an important and explicitly acknowledged part of the program. As the administrator said, “For a lot of people it looks like play, but it’s not play. Well, it is play, but it’s got a goal in mind” (Admin 1.1). This illustrated how the program saw play as a vehicle for supporting academics and social development.

I want to make sure the play is always a part of what I do, and giving kids unstructured play time is the way that they’re going to develop social skills. That’s an important part, too. I don’t want ever the work time or that to take over the playtime. We need to make sure we have that in our day. (Teacher 1.4)

Providing children with unstructured time to play allowed teachers to cultivate social-emotional skills. The staff all mentioned social-emotional development to be a critical piece of teaching. One teacher summarized this as: “I guess my main philosophy is helping kids to feel good about themselves and developing their own abilities and to feel good” (Teacher 1.2). Social-emotional skills encompassed a large range of skills. The administrator provided her own definition of social-emotional skills:

\begin{quote}
Bev Bos is an early childhood education expert and author of several popular books for teachers, including \textit{Don’t Move the Muffin Tins} and \textit{Together We’re Better}. She often presents lectures and workshops about encouraging social-emotional development, experiential learning, and instilling a sense of wonder in children. For more information, see \url{http://www.turnthepage.com}.
\end{quote}
I believe it is about providing kids exposure to group settings, to activities and different areas of activities that support all areas of development. It is social development, kids being able to sit at a snack table and have snack and converse with each other, it’s about playing in a sand table and getting along with each other, it’s about going out on the playground and the physical development, the fine motor, the gross motor, starting to understand some of the basic concepts of colors and numbers and those kinds of activities that are presented in a way that is appropriate for a 4 year old. It is a lot about exposure and group activities. (Admin 1.1)

The River Valley early childhood staff incorporated social emotional development into their program along with beliefs surrounding supporting families, developing the whole child, the importance of relationships, and enhancing creativity in children.

**Community Relationship**

The River Valley early childhood programs were attempting to be a bridge between the community early childhood programs and the River Valley school district. This stemmed from the program goal to find and serve families in the community with the greatest needs. The staff recognized that in order to do this, early childhood program staff needed to be in touch with the community. The administrator acknowledged this, saying, “Part of my job is also looking at a community and seeing how together we can help all kids be ready” (Admin 1.1). River Valley therefore not only worked to bridge the K-12 system and the district early childhood systems, but also worked to bridge the district and the community. A district early childhood committee that included representatives from community agencies attempted to do this:

We have an early childhood committee in our district, and I lead that group, and it includes directors, the Head Start director, some of the directors from the community preschool, some from childcare, some of our elementary education directors or supervisors, a number of kindergarten teachers, a number of ECFE staff, our screening manager, some ECSE staff. It used to have our elementary education director, but she isn’t always able to make it. We meet monthly and assess what our goals are, what do we want to see happen and move forward with it. (Admin 1.1)

The primary concern of these meetings, as reflected in the minutes, was ensuring that children across the community were ready for school. The committee served a communication function across early childhood programs in the district and communicated River Valley kindergarten expectations to the greater community.

Part of community interaction included outreach, both to parents and to community programs. River Valley staff convened community meetings for parents to talk about what children needed to be ready for school in the River Valley district, and they offered some training to community early childhood staff, particularly around what it meant to be ready for kindergarten in River Valley schools and how to support children who were learning English.
Our goal through school readiness and working together with Head Start and community preschools is to make sure our kids when they enter kindergarten are ready. That is really everyone working together. It is getting kids screened early, it’s making sure Head Start has the support they need and that we are working together, [and] the community preschools know what they need to be working on. (Admin 1.1)

The River Valley early childhood program recognized that they were unable to serve all young children in their community. Therefore, they collaborated and connected with other agencies, particularly those agencies that also served young children and families, to ensure that all children arrived in school ready to learn. The administrator saw part of her larger work as developing community collaborations and being sensitive to the needs of all the families in the community.

In many ways, the River Valley early education program was in a unique position that straddled two cultures: that of the early childhood community, and that of the school district. River Valley had diverse early childhood programs that served a variety of children and families across in the community and school district. The staff recognized the importance of finding and serving families in a developmentally appropriate way and saw collaboration with community partners as a necessary and integral part of this goal. In this way, River Valley early education programs were part of the broader early education community that included child care programs and Head Start. However, the River Valley program also had strong links with the K-12 system: all funding streamed through the school district, some classrooms were co-located in elementary schools, the administrator served on district committees, and the early childhood teachers communicated regularly with kindergarten teachers. This enabled River Valley early education programs to have an understanding of how both the district and kindergarten teachers defined school readiness, while also providing opportunities for the River Valley early education programs to influence both the K-12 system and other early childhood programs in their community.

Standards-Based Reform in River Valley

Standards-based reform (SBR) in River Valley was composed of a number of layered and interrelated polices and initiatives that conveyed various messages about what the program should be doing. Unlike the other two previous cases, SBR in River Valley was not clearly defined, but rather a kaleidoscope of different initiatives that evolved over a long period of time without a large infusion of outside funding. However, the key elements of SBR still existed in River Valley, including using standards, curriculum, and assessment while providing support through professional development.
River Valley began instituting a child assessment aligned with the state standards about 10 years prior to the 2007-2008 school year. Over the intervening years, the early childhood program as a whole gradually developed curricula based on the assessment. Although the early childhood program offered some professional development within the district, there was little coherence, and teachers pursued their own personal areas of interest. More recently, the district as a whole received innovative state grant funding called Q Comp. This introduced a comprehensive system of professional development aligned with the goals of both the district as a whole and the early childhood programs specifically Table 6 outlines the SBR components during the two phases, the evolution and components of which are described in the following sections.

Table 6. Standards-Based Reform Components in River Valley

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Phase 1: Standards, Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction

SBR in River Valley can be considered a dual-phase reform model. The first phase of SBR in River Valley occurred about 10 prior to the 2007-2008 school year, when the program adopted a set of standards and a child assessment based on the standards and began developing curricula based on the standards and the assessment. The program chose to use the state-developed Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs) as their guiding standards and the Work Sampling System (WSS) as their children’s assessment. The program also wrote its own curriculum that each teacher was expected to implement based on the ECIPs. The children’s assessment, curriculum, and ECIPs were all aligned with each other and also with the district kindergarten standards.

Standards and assessment. Standards were used as a basis to inform curriculum, determine goals, and assess children. They provided a unifying framework for the program. The main standards used in River Valley were the ECIPs and the River Valley School District Kindergarten Standards. These standards were the driving force for their curriculum. The River Valley district used the WSS to assess children, the ECIPs and the district kindergarten standards
to inform what to teach, and a program-designed curriculum that was aligned with all three to create classroom lesson plans.

The alignment of the district standards and WSS meant that the teachers tended to use WSS rather than the ECIPs as they were planning their lessons and developing curriculum. The teachers knew about the ECIPs, but as a practical guide, they used the WSS. As one teacher said, “I don’t use those [the ECIPs] as much as our work sampling. My Bible is the Work Sampling book, the P4 one” (Teacher 1.4). Another teacher concurred:

I use the WSS. They [the WSS and the ECIPs] are similar. Because I have to do WSS, that’s what I tend to rely on. I use the other as a resource, but not as much… I don’t pull it [the ECIPs] out as often as the WSS. WSS is more specific. It gives some examples of how to assess or what kinds of things to look for. (Teacher 1.2)

Essentially, the curriculum was based on WSS, which was aligned with the ECIPs and the standards for their individual district. The district standards were more general, while the ECIPs and the WSS were more specific and therefore more helpful. “But I think knowing that they are all aligned brings a lot of security” (Admin 1.1). This made the WSS a centerpiece of the River Valley early childhood program, and both the teachers and the administrator talked about the variety of roles the WSS played in their program and how they used the data, both at a classroom level and a program level. Their use of WSS data will be addressed later in this chapter.

WSS is a long assessment with many indicators in each of the seven developmental domains. Teachers tended to like WSS because it is observational, but they acknowledged that it was a lot of work and overwhelming to complete. Therefore, over time, the River Valley early childhood program adapted the WSS for its own use. The checklist teachers used was adapted from the original WSS checklist and was narrowed down to specific skills, aligned with district kindergarten standards and what the program thought was most essential. Although the program used all seven of the domains and the majority of the indicators in each domain, the program did not assess all of the indicators. This is not unusual since the WSS is an involved observational assessment with 55 indicators for the Preschool-4 assessment. The number of indicators assessed increased gradually over time, but the program still only used a limited number of the possible indicators. This made the assessment more manageable for the teachers. The WSS was aligned with both the kindergarten standards and the ECIPs, providing a guiding framework for the classrooms, while leaving the actual process of instruction up to the teachers. The content and skills were set out for them, but how teachers chose to teach these skills was up to them.

**Curriculum.** The River Valley early childhood program used the ECIPs and the WSS as guides for their curriculum development. The curriculum used by the River Valley early
childhood program was one that they designed and wrote together as a staff. It was not a traditional curriculum in the sense that it had a manual with specific areas of study, but rather was skill-based and specifically linked to the WSS and the district standards.

All teachers were expected to help write curricula as part of their staff development, and the program had a number of different curricula for each of the classes taught in the district. The staff wrote curriculum based on the WSS indicators. The process of writing curricula demonstrated how teachers understood the alignment of curriculum, assessment, and standards (both kindergarten and early childhood). The kindergarten standards for the district played a large part in the writing of curriculum. A teacher described the process of curriculum writing:

We met and each took an area. Mine was math. Some people took personal and social, so the seven domains we broke up into parts, and each wrote lesson plans based on what were the components that you were wanting to assess. (Teacher 1.4)

The administrator elaborated on this process:

Our teachers write curriculum that becomes a document in our program, but often they write curriculum together and they are all using [it]. When they write curriculum, it is based on those pieces. What is WSS looking for, what are those standards, ECIPs, so they use that as a base and work backwards. How do you teach that, what are the levels to get to that point? (Admin 1.1)

The curriculum writing process at River Valley was a collaborative process in which teachers examined domains of the WSS and the district kindergarten standards and wrote lesson plans based on the WSS assessment indicators used in the program. A teacher described how the curriculum was informed and aligned to the kindergarten standards, saying that they made a chart depicting “if this is what they need for K, what’s the step before that? This is what we want them to learn, and this is what they should know before they leave Bridge to School” (Teacher 1.3). This same teacher gave an example of the process and how she applied the curriculum in her classroom:

The kindergarten standard was, “A student will hear this sound in English, hear individual sounds.” In early childhood we maybe have had it exactly the same, but sometimes we changed it. What are they going to be exposed to for rhyming? The light goes on—I haven’t done a lot of rhyming. I think, “We should be doing more rhyming, or we should be doing something else.” A framework, kind of a curriculum. We have curriculums we’ve developed over the years, and lately we have been developing them around work sampling. I had speech and listening. My goal was to come up with lesson plans that other teachers could do. (Teacher 1.3)

The resulting curriculum, entitled Teaching Sequential Skills through Work Sampling, was a large binder with lesson plans, objectives, and activities directly related to Work Sampling indicators. Domains from WSS were separated, and lesson plans listed the domain, the functional component, and the performance indicator. Each performance indicator had a variety of possible
activities, with the task/objective, materials, directions, and a home extension activity if applicable. The activities corresponding with each performance indicator were compiled from a variety of sources, including personal teacher materials, early childhood instructional sourcebooks, workshops, and the internet.

Although all teachers were familiar with the curriculum guide, not all teachers used it or thought of it in the same way. Teacher 1.4 describes how the curriculum was used: “We pull from [the curriculum guide]. I mean, I’m not going to say every teacher does that. We all do our own unique style.” It was a creative and flexible curriculum, letting teachers decide which activities fit best with their class and which areas of study or themes were appropriate. This was evident in how the teachers described their use of the curriculum:

The curriculum for Bridge to School is pretty much whatever the early childhood teacher wants to do. There isn’t a curriculum where they say this is what you teach. We have very veteran teachers, so everyone does it completely different[ly]. Which is kind of why we brought [the curriculum guide] together, so no matter where students go [to preschool in the district], they should be exposed to color words, number words, days of week, days of month, size and shape words, and people and place words. This was to make sure that if they’re coming out of my Bridge and coming out of another Bridge somewhere else in district, they have been exposed to this. Can they re-tell familiar story, make predictions about what’s going to happen next? We want to make sure we cover all this. But there isn’t a [formal] curriculum for Bridge to School. (Teacher 1.3)

The curriculum, then, provided a framework from which the teachers could pull, rather than a clear-cut, standardized manual that all teachers were required to follow. This method seemed to work well for the program because it allowed teachers the flexibility to adjust activities to the needs of their class. “I still know what kindergarten teachers want students to know next year, but how I get them there I can adjust to each class” (Teacher 1.3). In other words, teachers had goals for what children were supposed to learn based on the ECIPs, district kindergarten standards, and WSS. The teachers were allowed quite a bit of flexibility in their actual instructional practices, as long as the children learned what they were expected to learn.

**Instruction.** River Valley’s instructional strategies were similar to the curriculum in that they were flexible, open-ended, and based on DAP. Each teacher chose how she would teach the curriculum, using a variety of process-oriented strategies.

I like to think of it—I’m bringing the activities in there, and I am setting up the environment and then letting them explore it while I am watching or near them to guide them if problems arise or if they have questions or things like that. (Teacher 1.2)

This was typical of how teachers in River Valley described their instructional strategies. The teacher also described her daily schedule for Bridge, which started at 1:00 pm, when children either got dropped off or arrived on the bus. As children waited for all of the students to arrive,
they looked at books independently or played guessing games or sorting games. Children also signed in as they arrived, which served as a literacy activity. When all the children had arrived, there was a circle time, where “We sing a counting song and then we read a story and we choose a helper and mark the calendar and look at the weather and sing some songs” (Teacher 1.2). After circle time was a half hour of play time to explore the room. A number of activities were available, such as painting and the sensory table16, and all of the toys and games in the room were open. After that, teachers split the children into three groups for small group time, rotating the children through each group that was led by a teacher or teaching assistant. After small groups, children had a snack together as a group, collected their belongings, and went outside to play.

Small groups were an important part of instruction. They tended to be skill-based and more directive than free play. Small groups gave children more time with the teacher and allowed the teacher to understand the developmental and skill levels of their students.

They’re working on cutting shapes, learning shapes, sometimes counting practice, like a sequence book, coloring, knowing colors, color activities. Sometimes we do dot-to-dots, we’ve done bingo, drawing yourself, other fine motor types of things. (Teacher 1.3)

Small groups also were a time when teachers were able to do some assessments. A teacher described her thinking about constructing small groups:

I just went down the list and assigned. Sometimes in January I’ll re-look at the groups because sometimes there are some personalities that aren’t working, or some groups have too many kids that need extra help, so we spread them out. As I was setting them up, I made sure there was an even number of girls and boys, so one group didn’t have all girls or all boys. I will look at them again in January and do some changing. That way they also get to know other kids. (Teacher 1.2)

Teachers tended to form small groups based more on personalities, rather than specific skill levels, and used small groups to teach skills assessed by WSS.

The first phase of SBR in River Valley happened as a gradual process over a number of years and had few explicit external motivators. Under the leadership of the administrator, the teachers chose to implement an assessment process and develop a curriculum based on state and district standards. Instructional strategies were based on the standards, assessment tool, and developmentally appropriate practice. River Valley teachers used small group instruction, but the small groups did not tend to be based on specific abilities or skills. Rather, they were a strategy

16 A sensory table is a common element in most early childhood classrooms. It consists of a deep tray (usually about 5 inches deep) at waist height of the children. It is filled with sensory materials, such as sand, water, corn, rice, or cotton balls, along with props such as scoops, cups, and/or various plastic animals.
that allowed children to have more intensive time with a teacher. The second phase of SBR in River Valley—Q Comp implementation—is described below.

**Phase 2: Q Comp**

The second phase of SBR began in the school year in which this research was conducted (2007-2008) and focused on implementing Q Comp in the district. Q Comp was an innovative, state-wide initiative that based teacher compensation on quality indicators and was intended to improve professional teacher practice and student outcomes. Q Comp built on the existing SBR components in River Valley, encouraging the district to set specific, standards-based goals for teachers and children, and providing professional development to help teachers develop their skills. It added an additional layer of reform and accountability to the early childhood program in River Valley. Q Comp focused on improving student achievement through improving teacher practice and included initiatives such as selection of goals, comprehensive professional development, and an alternative teacher compensation package.

Although not specifically focused on child outcomes, Q Comp was a form of SBR that focused on improving teacher practice and linking teacher compensation to student outcomes on a limited basis. Each local school district, in conjunction with the teacher representatives, designed its own Q Comp plan that focused on five main components: (1) career advancement options, allowing teachers to be compensated for additional responsibilities; (2) integrated and aligned professional development embedded in the job, typically taking the form of Professional Learning Communities; (3) teacher evaluations with multiple criteria, conducted by multiple objective evaluators and aligned to staff development; (4) some sort of performance pay tied to student outcomes; and (5) an alternative salary schedule that reformed the traditional schedule of “steps and lanes.” School districts applied to the state Department of Education for Q Comp, and, if their plan was approved by the state, they received a modest increase in per pupil spending to implement Q Comp. In addition, teachers also had the possibility of receiving a bonus at the end of the year if they reached the goals set for themselves and the program.

The River Valley School District applied and was approved for a Q Comp plan that was implemented for the first time during the 2007-2008 school year. Because the early childhood staff in River Valley were included on the K-12 teacher contract, they were also eligible for the plan. Q Comp in the early childhood program of River Valley took the form of developing program goals (Q Comp also called these “site” goals) and personal teacher goals that were aligned with professional development opportunities in the district, using a teacher observation protocol, establishing a goal for children’s learning, and implementing a way to assess the goal.
At the time of this research, River Valley had not begun conducting teacher observations, although they were part of the Q Comp plan.

Q Comp provided an important motivating factor in the form of more funding for students and also a bonus system for teachers who achieved their goals. As the administrator noted, Q Comp was “driving site [program] goals for teachers and individual goals for our early childhood teachers. They would be trying to improve those test scores through improving their teaching practices” (Admin 1.1). Thus, Q Comp was providing motivation for one of the key aspects of SBR: alignment of goals, professional development, and assessment. The importance of alignment was not lost on the administrator:

There are multiple levels about how this is working and how we tackle Q Comp and build in staff training that supports these changes. We also have a couple days of the teachers for curriculum writing. It is all woven together, which is what I like about it. We have this focus area, and the program is focused on it, and individuals are focused on it, and we are doing our staff development around it, and we are doing our curriculum writing around it. (Admin 1.1)

Alignment of all program elements was a key part of Q Comp and linked professional development to a site goal based on student performance. It added a professional development element while also providing significant motivation in the form of monetary bonuses for teachers to change their practice.

**Program goals.** Choosing a particular program goal was an integral part of Q Comp. This created a focus for the program throughout the year. Using the ECIPs and the WSS to inform the choice of program goals and personal goals was one way standards were used in the program. The River Valley early childhood program chose social-emotional development, which was in line with the beliefs of the program staff. The administrator described the choice of the Q Comp program goal:

It was a group process. Originally, I thought we might go with literacy because literacy is such a hot area, and I thought literacy this year, math next year. I shared it with staff, and then I started thinking more about it and felt that the basis for everything we do is about relationships. A base area for us was social emotional, and that was where we needed to start. Teachers agreed. (Admin 1.1)

Teachers used the Work Sampling System (WSS) to assess children on progress toward the goal and set a target that 70% of three and four year old students would be rated as proficient on the personal-social development domain of the WSS checklist by spring. The action plan for the early childhood program included staff attending workshops, reviewing materials on social-emotional development independently and as a group, and expanding a curriculum framework for social-emotional content. Q Comp aligned well with the state culture of flexibility and local control of
educational agencies, allowing each district to determine its own program goals. The goals were determined based on how the program staff viewed what was important to teaching and learning.

The Q Comp program goal chosen by the early childhood program drove the choice of individual teacher goals (Individual Growth Plans) and professional development offered within the program. Because the program goal was to work on social-emotional development, teachers used the Work Sampling System indicators of progress under Personal-Social as a guide to choosing their goals. The teachers each chose one or two specific indicators on which to work with the children in their classes, targeting indicators that their children did not do well on in the fall and developing a plan for instruction.

We met with a collegial group of early childhood teachers. My [Individual Growth Plan] has not been approved yet, but we are all kind of doing the same thing. An example would be between fall of ‘07 and spring of ‘08, four out of six students will move from not yet or IP (in process) to proficient before or between fall assessment and spring assessment in [the social-emotional] area of seeking help when they encounter a problem. When I did the fall assessment, one student was proficient at asking for help, and that guided my decision to go with this goal. Another teacher’s problem was that kids always ask for help and won’t do anything themselves. So her goal was similar, but she picked something different from within Work Sampling. (Teacher 1.3)

Teachers used both the program goal and their classroom composition/assessment to develop their personal goals. These goals were used to inform assessment, instruction, curriculum, and professional development.

The second phase of SBR in River Valley continued the process initiated during Phase 1. Teachers continued to develop curriculum based on district kindergarten and state early childhood standards, using the WSS assessment to inform both curriculum and instruction. This stage of reform was primarily motivated by internal district factors, such as the need to ensure children were ready for the district kindergarten demands and was completed with little external funding. With the advent of Q Comp, motivation came in the form of district expectations and additional funding, both for the program and individual teachers. Opportunities for professional development expanded to include Professional Learning Communities and more targeted classroom observations. Q Comp also required River Valley early childhood program staff to choose a particular goal on which to focus all professional development.

Implementation Process of SBR in River Valley Early Childhood

The way in which River Valley implemented SBR was based on a number of supports the program put into place. These supports included intermittent training based on a number of different professional development topics and professional learning communities (PLCs). This
professional development provided by the district was helpful for the teachers as they
implemented SBR, but teachers still struggled with a number of implementation challenges.

**Training Opportunities**

River Valley district professional development took a variety of formats. There were four
days per year dedicated to staff development for all staff and a teacher meeting every other week
for an hour, in addition to PLCs. Topics offered by the district included autism, children’s mental
health, poverty, literacy, and math. Teachers also received eight hours of “Resource Day” per
year, which was “a day we don’t teach, but then we’re expected to go out to in-services or other
workshops or speakers at night and gather data that way” (Teacher 1.4). The teachers
independently chose additional classes of interest to them, offered by a range of organizations,
such as universities, professional associations, or the Minnesota Department of Education.

Past training in early childhood focused on using the WSS, curriculum writing, and
workshops on a variety of topics. Training offered by the district was not comprehensive,
intensive, or ongoing, but it was unified by being standards-based. Although curriculum and
assessment continued to be important foci for professional development, the advent of Q Comp
meant the onset of more intentional professional development related to the program goals. The
teachers were aware of the program goal and the focus of professional development and planned
accordingly for their own individual goals.

This year, because our Q Comp goal is social-emotional development, so our IGP,
Individual Growth Plan, is most of our own learning about social-emotional development
and coming up with a new resource idea list. We’re sharing that as a staff together.
(Teacher 1.4)

The administrator also acknowledged the program goal as an important guide to professional
development and encouraged teachers to read research related to the goals and process
information in their collegial groups. She expected teachers to “choose to change some of their
teaching practices, write new lesson plans, and pull out the data about kids in that area to see if
they can improve test scores” (Admin 1.1).

The professional development offered by the River Valley early childhood program was
supposed to link to the district and program goal, but in practice, that was not always the case.
The administrator described her plan for trainings this year:

In December we will have the district trainers [in literacy and math], and then I am
bringing a *Working and Connecting with All Families* workshop to our staff to do
processing about how we change our outreach and change our teaching practices to
attract and retain populations that we are currently not serving. Then, we are looking at
some other times to do some pieces on social emotional development and assessment,
and I am not sure what that will be this year. (Admin 1.1)
The administrator noted this discrepancy, but explained that the literacy and math trainers were scheduled last year, before Q Comp was approved. A teacher went on to talk about the need for other kinds of training:

> [At] our next training, one of the literacy trainers and the math trainers from the district is coming out, and that is a direct result of when last summer we wrote the kindergarten expectations of early childhood. When we sat down to do that, we realized we were lacking in math area for training. So we asked Admin 1.1 a for math trainer. We also said it might be good to have district person come out for literacy because we need to know how the district writes the letter A. The district literacy trainer will teach us the step before kindergarten. (Teacher 1.3)

Clearly, there was a purpose to each training, even if it was not directly linked to Q Comp goals. However, being responsive to these other issues meant that the program had not implemented a comprehensive plan aligned specifically with the goal of social emotional development. Q Comp, the program goals, and the expectation that professional development would align with the goals, were in the first year of implementation, which likely explains this discrepancy. Nevertheless, the administrator and teachers were working towards a more comprehensive plan, and the program continued to provide training opportunities that were in line with the overall goals of the program. This also highlights the program staff’s desire for professional development on multiple topics, not only focused on a single program goal.

**Professional Learning Communities**

Professional learning communities (PLCs), also called collegial groups in River Valley, were an important part of the professional development in the program. The program placed a high value on these groups, as the administrator said: “A lot of what I think staff development is, is processing and the collegial dialogue” (Admin 1.1). The greatest impact of the Q Comp program goal may have been on the content of the collegial groups. The groups were composed of teachers who read resources together and then discussed them. The teachers also agreed that working in collegial groups was important to professional development and learning and was the type of professional development most useful to them.

This year, the program goal for us is personal/social development out of WSS. We have done a lot of collegial things. Six early childhood teachers met a few weeks ago to talk about what we need to work on in classrooms on personal and social. To me those are the most beneficial. What you get out of it is so much richer than if I did it myself. The discussion and dialogue makes you think. I may have a way of doing something that I have always done that way but then I hear that someone is doing something different and I hadn’t thought of doing it that way. (Teacher 1.3)

Small groups of teachers allowed for more discussion and sharing of ideas. Teachers mentioned that they shared lesson plans and read and discussed books related to social-emotional development to increase their understanding of the program goal. Teachers felt this was helpful
“because you do learn a lot just from the discussion, and then I like reading something new that someone else has recommended” (Teacher 1.4). The teachers were clear that they found PLCs helpful in their work and preferred to discuss and share ideas with other teachers. Trainings provided information, but collegial groups helped the teachers process the information and find ways to implement ideas in their classrooms.

Professional development in River Valley early childhood programs was offered in the context of the district as a whole. The messages of serving children and families in the greatest need and aligning the content of early childhood programs with kindergarten led to a number of workshops and trainings for the teachers. Q Comp added another layer of professional development, centered on collegial groups with a specific focus on the program goal: social-emotional development.

**Challenges to Implementation**

While staff overall found the process of implementing SBR, both in Phase 1 and Phase 2, to be helpful to their work, they also talked about a number of challenges. These challenges were generally related to feeling overwhelmed by and having a lack of time to do everything that was being asked of them. A few also mentioned a high learning curve as they implemented changes and not always having the skills necessary to do what was being asked of them. Most of the challenges centered around assessment—learning to use WSS and understanding the process of evaluation.

Staff mentioned some drawbacks and challenges to implementing SBR. The most common comment was the amount of time needed to assess children and implement the changes.

There are some people that grumble about the amount of time they have to put in for some of these things, but I think all of them would say that that’s probably comparable to what a K-12 teacher has to do to be a good teacher. It is not unrealistic. It’s what you have to do. I think they would agree that having that information to base their work on, where do I go from here, that’s been the most helpful. (Admin 1.1)

Obviously [there is] a little bit more work to do because I have to get these checklists ready and follow them in the classroom and do the conferences. I think it is great that we are doing it and that they have information that can show the value of what we are doing. But it does take more time and a lot more management. (Teacher 1.2)

Understanding how to use assessment tools was a challenge for both the teachers and the administrator. There were two different aspects to this challenge. First, at the classroom level, teachers needed to have a clear understanding of what they were assessing. This was not always the case:

Sometimes I feel frustrated with WSS, that some of the way it is worded, it is kind of nebulous—it is so broad, where sometimes I want something a little more specific. And
they have examples, like it might look like this or it might look like that. So sometimes I get frustrated with that part of it. (Teacher 1.2)

Although teachers liked WSS as a whole, they found that it was not always as clear as they would like.

Second, developing the support and the knowledge to assess program outcomes as a whole was a challenge for the administrator. The administrator was part of a larger statewide committee to create a way to assess parent outcomes, and she noted, “There isn’t the support or the resources out there to do it. I am not an evaluator, and it is not my job to develop evaluation tools.” She went on to talk about her district specifically and how it was a challenge to implement and understand assessment in early childhood:

We have assessment staff in our district who support the schools in understanding their assessment, doing their assessments and all those things, and we don’t have that support we have to figure that out ourselves. How do you do it in early childhood? That is a challenge… Time, money, professional resources to help get us there. (Admin 1.1)

Even though there was assessment staff in the K-12 system, this staff did not spend much time helping early childhood programs understand and implement assessment.

SBR in River Valley was implemented primarily through professional development offered by the school district and early childhood program. Teachers were expected to attend a variety of professional development trainings. These trainings addressed a variety of topics, including math, literacy, social-emotional development, and reaching underserved families. Q Comp, an aspect of SBR, intended to align specific program program goals with professional development and was in the beginning stages in River Valley. Teachers found professional development helpful in their work, but they also found challenges with implementation. These challenges centered around assessment, particularly the amount of time needed to complete it. There was also a lack of support at the district level to help early childhood teachers use and understand assessment data. Despite these challenges, the components and process of SBR changed how River Valley early childhood staff taught, as will be seen in the following section.

Perceived Outcomes of SBR in River Valley

The River Valley program had been implementing components of SBR for about 10 years before the 2007-2008 school year, and staff talked about the outcomes of the reforms within the context of that length of time. Many of the changes occurred gradually and focused on assessment and data use, and therefore many of the outcomes were related to assessment and data use. Staff saw that SBR helped them become more accountable and aware of the importance of their classroom activities. SBR also facilitated the staff’s ability to explain the importance of the
early childhood field. Program staff saw SBR as helping them to be more focused and intentional in their choice of what to teach and how to teach it. SBR raised expectations for what children needed to learn and therefore what teachers needed to teach. Although some staff voiced concerns about high expectations, for the most part staff felt that they were better teachers as a result of the reforms.

Using Data

Use of WSS in River Valley early childhood programs evolved over time. WSS was instituted in the River Valley early childhood program about 10 years before this study, and since then the teachers had used it as the primary assessment for their children. Teachers used WSS in a variety of ways in their classroom and to different extents. In general, teachers used WSS to develop goals for individual children, develop small and large group activities, and guide curriculum development. WSS was also used to assess children on an individual level, guide teachers’ understanding of students’ skill levels, and collect specific examples of children’s skills. Staff talked about how they used data in the program as a whole to communicate to the broader community about what they did in early childhood education and demonstrated that they were accountable for what is expected of them.

Overall, the staff in the River Valley early childhood program were happy using the WSS to assess their students, and all interviewees acknowledged the positive change it had on classrooms and teachers. Implementing WSS was a process of change for the teachers. The administrator talked about the first time she mentioned the need to start using WSS:

I remember very strong reactions from teachers who were fearful of it, how could we do that, is it developmentally appropriate, how could we manage to add that to our workload, and it is interesting to reflect on that… Now our teachers are well into it and have been doing it for years and have many systems in place to collect data and move to using it in a number of different ways. I think it has added so much to our work. (Admin 1.1)

One teacher also described her first reactions to WSS and how she grew through the process of understanding to using it:

At first it was hard to remember what all was in [WSS]. But now that I’ve done it a number of years I am more used to it and I can observe better, I guess, because I know what I am looking for. I know what is in the system. At first, too, it was hard to try to fit it in, how to assess, how to observe, how to gather all that information. Over the years that I have done it, I’ve figured out some of the ways I can gather that information. (Teacher 1.2)

From the administrator’s perspective, WSS made the teachers more confident in their teaching, ensured the teachers address all areas of development in appropriate ways, broke down the walls of the classroom by encouraging dialogue between the teachers, and provided solid information.
the teachers can use to inform their instruction. Another teacher concurred, saying, “I think it just has added another dimension to planning and thinking about the children” (Teacher 1.2). As teachers began to use WSS in their classrooms, they began to have a better understanding of why it was important and how it could improve their teaching. It now was a valued part of the River Valley early childhood program.

In the classroom, the teachers primarily used the WSS to guide curriculum development and assess progress. Children were assessed three times per year, and a progress report was written three times per year and given to parents during conferences. Teachers developed various ways of using the WSS to gather data, both in terms of naturalistic observation (observing how children play and interact with materials) and in terms of providing activities that assess a particular skill.

I have [what] I call ongoing assessment, so these are things where I’m just watching what the kids are doing. This is how I kind of noticed that [one child] was only reading that same book, because I started to watch what they’re doing in interaction. Sometimes I write down a statement they say. It just helps me know what they’re doing each more explicitly. (Teacher 1.4)

In my three-ring folder each student has a section and a page for personal and social, a page for literacy, a page for math. I make notes, like [one child] showed me a car with a number 1 and said number one, so I put that in his math section. Language samples and I will put that in their language. When I sit down to do my reports, I go back and look and see. (Teacher 1.3)

Teachers also have developed ways in which to assess children, with specific checklists for each skill. These checklists are often used during small groups and are linked to WSS indicators. However, some teachers are not using WSS as often to guide lesson plans or explicitly monitor children’s progress.

I know when I went through the training, that’s how they talked about it—“This will guide your curriculum.” I have not found that is how I do it… I do let WSS guide the curriculum in that I know I have to cover certain things, and so those things I will get in… I watch for making sure I am hitting all of these areas, but I don’t use it as a tool to look at every week as a way to plan. (Teacher 1.2)

Not only was the WSS assessment used in the classroom, but it was also used in the program as whole. The district helped the staff develop a computer program for teachers to enter the data in the fall and the spring. According to the administrator, they not only used it for reporting to parents, but:

We are also using it to write curriculum and because we have that ability to enter that data into a program, we pull reports on how kids are doing. How many are proficient at the end of the school year. And now with the advent of Q Comp in our district, that is also driving [program] goals for teachers and individual goals for our early childhood
teachers. They would be trying to improve those test scores through improving their teaching practices. (Admin 1.1)

The administrator was then able to pull various reports that were used by the teachers during conference time to set both individual and program goals for the children. These reports were also passed on to kindergarten teachers. WSS was therefore used broadly in the program to assess overall progress of students, understand program strengths and weaknesses, and demonstrate program outcomes. WSS in River Valley began primarily as a tool for individual assessment in the classroom, but it evolved into a way for the program to assess its quality and provide accountability.

The staff also noted the importance of being able to show what children learned in the program and to demonstrate accountability to stakeholders. As the administrator said, “We just keep trying to educate people about what we are doing” (Admin 1.1). Demonstrating outcomes and student progress using WSS data helped give credibility to the River Valley early childhood program and confirmed the professional status of the staff. It also provided a specific and intentional way to describe what they taught. A teacher said,

It’s just a different way of looking at what I’ve been doing anyhow, but I guess it does make us look better in the eyes of legislators or parents, or, if we have other staff in the district, it puts us on a more level footing, so I think it’s a good thing. (Teacher 1.4)

Another way the program used assessment was to articulate to people outside of the field what exactly early childhood was all about. One teacher said that the legislators were “spending money on the program and want to know if it’s working. They want to know if the money is making a difference in helping kids prepare for school” (Teacher 1.3). The administrator further clarified this sentiment:

It is what we need to be doing to prove that we are as accountable as anyone else who is in a classroom. Is what we are doing really making a difference with kids? If we have these plans and do these things and work hard to bring things to kids, does it make a difference? Now we are seeing how we can improve what we are doing, making sure we are all current and we all agree that these are the things we should be teaching in the classroom. Isolated classrooms and isolated teachers in planning doesn’t allow us to learn from each other and figure those things out together, and Q Comp is forcing it. (Admin 1.1)

Using assessment in particular gave the staff in River Valley a way to show a variety of stakeholders what they were doing, how well they were doing it, and what possible ways early childhood contributed to overall children’s learning.

SBR, and particularly data use, in River Valley also influenced how the program viewed itself and motivated change. The administrator thought this was not a bad thing—and the stress of change and accountability were far outweighed by the possibilities of working together and
improving classroom instruction. It also made the staff feel like what they were doing was valued by the broader community and that it gave the field greater recognition.

All of a sudden now we are doing what K-12 has always been doing, looking at student test scores. I see it has professionalized what we do in family education and early childhood education by saying that we have to be accountable. (Admin 1.1)

There have been a lot of messages from business people who are talking about the value of early childhood education and encouraging more funding. That has really felt good, to have these business leaders talk about the value of our work, because I think for a long time, and I don’t think we are completely in the legit frame of mind, but early childhood was just, oh, you are babysitting. (Teacher 1.2)

Staff felt that as more attention was focused on early childhood, including the need for assessment and proving what they do in the classroom worked, the field as a whole was becoming more valued by outside stakeholders. Assessment meant they not only knew what to teach, they were able to demonstrate that they were teaching it in their classrooms. By extension, staff perceived that the field was becoming more professionalized and had more credibility as a profession in the eyes of the general public. One teacher said, “There is so much more legitimacy being put on the value of early childhood education. It’s nice” (Teacher 1.2). In other words, staff felt that early childhood teachers were beginning to be seen as “real” teachers, which was an important outcome to staff.

**Higher Expectations and Intentionality**

Another important outcome of SBR in River Valley was the notion of higher expectations. This meant that teachers were aware of what children needed to be successful in school and were clear about what they needed to teach in their classrooms. It also meant that teachers were more intentional in their teaching.

I think early childhood teachers in general had a hard time verbalizing why they are doing what they are doing and what it was addressing. Now, as a result of WSS driving them to think more about what they do, I think they are much better teachers, they are better at addressing all areas of development and very conscious about what they are offering and how it sequences from one learning area to another. (Admin 1.1)

Teachers agreed and noted the perceived positive impact on their teaching, saying that WSS has changed what they look for when they observe children. They were able to relate the skills and abilities they saw in the classroom to specific WSS indicators, which aligned with kindergarten expectations.

I think [teachers] have gotten more confident about what they are doing and more confident that they are making an impact with kids. I see a lot more early childhood teachers in school readiness very focused on teaching skills in developmentally appropriate ways that I probably didn’t see before. I think there is a lot more dialogue around that, so it has taken down the walls of classrooms in the sense that our teachers…
spend time talking about what they are doing and sharing ideas and sharing curriculum. (Admin 1.1)

A teacher agreed, saying,

I just feel more knowledgeable about what’s coming up or what the schools are doing. I think it’s just learning more. We’re all just learning more, and then able to just come up with new ways to do things that we’ve been doing anyhow but are more deliberate. I guess learning that kids don’t just come up with learning to read on their own. You have to do this and that to help them get there. (Teacher 1.4)

Having standards and specific indicators aligned with early childhood and kindergarten expectations ensured teachers were more intentional with classroom activities and instructional strategies, informed by targeted observation of students. Another teacher described how her thoughts about using WSS assessment have changed over time:

I learned it [WSS] four years ago. Every year I’m getting better at it. I feel that what we are doing now, I am not saying “teaching to work sampling,” but knowing what we expect…. So with work sampling, how it’s changed the most is first I just used to assess. And now I think, “They need to know how to do this. How am I going to teach that?” (Teacher 1.3)

As teachers understood the WSS and how children’s skills and abilities were assessed, as well as how skills developed in early childhood related to expectations in kindergarten, teachers were able to be more intentional in their planning and instruction. Using WSS helped teachers develop a clearer understanding of expectations for children and how to provide instruction to help children attain the expectations.

However, River Valley staff recognized that higher expectations could bring risks if not tempered by a grounding in DAP. A teacher expressed some concerns about pressure for a more academically-focused curriculum, saying she worried that children may lose time to play and be social with their peers. This same teacher talked about the academic “push-down,” saying,

There is always concern about our expectations—are we demanding too much of [the children]. I know in elementary schools they’ve added more and more. A first grade teacher friend of mine was talking about what she is expected to do now, they used to do in second grade. Sometimes it feels like there is more and more work that you are expected to do that used to be at another age level. (Teacher 1.2)

The administrator offered a different view regarding expectations:

I do believe there are times when I have concerns about expectations of some kindergarten teachers or what preschools are doing, but I think pretty much we have very veteran early childhood teachers so we have worked through any philosophical differences…the whole field of early childhood was making a shift. (Admin 1.1)

Despite the high expectations and the risk of focusing on academics over social-emotional development, River Valley early childhood maintained a strong commitment to developmentally
appropriate practice, a cornerstone of their program philosophy. Teachers acknowledged that the changes in River Valley improved their teaching:

Accountability makes me a better teacher. It makes me think beyond what songs do I like or what activities are fun. It makes me think, “Okay, I need to make sure my kids have worked with above, below, beside, directional things.” I never knew that before, how important those pieces are. It helps you become a better teacher to have a guideline and framework. And I like that we’re free to work within that framework. I like the balance. (Teacher 1.3)

Maintaining a balance between the higher expectations and the program philosophy grounded in developmentally appropriate practice helped teacher to become more intentional in their teaching. One teacher expressed it as being more deliberate in her teaching to ensure children are ready for kindergarten, “but how to do it in ways that meet the needs of kids and parents” (Teacher 1.4).

**Conclusion**

River Valley, a suburban school district, faced a growing population of families and children with diverse challenges related to success in school, such as low income levels and language barriers. River Valley’s early childhood programs, including Bridge to School, were increasingly part of the K-12 system and aimed to increase children’s readiness for school. Bridge served children in the greatest need to ensure they entered kindergarten ready to learn. The Bridge program philosophy included using developmentally appropriate practices and a standards-based approach to instruct children while also developing strong relationships with children, parents, the K-12 system, and the greater community. SBR in River Valley consisted of a two-phase model. The first phase incorporated standards, introduced a whole-child assessment system, and built a curriculum based on standards and assessment. The second phase of SBR included additional alignment among professional development and the components put in place during the first phase. The professional development aligned with overall program goals, although it was not focused specifically on one particular goal. Staff perceived primarily positive outcomes of SBR, including more intentional instruction; clarity around kindergarten expectations; and the use of data to inform instructional practices, program effectiveness, and program improvement. The River Valley case illustrates a longer process of standards-based reform implementation with less external funding than the previous two cases investigated.
CHAPTER 7
COMPARISON AND ANALYSIS OF CASE FINDINGS

This chapter compares and contrasts the findings of the River Valley, Urban Center, and Lake Area case studies. These programs differed in terms of district context and the type of standards-based reform (SBR) initiative implemented, but they all had similar goals and basic philosophies of teaching young children, using developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) as a guiding principle. Each of the SBR models had similar components in terms of standards, curriculum, and assessment, yet each program had different ways of combining them. The programs were in various stages of implementation and had different types of professional development, yet the process of implementation, including the challenges, was similar. Despite the differences in the cases, there were surprising similarities across them in terms of how staff perceived the outcomes of SBR.

Program Contexts
Each of the three cases examined in this research was chosen with the expectation that they would highlight similarities and differences in how standards-based reform (SBR) was being implemented in early childhood programs. All three of the cases described early childhood programs that were located within a school district and therefore had a relationship with the K-12 system. The majority of the early childhood programs were co-located in elementary schools. However, the cases intentionally differed in terms of location, size, type of SBR reform initiative, amount of money spent on SBR, and length of time SBR had been implemented. Despite these differences in context, the three cases were extremely similar in their program goals and philosophies. The cases varied primarily in their approach to school readiness, their priority of serving children in need, and the underlying program culture.

Program Goals
The program goal of the three cases was similar: to ensure children at risk for school failure were prepared for kindergarten. All program staff in the three cases were aware of the goals of K-12—to ensure all children succeed academically—and talked about their own program goals in the context of this overarching K-12 goal. Each program had a connection to the K-12 system. The programs’ relationship with K-12 was evolving in all three cases—and as the K-12 relationship deepened, early childhood programs were seen as more important to the overall mission of the K-12 system. However, each program had a slightly different definition of what it
meant for children to be at risk for school failure and what it meant for children to be ready for kindergarten.

Serving children and families at risk was an overarching theme of all the cases; however, the definition of at risk differed among the programs. All programs had specific eligibility requirements that focused on children at risk. Most programs seemed to define children in the greatest need as primarily low income, ELL, and/or with other challenges. River Valley specifically acknowledged that “greatest need” could also mean families that were not financially challenged, but might have other challenges instead. Lake Area also noted that “disadvantaged” or “at risk” children often included children with mental health challenges in addition to income challenges. Urban Center recognized there were “meaningful differences” between children considered at risk for failure and those who were not, and the program tried to target these children to close the achievement gap. Overall, River Valley and Lake Area seemed to have a broader definition of children in need, while Urban Center focused on the academic nature of and implications for children at risk.

Both Lake Area and Urban Center explicitly acknowledged the role of early childhood programs in giving children at risk supports and learning they were not getting at home in order to ensure future school success. River Valley had an explicit focus on finding families that had the greatest need and ensuring they were receiving services and supports, and this emphasis on finding families was not as evident in the other two cases. The primary impetus in Urban Central behind serving children with enhanced needs was to help close the achievement gap in K-12, ensuring children arrived in kindergarten ready to learn and on par with their more advantaged peers. Urban Center was also the case tied most closely to the K-12 system, with elementary principals as the early childhood teachers’ instructional leads, which may account for the focus on the achievement gap.

**Program Philosophies**

The philosophies of each of the early childhood programs formed underlying program “cultures” that informed how staff in the programs believed children learn and how best to teach young children. Overall, the program philosophies across the three cases were strikingly similar, with small differences among programs. The foundation for all of the programs philosophies was developmentally appropriate practice, in that virtually all staff in all programs mentioned the importance of DAP in their program and their teaching. DAP is a comprehensive way to describe best practices in early childhood education, and certain aspects were highlighted by programs. These included allowing children time to play independently in the room in carefully designed
“learning centers,” scaffolding instruction based on a child’s current skill level, focusing on process activities instead of product, and providing hands-on, experiential activities.

In all three programs, social-emotional development emerged as an integral part of DAP, along with a focus on the “whole child.” Staff in Lake Area talked specifically about mental health as a priority of their program, likely because they had received a large grant to enhance mental health prior to receiving the Early Reading First grant. Similarly, staff in all three programs recognized that a significant component of DAP was developing meaningful and hands-on learning for children. This appeared to be a stronger value in River Valley and Urban Central, where staff mentioned the need to ensure time for children to play and create engaging activities. In addition, the role of academics versus the role of play in the early childhood programs was also important to each of the programs’ philosophies. Staff in each case discussed the desire to balance the need to provide stimulating academic environment while not compromising the role of social-emotional development and play. Play was seen as important by all, but the overall goal of ensuring that children were ready for school was still an important part of the culture.

Another common characteristic across programs was a focus on relationships. Many teachers characterized themselves as “relationship-based,” which meant they emphasized the role of their relationships with children and families in their work. However, River Valley, Lake Area, and the school readiness program in Urban Center talked about relationships in the context of their work more than staff in ASP in Urban Center did. The focus in the ASP in Urban Center seemed to be more explicitly academic, and while staff saw relationships as important, that import was subsumed in the overarching goal of academic success.

Developing relationships also extended to cultivating relationships with the community. Staff in all three programs discussed the importance of their communities and how they attempted to work together. This most often took the form of developing community partners, particularly community-based early childhood programs. Staff in the programs realized they alone could not serve all the children in their community, so all three programs had some form of outreach program to child care centers. This desire to reach out to other centers and improve quality while also raising awareness of the district’s kindergarten expectations was a common element of each case’s culture.

**SBR Models and Initiatives**

Each of the three cases investigated in this research described distinctly different methods and models of implementing SBR. River Valley was a medium sized suburban district that had
been implementing a “homemade” version of SBR for over 10 years with little additional money. Urban Center, a large urban district, was scaling down a SBR model designed for K-12 for the prior three years that had been funded by a private foundation. Located in a rural area, Lake Area had just begun the process of implementing SBR with a large amount of federal funding. While the components of SBR—standards, curriculum, assessment, professional development, and instructional strategies—existed in each of the models, the components themselves were different, and the way in which they worked together was also different. Despite these differences, there were similarities among the models, primarily in terms of the standards used and the existence and alignment of the different SBR components. The three cases are compared in terms of their SBR components, contexts, and funding in Table 7. Each of the SBR models is discussed in more detail in the following section, comparing and contrasting the form of SBR and the extent to which the elements were aligned.

To review, SBR consists of a number of different components intended to change and improve classroom instruction and student outcomes. Figure 4 shows the expected way in which SBR is theorized to work in early childhood.

![Figure 4. Theorized model of Standards-Based Reform in early childhood.](image-url)
The components of SBR include standards, curriculum, professional development, and assessment, along with some type of motivation to encourage programs to improve practice. The alignment of standards with curriculum and assessment, coupled with professional development that is directly relevant to the experiences of teachers and related to the other SBR components, provides support for teachers to enhance their capacity, change their classroom instruction, and improve student outcomes. Teachers use their beliefs, knowledge, and experience to interpret the demands of SBR, while funding can provide motivation for staff to change.

**Lake Area Standards-Based Reform Model**

In the Lake Area SBR model, funding was provided in the form of a large infusion of federal grant dollars with the specific requirement to implement a high-quality early literacy program for preschoolers at risk for school failure. The primary motivation for Lake Area to implement the SBR reform model was continued funding, although the original impetus for applying for the grant was to expand to a full-day program, not to implement the SBR model. In fact, staff talked about their hesitancy to take on ERF because of the “militancy” of classroom literacy requirements. Lake Area was originally a Head Start program, which meant it already had requirements for curriculum and assessment, with federal and state funding contingent on compliance. Lake Area also needed to ensure continued alignment with the state standards (ECIPs). The program therefore had three different and layered standards and requirements to guide program development: the ECIPs, the Head Start standards, and the ERF requirements. These layered requirements were at times challenging for Lake Area staff, particularly in ensuring that the different components fit together while also maintaining their commitment to family support and children’s mental health. In the end, it appeared that the Early Reading First (ERF) requirements took precedence, guiding the choice of curriculum (Opening the World of Learning, or OWL, a literacy-based curriculum), professional development (SEEDS, a literacy training based on the OWL), and many of the assessments (PALS, PPVT, and IGDIIs, all tools to assess literacy skills). To ensure teacher comprehension and compliance, Lake Area offered intensive professional development, consisting of coaching, ongoing training, and classroom observations, all of which were related to the standards, curriculum, and assessment. The classroom observations consisted of the ELLCO, a literacy environment assessment tool, and a tool to assess OWL implementation. Figure 5 shows the way in which the SBR reform components in Lake Area connected.
The alignment among the different components of SBR as interpreted through an ERF literacy lens, along with the infusion of funding, ensured that Lake Area was able to implement the components. The ECIPs and the Head Start standards were aligned in a document authored by the state educational department, while the ERF requirements were fairly narrow in focus and were included in the ECIPs. The OWL skills and activities were aligned with the WSS indicators, and the WSS was aligned with the ECIPs. In this way, the program met the primary goals of the SBR, which were to reach at-risk populations and begin to develop a literacy-rich classroom environment. However, because of the focus on literacy, teachers sometimes struggled to meet other standards of the program, particularly the Head Start standards.

**Urban Center Standards-Based Reform Model**

The Urban Center SBR model was focused on translating a K-12 model, the Academic Success Project, into an appropriate model for early childhood programs. Part of this translation was implementing a curriculum and specific instructional strategies that were called Early Childhood Workshop, which was an adapted version of a curriculum used in elementary schools. The primary motivation for implementing SBR in Urban Central was to align early childhood curriculum with the curriculum used in K-12 in the expectation that this would improve children’s school readiness and close the achievement gap. The SBR implementation was funded
by a private foundation and was done in phases over the course of three years at the time of the research. It is notable that Urban Central was the only case that explicitly discussed alignment with the K-12 system in the interest of creating a seamless E-12 system. This strong administrative and instructional connection with K-12 characterized and distinguished Urban Center from the other two cases. Figure 6 illustrates SBR in Urban Central.

Figure 6. Urban Center Standards-Based Reform model: Academic Success Project

As mentioned in the case description, Urban Center had two different programs in various stages of implementing the ASP, providing some insight into the implementation trajectory in the program as a whole. Urban Center primarily used the ECIPs and the federal reading standards to guide program development, and these were aligned with the WSS, which was the primary assessment tool used. Staff in Urban Center also used the IGDIs for progress monitoring. The program’s curriculum was teacher-created, based on the WSS, and used strategies consistent with those used in K-12. Professional development focused on understanding and implementing the specific instructional strategies used in the ASP, as well as some early literacy training. Classroom observation tools, including the CLASS, the ELLCO, and an ASP
implementation tool, helped teachers to focus on implementation while guiding coaching experiences. The primary goal of the program was to improve reading and writing, so overall, the alignment of the different components was successful. However, despite the desire to align early childhood and elementary strategies and outcomes, there seemed to be some problems with the alignment between early childhood and K standards.

**River Valley Standards-Based Reform Model**

River Valley’s standards-based reform model differed from the previous two models in three important ways: the time period over which implementation occurred in River Valley was much longer, there was no significant source of extra funding available to the program, and there were less alignment and coherence among the different SBR components. Figure 6 describes SBR in River Valley.

![Figure 7. River Valley standards-based reform model: Homemade; Q Comp.](image)

The River Valley program staff decided to undertake a phased SBR initiative about 6 years prior to the beginning of the research. They began by adopting the use of the ECIPs and the WSS assessment, which were well-aligned. Program staff used the WSS to develop curriculum and guide instructional strategies, as well as assess program outcomes over time. In this way, the flexible teacher-created curriculum was aligned with both the standards and the assessment. While professional development was offered by the program, it was not comprehensive or always
directed toward the WSS or the ECIPs, although they played a large role. Professional development tended to be one-time events focused on a single topic, although the topics were often relevant to the work of the classroom teachers.

In the year prior to this research, River Valley began implementing Q Comp, designed as a program improvement tool based on a process of alternative teacher compensation. Q Comp seemed to be helping the program focus their goals and align program goals with teacher and student success goals. Q Comp helped staff initiate professional learning communities as an ongoing type of professional development, while also encouraging staff to align professional development with program goals. It was clear that River Valley’s professional development opportunities were much less aligned and intensive than the other two cases investigated, likely due to the lack of funding. Despite this, it was evident River Valley staff continued to strive for alignment among the different SBR components.

**Similarities and Differences in SBR Components**

There were similarities and differences in the type and intensity of reform models used in the three programs investigated. All three programs used the ECIPs as their underlying standards, but program staff tended to discuss their curriculum or assessment as the primary guiding force for instructional decision making. However, the curriculum and assessment seemed to be aligned well with the ECIPs, providing continuity with the standards.

All programs used some type of curriculum and instructional strategies, but there were differences in which curriculum was chosen and the extent to which both the curriculum and instruction were flexible. River Valley exemplified an extremely flexible curriculum that allowed teachers quite a bit of choice in their instructional strategies and the sequence of teaching specific content or skills. However, teachers were expected to teach certain skills and content that was consistent with the WSS. Urban Center represented a middle ground, with clear expectations of what skills to teach and somewhat clear expectations about how to teach it, but with more flexibility regarding sequencing and content areas. At the other end of the spectrum, Lake Area had much more scripted curriculum with clear scope and sequence. Teachers knew what to teach, when to teach it, and how to teach the skills. While professional decision making entered into the selection of all the curriculum and instructional methods, there was a range of flexibility for implementing curricula and a range of structure to the different curricula. Despite the differences in curriculum and instruction, teachers from all three programs talked about how SBR made them more intentional in their instruction and more aware of what they needed to teach.
Programs used a range of assessments, including on-demand assessments and authentic assessment, as well as more global assessments and assessments that measured specific skills. All of the programs used the Work Sampling System (WSS) to some extent, a global, authentic measurement instrument. However, two programs used other assessments to complement the WSS. Urban Center and Lake Area also used the Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDIs; Missall & McConnell, 2004), an on-demand progress monitoring tool focused on assessing literacy skills. This made sense for the programs because both of them had explicit goals related to literacy. Lake Area also used on-demand assessments—the PALS and PPVT—in addition to the IGDIs. The assessments in the programs were used for a variety of purposes, including outcome measurement and instructional guidance.

All programs implemented professional development, but there were differences in the intensity, type, and content of the professional development, as well as differences in how extensively the professional development was aligned with the rest of the program’s SBR components. River Valley had the least intensive and least aligned professional development, which was not as comprehensive or ongoing as the professional development offered by either Urban Center or Lake Area. River Valley offered some training on a variety of topics, which were related to the goals of the program but tended to be one-shot offerings that were not ongoing or intensive. However, PLCs seemed to be an important aspect of River Valley, and it was clear the staff collaborated together and found the time spent together helpful for implementing reform. In contrast, Urban Center and Lake Area both had ongoing, intensive professional development related directly to the goals of their program and other SBR components. Both programs offered training that was aligned closely with their curriculum and instruction, and both programs also provided regular coaching to teachers to help them implement what they learned in training sessions. While PLCs were not currently being implemented comprehensively in either Urban Center or Lake Area, both programs were either in the beginning stages of PLC implementation or intended to implement PLCs in the future. It is important to note that the other difference between River Valley and Urban Center and Lake Area was funding. It seems likely that the type and intensity of professional development was related to the amount of money available to the program. The amount of funding, and therefore resources, available to Urban Center and Lake Area allowed these programs to better align the SBR components through the use of trainers and a curriculum that had already been developed for them. River Valley did what they could using the limited resources available to them, but it was more difficult to create and implement a strongly aligned and comprehensive reform without a large infusion of resources.
Programs had different motivations for initiating SBR implementation, but the primary motivation was increased funding that provided more resources to the program. Another important motivating factor for programs was to serve families in need and ensure children were ready for school. This is what prompted the Lake Area early childhood program to apply for the Early Reading First grant, and the acceptance of funding came with expectations that the program would evolve and improve by implementing the components of SBR. Funding also provided motivation for Urban Center early childhood programs in the form of a grant from a private foundation to implement the district’s SBR model, ASP. The Urban Center school district was aware of the achievement gap and recognized that by creating more coherence between early childhood programs and K-12, there was more likelihood children would be ready for kindergarten. In this case, the early childhood program itself did not initiate SBR, but as the program was implemented, staff saw the value of it. River Valley was unique in that staff began the process of implementing aspects of SBR on their own, without the motivation of increased funding, with the expectation that it would improve services. The small increase in funding in River Valley was also part of a district initiative, Q Comp, and it motivated staff to start to align their professional development with intentional improvement goals. In all cases, there was an implicit recognition that with increased funding, there came different expectations for program change that would help address the needs of children at risk. Programs were willing to implement the changes they believed that in some way, the reforms would allow staff to better serve families and children.

Overall, all three programs implemented the various components of SBR, but each program implemented those components in its own way and at its own level. The most similar of the components was the standards, with all programs using the ECIPs and possibly additional standards. The standards guided the choice of assessment in all of the programs, which in turn informed the type of curriculum chosen. Professional development was the most different among the three programs, varying in type, intensity, and content. Although there were differences in the type of SBR implemented in the program, the implementation process and challenges encountered by staff as they worked to implement the changes were often similar among the programs.

**Implementation Process and Challenges**

The process of implementation in each of the three case studies investigated was surprisingly similar. All of the programs struggled in some way as they implemented the reform,
and all had challenges with increasing change. In addition, all three of the programs recognized this struggle and provided a range of supports to help staff implement the changes in their programs. Overall, clear expectations and professional development provided convincing evidence that implementation made a difference for children and seemed to support teachers as they engaged in the implementation process. Interestingly, none of the programs had significant issues with teachers not implementing change, but staff did freely mention the challenges.

**Process and Supports**

SBR was implemented in each of the three programs based on a diversity of supports that helped teachers put changes into practice in their instructional strategies and data use. One of the key supports for each of the programs was clear expectations. Program staff in each case generally understood what was expected of them and what they needed to do to implement the reform. This was particularly true for Urban Center and Lake Area. Administrators in the programs felt that expectations were clearly enumerated and described in a variety of classroom observation protocols. These protocols ensured teachers knew what was expected of them. Lake Area had observation protocols related to OWL curriculum fidelity and the early literacy environment, which allowed coaches and teachers to explicitly address expected changes. Urban Center had observation protocols related to ASP instructional strategies, general classroom instruction, and early literacy environments. In contrast, River Valley did not have any observation protocols to help guide implementation, although teachers tended to define their expectations in terms of the WSS assessment. In all programs, teachers were expected to implement a curriculum based on standards and assessment that was supported in some form by professional development.

As mentioned above, all programs had some type of professional development to further elucidate the expectations and help teachers understand how to implement the changes wrought by SBR. This professional development took a variety of formats in each of the programs and was linked to available funding and resources. Professional development ranged from one-time, content-related training sessions, to comprehensive ongoing training and coaching, as well as PLCs. In River Valley, there was little additional funding available to implement comprehensive professional development, and as a result, the program had the least intensive and aligned professional development opportunities. In both Urban Central and Lake Area, substantial funding and resources supported ongoing and intensive professional development, resulting in clear alignment with the other SBR components. Nevertheless, the role of professional
development across the board was to support teachers in implementing the expected changes to their classroom environment, curriculum, and instructional strategies.

Much of the professional development in all cases relied on evidence in the form of research-based articles and other peer-reviewed sources that teachers looked to for proof that a particular strategy was successful with children. Each of these forms was used to some extent in each of the cases to support the implementation process. In River Valley, Lake Area, and Urban Center, staff mentioned research evidence as a key part of why they wanted to implement changes. The concept of “what science says” as a basis for change and as a basis for training were all important to staff as they implemented the reforms. Staff were conscious that what they were doing in the classroom was based on research and provided a way for them to translate research to practice.

Another type of evidence used in the programs came directly from staff experience. Anecdotal or assessment evidence directly from their classrooms demonstrated that children were making progress and was also important information for teachers. As teachers saw children flourish and learn, they were excited and motivated to continue to implement changes. These results confirmed that what they were doing worked and encouraged them to continue to try new things. Seeing the manifestation of their instructional changes on student achievement and changes in child growth was a strong motivator for teachers to make additional changes. It also helped “sell” them on the concept of SBR and provided a clear rationale for why they were doing what they were doing.

It was apparent that the process of implementation was encouraged by clear expectations, professional development opportunities, and using evidence in a variety of ways. However, the process of change was not smooth or easy in any of the cases, and all programs mentioned specific challenges in the implementation process.

**Challenges**

Staff in all three programs discussed challenges they faced in implementing SBR. Some of the challenges were similar across the programs, while other challenges were specific to certain programs. The context in which the program operated seemed to be a mediating factor, and each program had certain challenges they had to overcome. Staff in all three programs talked about feeling overwhelmed with all they were expected to do and mentioned that time was a factor in implementation. Some teachers discussed a lack of clarity around exactly what they were expected to do, despite the program administrators and trainers feeling they were being very clear about the expectations. Lake District staff in particular explicitly mentioned the grief
process of letting go of previous practices, while the other two programs did not mention this explicitly.

The most pervasive challenge mentioned by the staff was the feeling of being overwhelmed by expectations and having a lack of time or resources to implement them. This was regardless of the amount of time or resources invested in the SBR model. River Valley was distinct from the other two cases in that it was self-initiated and organic and implemented over a long timeframe. Although this allowed teachers to develop buy-in to the changes, teachers still felt overwhelmed. Virtually all staff in each of the cases talked about pressure and demands placed on them as they went through the implementation process. Overall, this was not necessarily talked about in a negative way, but rather in a matter-of-fact way. Teachers seemed to feel tired and overwhelmed, but it was balanced by the excitement of seeing children progress. Notably, teachers in Urban Center talked about not always being sure of what was expected of them. Despite the perception of administrators, trainers, and coaches that the expectations were clear, the teachers found that when they went back into the classroom to implement the changes, they were sometimes confused about what they were supposed to do.

Staff in Lake Area dealt with a sense of grief or loss as part of their implementation process. This came from having to give up their existing practices and ways of doing things to implement the new requirements. Staff talked about feeling as if their old practices were inadequate and that they weren’t doing their best to help children before the ERF grant and new literacy expectations were put into place. A sense of, “Wasn’t I doing enough before?” seemed to underlie the implementation process in Lake Area. Neither Urban Central nor River Valley explicitly mentioned this sense of grief.

Despite these challenges, the process of implementation across all three cases was relatively smooth, as described by staff. All programs provided a range of supports to their teachers to help them through the implementation process, including training, coaching, and professional learning communities, but some programs provided more comprehensive and ongoing training than others. Clear expectations and observational protocols provided a framework for the changes, although some teachers were not always completely clear about what they should do in the classroom. The use of evidence, both in the form of data on their specific children and successful strategies in the research literature, was important to motivate teachers to change. The most common implementation challenges cited by staff were finding time and feeling overwhelmed by all they were expected to do.
Perceived Outcomes of SBR

Across the three programs investigated, staff talked about a number of outcomes related to their individual SBR model. Despite the differences in the SBR models across programs, the outcomes the staff mentioned were fairly similar, although they manifested themselves differently in each program. Program staff talked about how they increased their data use in intentional and specific ways after SBR implementation. Staff also discussed the concept of higher expectations, both for themselves as teachers and for their students. Academics and ensuring children were ready for kindergarten was seen as a priority, and therefore teachers felt they had to be more intentional in their teaching. Staff also seemed to find a balance, or understanding, between their own beliefs about teaching and learning and what the program was asking them to do.

Data Use

The three cases all used data to inform instruction, but the kinds of data and the extent to which it was used differed. Each program used data both summatively and formatively, but they differed in the specific ways in which they used data and the facility with which they used data. River Valley used the WSS to drive instruction in the classroom. Instead of having a short, direct assessment to assess outcomes, teachers relied on the observational techniques of WSS. School Readiness in Urban Center staff also used WSS to drive instruction and were in the midst of learning how to use the IGDIs. All three programs used a variety of data in the classroom to guide curriculum and instruction. Two programs, Lake Area and Urban Center, were in various stages of learning to use the IGDIs as a progress monitoring tool. Lake Area described their use of the IGDIs as “taking the temperature” of students to see how they were progressing in the classroom on certain literacy outcomes. Lake Area was just beginning to use the IGDIs in their classroom, similar to the School Readiness program in Urban Center. The ways in which these programs used IGDIs differed from the Early Kindergarten Project in Urban Center. Urban Center had been working with the IGDIs for a longer time than the other two programs and used the IGDIs in a more intentional way to form small groups and focus small group skill-based instruction.

Data were also an important element of all of the programs for accountability purposes and to demonstrate program outcomes. All programs were aware of the increasing accountability demands to show that what they did in the classroom was increasing school readiness. The tools each of the programs used to demonstrate outcomes were different from the progress monitoring, or formative, tools. Only Lake Area, which had federal funding and federal reporting requirements, used more direct, on-demand assessments, such as the PPVT and the PALS. The other programs used the WSS to demonstrate outcomes at the end of the program.
Data were also used in the programs to inform professional development. River Valley used the outcome data from WSS to help decide professional development topics. Lake Area and Urban Central used both child outcome data and data from classroom observation assessments to determine areas of focus for professional development. Implementation assessments, such as the OWL fidelity measure in Lake Area and the ASP fidelity tool in Urban Center, provided information to administrators and coaches about the extent to which the curriculum was being implemented as intended. This helped decide specific areas for improvement and growth and assisted administrators and professional development trainers in targeting professional development.

**Higher Expectations**

An important outcome mentioned by staff in all three cases revolved around the concept of higher expectations and intentional instruction. Staff noted their connection to the K-12 system and how they were increasingly expected to ensure children were ready for school. Teachers saw themselves as active agents in preparing children for entry into the K-12 system.

The definition of school readiness in each of the cases was locally based, focusing on what the individual district defined as being ready for kindergarten. Staff in each of the programs discussed school readiness in terms of higher expectations for children and the need for early childhood programs to be aware of these expectations and teach children what they needed to know to be successful in the kindergarten classrooms in their own individual districts. Each program alluded to the changing nature of these expectations, noting that school readiness has changed over time. While academics were noted as important, the actual academic skills of what a child should be able to know and do were not always clear. The social-emotional aspect of school readiness was much more clear across programs. All programs noted the importance of social skills such as being able to sit in a group, get along with others, know how to ask for help, be independent enough to function in a large group, etc. Again, Urban Center staff tended to focus on the academic nature of school readiness, while River Valley and Lake Area focused more on the social-emotional aspects of school readiness. However, it was evident from how staff discussed school readiness in Lake Area that their conception was changing toward a more academic focus.

Another aspect of higher expectations was increased instructional intentionality. Staff discussed how they were able to connect instructional strategies with specific skills to ensure alignment with assessments and standards. Although there was not always clarity around all aspects of school readiness, staff felt they were more aware of kindergarten requirements and
were better able to target specific skills intentionally. Staff also had a heightened awareness of the needs of children “at risk” and that there were “meaningful differences” among children that needed to be addressed in the classroom.

Despite this recognition of the need for more intentional instruction that targeted skills for kindergarten success, staff also voiced concerns about increased expectations. The concept of a “push-down” curriculum, where children were expected to have skills prior to kindergarten entrance that were once taught in kindergarten, concerned some staff in all of the programs. They acknowledged the shift in expectations and strived to meet it, while still holding some reservations. However, these reservations were tempered with the understanding that they were continuing to use developmentally appropriate practices and seeing children flourish and learn while in their classrooms.

**Teacher Understanding and Balance**

As teachers implemented the components of SBR, they began to develop a clearer understanding about what was expected of them, while creating a balance between their own beliefs and program expectations. The use of data was a large component in helping teachers understand why SBR was necessary and how it could be incorporated into their classroom.

Many staff in all three cases mentioned some form of apprehension or concern about implementing the changes. This was particularly evident in Lake Area and the School Readiness staff in Urban Central, where the changes were occurring quickly and they were in the beginning stages of implementation.

**Professionalism**

Another outcome of SBR was increased perception of credibility and professionalism. This was manifested in a number of ways. Staff, particularly administrators, felt early childhood was receiving more recognition for their contributions to decreasing the achievement gap and serving children at risk. K-12 began to acknowledge the role of early childhood and see programs as a supporting factor to the main goals of the educational system: ensuring all children have the opportunity to achieve to their potential.

**Conclusion**

In summary, this chapter compared the differences and similarities among the three cases: Lake Area, Urban Central, and River Valley. Across all three programs, staff strove to implement SBR to the best of their abilities while dealing with various levels of funding and professional development support. Although staff in the programs expressed concerns about
meeting the myriad standards associated with SBR implementation, they all found satisfaction in seeing measurable results in the performance of their students. The next—and final—chapter details the overall research findings based on the research question and discusses implications for early childhood practice, along with ideas with future research.
Standards-based reform (SBR) describes comprehensive educational reform based on standards for children’s outcomes. The model in K-12 has included standards that serve as a guideline for aligning curriculum, assessment, and professional development. As described in Chapter 2, the theory behind this reform is to change the quality of classroom instruction, which will lead to improved outcomes for children. This study investigated how early childhood programs were implementing SBR models, using three different early childhood programs in different stages of implementation and with different funding sources. Little is known about the actual process of implementing SBR in early childhood, but this study provided insights into how three programs began to change their programs using the principles and components of SBR.

All of the early childhood programs chosen for this study were based in school districts and were in the process of implementing the components of SBR. They also had different types of professional development to support teachers during implementation. Three cases were constructed from the data: Lake Area, Urban Central, and River Valley. The following sections discuss the findings of the research questions, implications early childhood programs and policies, and recommendations for future research.

**Research Question 1:** In what ways have early childhood program staff implemented standards-based reform? What are examples of different components of standards-based reform in early childhood, and how do they interact?

The three cases investigated in this study showed three different models of SBR reform in varying stages and using different funding streams. All three programs mentioned the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs; Minnesota Department of Education, 2005b) as state-approved standards for preschoolers, although two of the programs also incorporated other standards. Staff in the three cases implicitly recognized that these standards were acceptable, appropriate, and valid expectations of what preschoolers should know and be able to do as they entered kindergarten. This provides evidence that the standards, which form the backbone of SBR, are a presumably useful tool on which to base subsequent SBR components. It also provides evidence that early childhood staff were aware of the standards and used them to some extent in their instruction, which is one of the assumptions underlying SBR (Loeb, Knapp, & Elfers, 2008). As Kagan (2012) argues, standards can “create an integrated pedagogical subsystem that forms the basis for a comprehensive, well-articulated early childhood system” (p.
In this study, early learning standards, or what children should know and be able to do, provided a framework upon which other SBR components were built. Kagan (2012) also discusses potential disadvantages of standards, such as possible misuse (e.g., teaching to an unaligned test) or trading developmentally appropriate and child-centered teaching practices for inappropriate instructional practices for young children. This study did not reveal these disadvantages; rather, staff maintained a commitment to developmentally appropriate practices and social-emotional development as their instructional foundation. Although teachers often felt overwhelmed, administrators and professional development staff generally saw movement toward an improvement in classroom quality.

Despite the awareness of the standards and the perceived appropriateness of the standards, staff seemed to think they were at times rather vague and difficult to measure. In other words, the standards expressed ideas of children’s outcomes, but were not seen to be measurable in a concrete way. This is not unusual for standards; they are intended to provide guidelines and there is a need for them to be operationalized through measurement in a valid and reliable way (National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force, 2007). For example, one of the ECIPs states: “Interact easily with one or more children.” This is an important developmental task in terms of social-emotional development. But what does “interact” look like? What does “easily” mean? And how do we know when children are proficient enough in these tasks to be considered ready for school? There is a need to develop ways to assess these standards that is measurable and appropriate, while also predictive of future academic outcomes. A critical aspect of SBR is the close alignment of standards with assessment to ensure the instructional coherence and appropriate measurement of outcomes (Smith & O’Day, 1991). Polikoff, Porter, and Smithson (2011) note that in K-12, standards and assessments in many states are not aligned well and recommend greater coherence by carefully examining test items and topics as they relate to standards content. Given that early childhood standards are fairly new and many assessments are still in the development stage, the early childhood field is in a position to ensure there is a clear alignment between standards and assessment. This study provides evidence that early childhood staff are aware of these issues and are trying to ensure that there is alignment.

Although staff interviewed in this study recognized the ECIPs, they talked more about the importance of the assessments they used to guide both curriculum and instruction. Programs in this study used various measures to assess outcomes, but the Work Sampling System (WSS; Dichtelmiller et al., 2001) was one of the most prominent measures. WSS also is currently used by the state of Minnesota to measure children’s school readiness. The WSS is aligned with the
ECIPs, and has demonstrated some reliability and validity, as well as evidence of predictive validity (Gallant, 2009). Overall, teachers thought the WSS was a good assessment, but also thought it took time and was complicated because it relied on painstaking note taking and documentation to make informed ratings. Some teachers used the WSS to guide their curriculum and instruction on a daily basis, while others felt it was an overarching framework that provided general goals for children’s expected knowledge and skills.

In contrast, the majority of other assessments used by the programs included in this study were on-demand assessments, where children were asked to perform a specific task and then rated on their ability. The IGDIs (Missall & McConnell, 2004) and PPVT (Dunn & Dunn, 2007) are reliable and valid assessments, but measure a specific indicator related to literacy, such as alphabet knowledge. While these assessments provide helpful information about how well a child understands rhyming, for example, they do not directly assess skills related to, for example, problem solving. Teachers indicated they found the data from the IGDIs to be extremely helpful in their day-to-day instructional strategies related to literacy development. This is congruent with current response to intervention (RTI) approaches in early childhood, which are intended to provide a way for teachers to differentiate instruction (Greenwood et al., 2011). While Greenwood et al. note that RTI is still in its infancy and there are significant challenges to the approach, there is also much possibility for assisting teachers to identify and determine appropriate interventions for young children. The IGDIs are one aspect of this framework, and the teachers in this study found them helpful. There is a need for additional measures and aligned instructional practices and interventions to continue to support teachers.

It seems at this time that there is a need for multiple assessments that are aligned with the standards, relatively easy to administer and score on a regular basis, developmentally appropriate, able to inform classroom instruction, and demonstrate outcomes. There does not appear to be one assessment that can fulfill all of these demands in early childhood, although there are multiple assessments that can serve different purposes in an early childhood classroom (National Research Council, 2008). The challenge facing the early childhood field in terms of assessment is to ensure alignment with standards and maintain a commitment to developmentally appropriate practice while assessing the whole child, demonstrating outcomes, and providing day-to-day information to inform and differentiate classroom instruction.

The curriculum used in the three programs was generally aligned closely with the assessments and the standards. Two programs used flexible curriculum that was made by the program and based on the standards and the assessments. While there was some guidance as to
themes or content, the primary concern with the curriculum was skills as assessed by their
assessment process. Lake Area differed in this regard, as their SBR model required the use of a
“boxed” or prescribed research-based curriculum. Prior to SBR, they also used a creative
curriculum that allowed much more flexibility on the part of the teachers. In some ways, the use
of assessments in the cases investigated seemed similar to the negative view of “teaching to the
test.” However, in these programs, using the assessment (such as WSS) as a guide was considered
helpful and formed one aspect of the curriculum. Teachers embedded critical skills, guided either
by standards or assessment, into a framework of content “themes” or areas of study. Regardless
of how they used the standards and assessment, many teachers talked about the importance of
informed decision making in their classroom instructional practices, which is an important
component of DAP (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

It seems clear that the components of SBR are evident in early childhood programs and
are becoming more entrenched by the day. Virtually all states have early learning standards for
preschool children, and many have or are in the process of developing standards for infants and
toddlers (Kagan 2012). These standards are forming the framework for assessment and
curriculum in early childhood classrooms, which is the intent behind SBR. It is also clear that
there is no one “right” way to implement SBR—flexibility is a hallmark of SBR (Smith &
O’Day, 1991), and, as can be seen by the cases in this study, there are many ways to implement
the components. Two other aspects of SBR are motivating factors and professional development,
and these will be addressed in the following sections.

**Research Question 2: What factors are serving as motivation for early childhood program
staff to implement standards-based reform?**

All programs described in this study had both internal and external motivation for making
program changes and implementing SBR. Funding provided the impetus in some way for each of
the programs. However, the external pressures to demonstrate outcomes and show
professionalism also were motivating factors.

A key concept that emerged from this study was higher expectations, both for students
and teachers. SBR is requiring teachers to prove they are able to teach effectively, and there is a
need to demonstrate positive outcomes for all children. However, higher standards, the presence
of the so-called “push-down” expectations, and the need to close the achievement gap has meant
that early childhood programs have changed to keep pace with the requirements (Stipek, 2006).
Concern about rising expectations was voiced by many staff interviewed across the cases and is
evidence of a growing tension within the early childhood community. Staff understand they need to address the achievement gap and ensure children are ready for school, but they do not want to compromise the principles of DAP and worry if children are being asked to do too much, too soon.

As early childhood programs become recognized for their potential to close the achievement gap, ensuring children are ready for school is becoming a motivating factor for implementing SBR. However, this study exposed slightly differing definitions of school readiness depending on the district and the context. This is congruent with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, which described how definitions of school readiness have changed over the years and can also be different based on stakeholders concerned. Urban Center was the case tied most closely to the K-12 system, with elementary principals as the early childhood teachers’ instructional lead, which may account for their focus on the achievement gap. One aspect of school readiness—social emotional development—was clearly considered by most early childhood staff to be the primary consideration in assessing readiness to attend kindergarten. Many teachers considered this to be the foundation upon which other aspects, such as literacy or math skills, were built. Social emotional development has always been a primary consideration of early childhood, and recent research about executive function supports, supplements, and extends this foundation.

While recognizing the need to improve school readiness outcomes was clearly a motivating factor, just as important for staff was the desire to demonstrate outcomes through assessment. Staff, particularly in River Valley, were aware of the political landscape and realized that future legislative funding would likely be tied to their ability to demonstrate improvement in children’s school readiness. Staff also wanted to be recognized for the work they do on a daily basis and saw SBR as a vehicle for heightening awareness about the positive effects of early childhood education and increasing professionalism for the field as a whole. For early childhood teachers who have been seen in the past as simply caretakers with little legitimacy (Kagan, 2012), being recognized as valid educators was important.

All program staff discussed the importance of seeing children improve in their skills as they implemented new practices, which contributed to teachers continuing to implement SBR. As teachers saw children change, they became more on board with implementation and more willing to continue implementation. All talked about making a difference for children and helping children to be successful as perhaps their most important motivation for continuing to implement SBR, despite the challenges it engendered. Similar to the findings of Datnow and Castellano
(2000), teachers saw how the reforms benefited students; however, Datnow and Castellano also found that teachers felt the reforms constrained their professionalism. This directly contradicted the feelings of teachers in this study, who felt they were able to have more credibility because of the reforms.

The motivations for early childhood programs to undertake reform initiatives are clearly different from those of K-12 staff. SBR in K-12 is part of a larger nationwide policy change originating with NCLB. The federal government has more control over the K-12 system than the early childhood “system” (which barely exists as a cohesive system) and therefore is able to provide rewards and sanctions on a much different level to motivate K-12. The primary motivating factor for SBR as it was designed by NCLB was through sanctions—schools were required to make adequate yearly progress toward outcomes as measured by nationwide standardized tests or there was a threat of reduced funding or school reorganization (McDonnell, 2005b; Superfine, 2005). Currently, the focus of early childhood reform is developing a cohesive system and creating quality classrooms (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012). While child outcomes are important, the field has recognized that before outcomes can be measured, the classroom environments in which children learn must first be improved. A more coherent system must also be designed, and, as this is put into place, early childhood programs are encouraged to make improvements through incentives, such as quality rating and improvement systems, additional funding, and support (Shaack et al., 2012). Essentially, reform in early childhood is characterized by using the “carrot,” while reform in K-12 has often used the “stick.”

Research Question 3: How have early childhood program staff adapted to SBR as it was implemented in their program?

There is evidence from the cases in this study that early childhood programs are changing as a result of implementing the components of standards-based reform. As discussed in Chapter 2, early childhood programs as a whole are changing in response to increasing accountability demands and a desire to improve quality. These demands are fairly new to early childhood programs, and this study confirmed the existence of change while illuminating the challenges in the change process and effective ways administrators supported their staff as they implemented change.

While early childhood program staff are increasingly required or encouraged to use intentional curriculum and assessment based on standards, implementing these changes requires some sort of support—usually in the form of professional development. Across all three cases,
program staff found the process of change challenging at times. This indicates that regardless of amount of funding or time, the implementation process is not easy and means that staff need time, support, and often funding, to make the implement requirements with fidelity. Interestingly, there did not seem to be a strong relationship between the amount of support provided by the program and the extent and strength of the challenges.

Professional development provides teachers with the knowledge and instructional strategies to change their behaviors, as well as the support and personal accountability through coaching and observation to insist the changes in instruction are implemented. In all three cases, administrators decided at some point to change the way early childhood programs were structured. The motivations for these changes were varied, but inevitably linked in some way to school readiness, accountability, or child outcomes. Administrators essentially said, “This is what we want you to do. Here is some support for you to do it. Now we expect it to be done.” There was recognition that change would take time, which is similar to models of how professional development expect to elicit change through awareness of new instructional strategies, preliminary implementation of these strategies, and finally mastery of the strategies (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009). Despite the challenges of implementation and some reservations, teachers generally felt the changes were positive, both in terms of the quality of their teaching and the outcomes for children. This is congruent with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 regarding implementation processes. It was also clear that teachers and administrators interpreted the changes required by the policies through their own lens—particularly that of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP).

There are many ways in which teachers can respond to reform, including resistance (Duke, 2004). This response is often shaped by the culture of the school and other informal subcultures of different teachers (Coburn, 2001; Louis et al., 2005). These cultures are made up of beliefs, norms, and practices that are a reflection of teachers’ individual beliefs and philosophies. It is these beliefs that affect how and to what extent a reform is implemented in a classroom, as beliefs form the filter through which teachers make sense of the policy. Early childhood educators have a desire to maintain key elements of their practice while integrating new ideas. As Beattie (1995), Hashweh (2003), and Weick (1995) discuss, change often occurs through a process of integrating new information with existing beliefs and practices. Staff in this study were committed to DAP, and this provided a framework or a lens through which they implemented the reforms. They were able to understand the new requirements of SBR by incorporating them into their existing beliefs about appropriate instruction for young children. As
they implemented changes, they saw children grow and flourish, and this provided additional motivation to continue to adapt instruction.

However, teachers also needed support to implement change. Teachers felt the need for higher expectations and understood the need for increased demands, but also realized they could not implement changes in their classroom without support. On-going training, professional learning communities, coaching opportunities, classroom observations, and, perhaps most importantly, time are important professional development opportunities that assist in the implementation process. Teachers indicated that having time with their colleagues to discuss topics, problem solve, and share strategies were helpful for them as they began implementation. This is consistent with the literature regarding effective professional development strategies across both early childhood and K-12 education. Effective professional development tends to be relationship-based, is ongoing to allow teachers to reflect on instructional strategies, has a coaching or mentoring component, and creates a community of practice with other teachers (Harvard Family Research Project, 2005/2006; Chan & Wong, 2010, Sheridan et al., 2009; Lanigan, 2011).

Overall, the SBR models in early childhood mirror theoretical models of SBR, meaning that there is generally alignment among standards, curriculum, and assessment. Each of the cases described in this study had different ways of enacting SBR, much of which was dependent on the amount of time available to implement reform and the amount of funding available. River Valley was an example of a program that spent over five years working towards aligning their curriculum with their assessment and the standards, with little additional money. It was clear this was an evolutionary process that took time to create and implement, and there was still a struggle to ensure professional development aligned with their initiatives. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Lake Area was less than a year into implementing their SBR model using a large infusion of money from the federal government. They had clear alignment among curriculum, assessment, and standards, in addition to large amounts of professional development dedicated to improving classroom practices. Urban Center used a phased implementation process, with one early childhood program in the third year of SBR and one just beginning the process. A grant from a private foundation enabled them to develop their own alignment and supports. Regardless of the reform model, the time spent, or the amount of money used, staff in all three cases encountered similar challenges and successes. Overall, staff felt the process was positive and helped them become better teachers. This also suggests that SBR in early childhood is not only
possible, but can be a way to enhance the quality of early childhood programs. This bodes well for early childhood in the future.

**Implications for Early Childhood Programs**

Early childhood programs are currently in the political spotlight for their potential to give children a positive start in their lives. As mentioned in Chapter 2, there are numerous studies that show the positive effects quality early childhood programs can have on the lives of children, both in the short and the long-term. Currently, the early childhood system could be considered in a “golden age.” There is significant public and political desire to improve early childhood programs and outcomes for children. Early childhood is being touted across the country as a solution to failing schools and societal woes. As early childhood has captured the public imagination, there is an opportunity to construct a meaningful and successful system that is more rigorous and of higher quality while maintaining a commitment to best practices. Clearly, change has come to early childhood. However, there is a need to ensure this change is achieved in a respectful manner that adheres to early childhood best practices.

For many years early childhood programs have been outside of the public and policy eye, regulated mainly for safety, but with little quality regulation or expectations to show specific outcomes (Spodek, 1983; Stipek, 2006). This is clearly changing, and early childhood programs have an opportunity to help shape the change that will come to their programs while still maintaining core principles of learning and child development. The challenge facing early childhood programs is to maintain the principles of DAP in a sea of sometimes disparate policies that may overlap, contradict, or confuse. The field of early childhood has created foundation grounded in DAP, and this shapes how early childhood program staff interpret reforms. DAP has traditionally valued child-centered, experiential learning and providing families with support and children with educational opportunities. Although DAP may change in response to demands and research, it acts as an overarching lens through which all early childhood programs view changes. In a sense, DAP can be a touchstone that grounds early childhood practitioners as they face increasing pressure to produce outcomes. Maintaining a focus on DAP ensures reforms continue to be positive for the field as a whole.

One clear theme from the interviews, particularly those of the teachers, was that of “feeling overwhelmed.” Early childhood programs are changing quickly, with multiple layers of reforms and demands to produce higher quality classroom environments while also demonstrating improved child outcomes. Providing support to teachers and other program staff that will allow
changes to happen effectively, but respectfully is one major challenge of any reform effort. Change is a process, and implementing reforms takes time and resources. Ensuring that professional development opportunities are grounded in DAP, build upon current beliefs, demonstrate positive child outcomes, and related to a teacher’s own classroom will encourage teachers to adapt their instruction. In addition, professional development in early childhood should be relationship-based, and this is particularly true for family child care providers (Lanigan, 2011).

Reforms can be difficult and challenging, and change does not come easily to many. While early childhood programs are in the midst of intense public and political scrutiny, making changes in programs is a long-term effort. Leadership can play a role in helping staff have buy-in to the changes while also providing support, in the form of professional development and time. Datnow and Castellano’s (2000) study suggests possible ways to motivate and encourage staff to implement reforms, such as showing similarities between existing beliefs and new reforms, engaging staff in creating change, and pointing out how children are benefitting from new instructional practices. I saw much of this, implicitly and explicitly, in how teachers reacted to SBR implementation in this study.

While some teachers embraced change, others were more hesitant. I had expected to find more resistance to the changes in this study, but this was not the case. As reviewed in Chapter 2, there is a large body of literature that suggests negative impacts of SBR and teachers who may be resistant to change, particularly in the K-12 system. There are indications in this study that such may not be the case in early childhood. While not all teachers fully embraced the changes and felt challenged at times by them, they reportedly did not actively resist or resent the changes. They were overwhelmed, yet they saw the need for them. It is clear from the implementation literature that people can interpret reforms in different ways, which is why providing support and professional development can help develop a shared understanding of what the expectations are for change. Good leadership and professional development opportunities can support this shared understanding.

School readiness is often seen as the defining outcome for early childhood programs. However, at this time, there is no shared definition of what it means for children to be ready for school, except in relatively vague terms. The ECIPs provide guidelines, but as Wesley (2005) discusses, some stakeholders perceive cognitive and academic issues to be important, while others see social-emotional development as the critical factor. This was also shown in this study, as teachers and administrators discussed mixed messages, often depending on the district in
which they worked. There is a need for a shared understanding of the meaning of school readiness and how it ultimately relates to outcomes in the K-12 system. Standards are one way of creating a shared understanding at a policy level, but at the local level, each school district still has its own idea of what children should know and be able to do at kindergarten entrance. This lack of clarity creates confusion for parents and teachers. If teachers in this study, who all had strong links to the school system, had differing conceptions of school readiness, one can only imagine the confusion of community-based early childhood programs such as family childcares.

This study focused on early childhood programs with strong ties to K-12 school systems. All three of the programs investigated were connected to the school districts both administratively and through funding. However, only a small percentage of early childhood programs have these connections. The majority of early childhood programs exist in the community, as Head Start, non-profit or for-profit childcare centers or preschools, at-home child care providers, or as family, friend, and neighbor providers (Mitchell, 2009). The early childhood landscape is complicated and continues to have little formal regulation, despite current attempts, both formally and informally, to create systems that will unify. While funding issues plague all sectors and silos in early childhood, funding can be particularly challenging for childcare centers and family home child care. Gaining the resources needed to improve quality in these environments is particularly challenging—both in terms of time and money. Staff turnover is also a challenge. Change in these environments will need to come more slowly and with respectful dialogue. It also may meet with more resistance because some child care providers may see their primary role as non-parental care (providing a safe and nurturing place for children) rather than as education and school readiness. In addition, the funding and support for community-based child care and school-based early childhood programs are different, with school-based programs often having more resources.

Often, community-based early childhood programs have little contact with the school districts in their neighborhood and may in fact have distrust with school districts in general. School-based programs may have a specific role to bridge the gap between community-based programs and the K-12 system. School-based early childhood programs straddle two distinct worlds: that of K-12 and that of early childhood. They are aware of the K-12 demands, yet maintain their identity and their connection with DAP, a philosophy most early childhood programs share (although implementation of DAP is not universal). School-based early childhood programs can reach out to community-based programs, providing trainings, support, skilled professionals, and ongoing education about best practices in early childhood. School-based early
childhood programs can also bridge between community-based programs and the K-12 system, articulating what school readiness means in their community and their school district.

**Implications for Early Childhood Policy**

As early childhood programs are increasingly in the policy spotlight, there is a need for strategic ideas. The early childhood “system” is complex, with a variety of early childhood silos, including child care centers; family, friend, and neighbor care; family child care homes; Head Start; and school-based prekindergarten programs. Each of these has different funding structures and oversight agencies, which makes the development of a unified system complex. There is also a public policy desire to increase quality and accountability in all of these programs and find a way to bring some sort of unification to the disparate system while maintaining flexibility for parents. Parents choose from a diverse range of these early care and education options, and there is a desire to maintain this choice. Kagan and Kauerz (2012) discuss the current early childhood policy landscape and describe the myriad efforts to create coordinated early childhood systems. They describe the need to “expand services, improve their quality and outcomes, and reduce inequities in access” (p.5). While improving outcomes for children is the ultimate goal of system change, the current focus is on building a comprehensive system that is based on quality educational environments. The components of SBR, both individually and as a whole, can be used as a guide for change.

The findings from this study highlight two particular policy areas that need to be addressed in more depth: Building capacity through relevant and effective professional development, and creating meaningful child assessments. The programs described in this study had significant internal capacity for change—they were publicly-funded with school district supports. However, much of the early childhood world does not have these resources. This is particularly true for community-based programs such as family child care and child care centers. There is also a need to motivate programs to change, which likely will involve incentives rather than sanctions. QRIS are intended to play this role, but additional incentives may need to be put in place. Increasing quality in all early childhood sectors will require a commitment to building capacity for change, which means developing relationships among providers, providing funding for centers to implement the change, and, perhaps most important, allowing staff time to adapt to new practices. Providing a menu of professional development options that are ongoing, directly related to classroom experiences, sensitive to the needs and challenges of the different early
childhood sectors, and based in relationships will ensure staff and providers feel valued and respected throughout the process of change.

This focus on building a system of early childhood based on quality first and foremost represents best practices in both early childhood and evaluation. As both Patton (2008) and Weiss & Jacobs (1988) discuss, monitoring and evaluating how a program is implemented should be considered prior to evaluating outcomes. The early childhood field has been proactive in ensuring that policy attention is placed on program implementation, and this needs to be continued by developing supportive QRIS, promoting internal capacity of programs, and ensuring quality standards and assessment continue to be linked to DAP and recent research on child development and learning.

Concurrent to the focus on developing a cohesive early childhood system based on quality implementation is the need for a comprehensive assessment system for child outcomes. While supporting and assessing program quality is essential, ultimately policymakers and the public want to know how well children are doing. Are children ready for school? Are children developing and learning at the same rate as their peers? Are children on a trajectory that indicates they will be successful in school? Do quality early childhood programs close the achievement gap? These questions can only be answered by assessing child outcomes. At this time, there are diverse assessments available to assess child outcomes, each with different purposes. There is no one assessment that can answer all of these questions while still maintaining a commitment to assessing all aspects of children’s development. As Snow et al. describe, assessing young children is a complicated endeavor. There is a need to find a coherent assessment system at the state (or possibly federal) level that is aligned with early learning standards, provides critical information for instruction, and predicts school success. This may require developing a more unified vision of school readiness across the state and the nation, as well as clear alignment with the K-12 system. The current movement toward pre-K-third grade alignment addresses this need and helps to connect the disparate parts of the early childhood system (Traylor, 2012).

Politics is ever changing, and therefore policies influencing the educational system often come and go. This is true in K-12 and in early childhood, and staff are well aware of these changes, perhaps believing if they wait it out, “this, too, shall pass”; the reform will go away. An administrator from one of the cases investigated in this study also alluded to the political “pendulum” that swings back and forth. However, while specific initiatives will change, the concept of SBR, which essentially aligns standards, curriculum, assessment, and professional development, is likely here to stay. While the method of change, such as Early Reading First, may
disappear, it will be replaced by another form, such as Race to the Top. Early childhood education will be continually pushed by both politicians and the general public to improve its practices and demonstrate outcomes.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study examined the ways in which standards-based reform was implemented in early childhood programs. This encompassed how programs used standards to inform curriculum and assessment and how professional development initiatives supported staff as they worked to implement changes. SBR is a new development in early childhood, and little is known about how it is being implemented, the process of change, or the outcomes. This preliminary exploratory study revealed a number of different areas for continued research.

This study provided an overview of the components of SBR: standards, curriculum, assessment, professional development, and motivating factors. Each of these elements needs further research. To what extent do programs actually use the standards? How are they informing school readiness in each district, as well as the state? Is there a way to operationalize them or measure key indicators that provides more definitive outcome information? These questions address the need for additional tools to measure school readiness, particularly tools that predict later school success. There is also a need to develop additional measurement tools to drive instruction and determine appropriate educational interventions.

Other components of SBR that need further investigation are curriculum use and professional development. What kinds of curriculum are being used in programs, and how do programs decide what to use? To what extent is the curriculum being implemented as intended? What are unintended outcomes, both positive and negative? What types of professional development are offered to early childhood professionals, and what is most effective for them to use to transform their instruction? Investigating the specific components of SBR and how each relates to student outcomes is needed to further elucidate the SBR theory of action and pinpoint aspects that lead to greater teacher capacity and improved outcomes for children.

**Conclusion**

Early childhood, once dismissed as “daycare” where children “played,” is now seen as critical formative years that can influence how children grow and develop. As a result, early childhood programs have become the focus of many new policies to increase quality, demonstrate positive outcomes, and ensure children are ready for school entrance. This study examined the
ways in which early childhood program staff implement standards-based reform efforts. Although standards-based reform has had mixed results in K-12, there appears to be an opportunity for early childhood programs to embrace change in this complex policy environment. Early childhood programs have history of a strong foundation in practices that are developmentally appropriate and based on current research. If programs can maintain this commitment while responding to increased demands and expectations, they can maintain their identity and contribute to the success of all children.
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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Early Childhood Administrator (Manager, Director, Coordinator) Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about your program.
2. How long have you been working in early childhood and what have your experiences been?
   ⇒ How did you become interested in early childhood?
3. What do you see as the main goals for your program?
   ⇒ What is your relationship with K-12?
   ⇒ What are you doing to meet the needs of diverse families?
4. How familiar are you with Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (Standards) in your program? (show cinnamon book) How do you use them in your program?
   ⇒ Assessment
   ⇒ Goals
   ⇒ Professional development
   ⇒ Curriculum
   ⇒ How would you like to use the standards?
5. How do you use assessment in your program as a whole?
   ⇒ How is your curriculum reflected in your assessments?
   ⇒ What has been your teachers’ reaction to assessment?
   ⇒ Recently there was a change in the SR statute requiring you to report student outcomes in the fall and the spring. What discussions did you have as a program? What did you decide to do? What did you take into account when making your decision?
6. How and why did you choose or develop your curriculum?
   ⇒ What was important to you as you created or chose your curriculum?
7. What does being ready for school or school readiness mean to you?
   ⇒ Do you think there is agreement about school readiness in your school community and district?
8. What are your core beliefs or guiding principles about teaching, learning and assessment in early childhood?
   ⇒ What do you think was most important to you in developing your beliefs?
   ⇒ How would you describe effective instruction for young children?
   ⇒ What has influenced your views of effective instruction?
9. What kinds of messages are you getting about what your program should be doing?
   Who is giving you these messages?
   ⇒ Elementary schools/kindergarten
   ⇒ Superintendents
   ⇒ Parents
   ⇒ State/MDE/Legislators
   ⇒ How do you feel about these messages?
10. Are the messages you are receiving ever in conflict with your beliefs about appropriate instruction/assessment?
   ⇒ Can you think of a time when what you were being asked to do and your beliefs about DAP were ever in conflict?
   ⇒ How did you deal with it?
   ⇒ What do you do to balance your beliefs with the messages?

11. What are the external demands or expectations placed on your program?
   ⇒ How has the expectations changed your program?
   ⇒ Where do you feel pressure for change coming from?

12. What have you put in place to support teachers in your program meeting the expectations?
   ⇒ How do you support teachers on an everyday basis to carry out expectations?

13. What types of professional development do you offer?
   ⇒ How do you choose your professional development activities?
   ⇒ What do you see as the priority for professional development?

14. How do you see your role in the program?
   ⇒ What do you need, personally and professionally, to meet the expectations?

15. How has your program changed over time?
   ⇒ What has been positive for you and your program?
   ⇒ What has been challenging or frustrating for you and your program?

16. What do you think about accountability and standards-based reform in early childhood? What comes to mind?
   ⇒ What are the positive things?
   ⇒ What are the challenges? Or what concerns you?
   ⇒ How has it changed your program?
Professional Development Staff (Trainers, Coaches) Interview Protocol

1. How long have you been working with early childhood programs and what have your experiences been?

2. What do you see as the main goals for this program?
   ⇒ Kids
   ⇒ Teachers
   i) What are the most important skills and knowledge teachers need to teach effectively in the current era?
   ⇒ Program
   i) How does this program meet the needs of diverse families?

3. How do you use the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (Standards) in your program?
   ⇒ Assessment
   ⇒ Goals
   ⇒ Professional development
   ⇒ Curriculum
   ⇒ How would you like to use the standards?
   ⇒ How do you think standards should be used in programs?

4. What does being ready for school or school readiness mean to you?
   ⇒ Do you think there is agreement about school readiness in your community and district?

5. What are your core beliefs or guiding principles about teaching, learning and assessment in early childhood?
   ⇒ What do you think was most important to you in developing your beliefs?
   ⇒ How would you describe effective instruction for young children?
   ⇒ What has influenced your views of effective instruction?
   ⇒ For example, literacy is an important concept for early childhood programs. What kinds of activities do you think are appropriate for teaching young children literacy skills, such as phonemic awareness?

6. What kinds of messages are you getting about what your program should be doing? Who is giving you these messages?
   ⇒ Elementary schools/kindergarten
   ⇒ Superintendents
   ⇒ Parents
   ⇒ State/MDE/Legislators
   ⇒ How do you feel about these messages?

7. Are the messages you are receiving ever in conflict with your beliefs about appropriate instruction/assessment?
   ⇒ Can you think of a time when what you were being asked to do and your beliefs about DAP were ever in conflict?
   ⇒ How did you deal with it?
   ⇒ What do you do to balance your beliefs with the messages?
8. What are the demands or expectations placed on your program?
   ⇒ How has the expectations changed your program?
   ⇒ Where do you feel pressure for change coming from?
   ⇒ Do teachers understand these expectations?

9. Where are these teachers on the way toward what you envision as effective practice?
   What do they still need to learn or be able to do?
   ⇒ How do you move teachers along the path of skill development?
   ⇒ What do you see as the challenges or barriers to change?
   ⇒ What do you see as your role?
   ⇒ What do teachers embrace or struggle with regarding the new expectations and demands?
   ⇒ What kinds of responses do teachers make to the changes?
   ⇒ What strategies do you suggest when working with teachers?

10. What has the program put into place to support teachers in your program meeting the expectations?
    ⇒ How do you support teachers on an everyday basis to carry out expectations?
    ⇒ What supports are needed to maintain the changes?
    ⇒ What has been most instrumental in this program making changes?

11. What changes have you seen in this program since you’ve been working with teachers and administrators? How do you feel about these changes?
    ⇒ Are the changes consistent across teachers and classrooms?
    ⇒ What has been positive for your program?
    ⇒ What has been challenging or frustrating for your program?
    ⇒ How much change do you see in classrooms? What kind of change is it?

12. What do you think about accountability and standards-based reform in early childhood? What comes to mind?
    ⇒ What are the positive things?
    ⇒ What are the challenges? Or what concerns you?
      i) What are you doing to safeguard against this?
    ⇒ How has it changed your program?
Early Childhood Teacher Interview Protocol

1. How long have you been teaching and what have your experiences been?
2. Tell me about your classroom. What is your day like?
   ⇒ Schedule
   ⇒ Lesson plans
   ⇒ Describe how you see your role as a teacher in an early childhood classroom.
   ⇒ How do you meet the needs of diverse families and children?
3. How do you use the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (Standards) in your teaching?
   ⇒ Assessment
   ⇒ Goals
   ⇒ Professional development
   ⇒ Curriculum
   ⇒ How would you like to use the standards?
4. How and why did you choose or develop your curriculum?
   ⇒ How do you feel about using a curriculum?
5. What does being ready for school, or school readiness mean to you?
   ⇒ Do you think there is agreement about school readiness in your community and district?
6. What are your core beliefs or guiding principles about teaching, learning and assessment?
   ⇒ How would you describe effective instruction for young children?
   ⇒ How do you feel about free choice time?
   ⇒ How do you feel about intentional instruction?
   ⇒ For example, literacy is an important concept for early childhood programs. What kinds of activities do you think are appropriate for teaching young children literacy skills, such as phonemic awareness?
   ⇒ What has influenced your views of effective instruction?
   ⇒ What do you think was most important to you in developing your beliefs?
   ⇒ Have these changed over time?
7. What kinds of messages are you getting about what your program should be doing?
   Who is giving you these messages?
   ⇒ Elementary schools/kindergarten
   ⇒ Superintendents
   ⇒ Parents
   ⇒ State/MDE/Legislators
   ⇒ How do you feel about these messages?
8. Are the messages you are receiving ever in conflict with your beliefs about appropriate instruction/assessment?
   ⇒ Can you think of a time when what you were being asked to do and your beliefs about DAP were ever in conflict?
   ⇒ How did you deal with it?
⇒ What do you do to balance your beliefs with the messages?

9. What are the demands or expectations placed on your program?
⇒ How has the expectations changed your program?
⇒ Where do you feel pressure for change coming from?

10. What types of professional development does your program offer?
⇒ What do you need most for professional development?
⇒ What have you learned from professional development activities?
⇒ What do you still think you need to learn?

11. It sounds like there have been a lot of changes in your classroom. How do you feel about these changes?
⇒ What has been positive for you and your students?
⇒ What has been challenging or frustrating for you?
⇒ How has early childhood changed from when you started in the field to now?
⇒ Why do you think the early childhood field is changing?

12. What do you think about accountability and standards-based reform in early childhood? What comes to mind?
⇒ What are the positive things?
⇒ What are the challenges? Or what concerns you?
i) What are you doing to safeguard against this?
⇒ How has it changed your program?
Making sense of standards-based reform in early childhood education: An exploratory study of how early childhood program staff understand and interpret standards-based reform

You are invited to be in a research study about how accountability and standards-based reform is affecting early childhood programs. Standards-based reform includes the new policies that are beginning to affect early childhood programs, such as using the early learning standards, implementing research-based curriculum, offering intensive professional development, assessing children, and reporting outcomes of children's assessment. This research is specifically focused on how you and your staff are understanding and interpreting standards-based reform. You were selected as a possible participant because you administer, teach, or provide professional development in a program that is implementing standards-based reform, is school-based, receives most of its funding from public sources, meets at least three half-days per week for at least nine months, and serves children aged 3-5. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Shannon Rader, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Policy and Administration at the University of Minnesota.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to gain a preliminary understanding of how standards-based reform is affecting early childhood programs. The focus of this study is how early childhood program staff understand and interpret the policies and components associated with standards-based reform and accountability.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:
1. Participate in an individual interview lasting approximately one hour. This interview will be audio tape recorded to ensure accurate information.
2. Clarify any questions regarding your responses via telephone, fax, email, or the like, as needed by researcher.
3. Provide the researcher with access to relevant documents, such as professional development training materials, lesson plans, program policies and training manuals, curriculum, and assessment instruments.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study

The study has minimal risk. This risk would involve any psychological stress you might feel in discussing your experiences as a staff member of early childhood program, if these experiences have been traumatic for you.

The benefit to participation in this study would be a feeling of contributing to further understanding of how standards-based reform is affecting early childhood programs. You may also provide valuable feedback to inform future professional development opportunities for early childhood program staff.
Compensation:

You will receive a gift card to a local coffee shop as a thank you gift for your time.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. The data you provide will be given an alias name association. Any audio tape recordings that are made will be accessible only to Shannon Rader, and will be erased as soon as they are transcribed to a computer file and the accuracy is assured. All research records will be kept in a locked file; only researcher will have access to the records.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Shannon Rader. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her on her cell phone, (612) 597-1326, or email her, rade0081@umn.edu. You may also contact her academic advisor, Dr. Jean King, at the University of Minnesota, (612) 626-1614, kingx004@umn.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the Research Subjects’ Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.