



Using Multiple Methods to Describe Supports for the Transition from Head Start to Kindergarten

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Abstract

Head Start programs engage in multiple practices to support children and families during the transition to kindergarten. Children moving from Head Start to kindergarten often encounter discontinuities between the program and services they were receiving and the new elementary school environment. This paper uses multiple datasets and methods to provide a rich descriptive picture of the types of practices Head Start programs engage in to support the transition to kindergarten, including child and family focused transition practices and coordination practices with elementary schools. Data from a nationally representative sample of Head Start center directors ($N=129$) showed that 95% reported having a formal transition process in place. However, reports on the specific practices that Head Start engaged in varied, with child and family focused practices reported by the majority of directors, but coordination practices showed more variability. Qualitative interview data with Head Start center directors ($N=16$), suggest that child and family focused transition practices varied slightly, but coordination practices varied more depending on the Head Start center's relationships with the elementary schools and local education agencies to which the children were transitioning. Together, these data sources suggest that Head Start policy and guidance around transition practices is leading to high implementation of transition practices that Head Start has control over, but more supports may be needed for Head Start to build relationships with elementary schools in order to strengthen coordination practices.

Keywords Transition · Kindergarten · Head Start · Elementary schools

Starting kindergarten is a critical time for children and families, and may be particularly critical for children from low-income families (Cook et al. 2019; McClelland et al. 2006; Pears and Peterson 2018). Children who have had strong early education experiences, such as attending high-quality early childhood education (ECE) programs, are well poised to succeed in kindergarten and beyond (e.g. Heckman 2006; Zhai et al. 2011). Yet the discontinuities between the programming, environments, and expectations children experience in ECE programs compared to kindergarten (Abry et al. 2018) may pose a challenge. Research has shown that ECE programs such as the U.S. federally funded Head Start pre-school program and elementary schools have the potential

to ease the transition with specific practices. These practices include: child and family focused practices that Head Start programs engage in directly with children and families (e.g., sharing information with parents, reading books about kindergarten to children); and coordination practices that require Head Start to coordinate with elementary schools and local education agencies (LEAs) to support the transition (e.g., supporting registration efforts, sharing child records, engaging in joint trainings) (e.g., see Cook and Coley 2017, 2019; Cook et al. 2019; LoCasale-Crouch et al. 2008; Shulting et al. 2005). Past research has found connections between such transition and coordination practices and enhanced child outcomes in kindergarten (Ahtola et al. 2011; Cook and Coley 2017, 2019; LoCasale-Crouch et al. 2008; Shulting et al. 2005). Yet more information is needed about the timing, content, quality, and variability of such practices. This study seeks to build on existing research by descriptively examining quantitative center-level data from the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Study (FACES) (Malone et al. 2013) and qualitative interview data collected

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by the authors with a separate sample of Head Start directors to understand the transition practices that they implement.

Research on transition and coordination practices has implications for the diverse ECE programs that serve children and families in the year prior to kindergarten entry. However, Head Start is a particularly rich policy context in which to study these practices. The Head Start preschool program in the United States is a national, federally funded school readiness program that has served low-income children and families since 1965, with a focus on early learning, health, and family well-being (Office of Head Start 2019). Head Start serves over one million children annually, 80% of whom are 3 and 4 year olds (Office of Head Start 2019). The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 delineates explicit expectations for individual Head Start programs to engage in transition and coordination activities, including systematic procedures for transferring child records; communicating with schools and local education agencies (LEAs); conducting joint trainings; creating transition policies/procedures; outreach to parents and teachers; providing information to families; working with families, administrators and teachers on developmental continuity and parent involvement; linking Head Start and LEA services; and coordinating to ensure alignment of curricula with the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework and state early learning standards (Office of Head Start 2007).

Head Start's Program Performance Standards further require programs to implement transition strategies and practices through collaborating directly with families, LEAs, and schools, engaging in learning environment activities, and providing transition services for children with an individualized education program (IEP) (Office of Head Start 2016). Based on the Head Start Program Information Report (PIR) data system, on average 89% of Head Start grantees in each state have a formal agreement with at least one LEA to coordinate transition services (Maxwell et al. 2019). However, it is common for a single Head Start agency to serve children who will attend kindergarten across multiple LEAs, making it important to understand how and why transition practices vary.

Literature and Theory on Transition and Coordination Practices

Research on the transition to kindergarten has been rooted in theory focusing on the different interconnected systems that interact to support children and families across the transition. Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) Developmental and Ecological Transition to Kindergarten model stresses the importance of connections between children, families, early education programs, and elementary schools as key to positive kindergarten transitions for children. Yelverton

and Mashburn's (2018) more recent conceptual framework points out the child, setting, and system characteristics that support child development during the transition to kindergarten. These include interactions within and across settings, and across time that help to maintain high quality experiences that build upon children's earlier experiences and develop stronger relationships between families and teachers. Related scholarship further highlights that the transition to kindergarten may be particularly challenging for children from low-income families who often experience adversities in child, family, and early education domains (Pears and Peterson 2018).

Child and Family Focused Transition Practices

Research has shown that child and family focused transition practices initiated by ECE programs and/or by elementary schools are fairly common, including parent orientations, visits to the kindergarten classroom, and sending information home to families, with positive benefits for children (Cook and Coley 2017; Little et al. 2016; LoCasale-Crouch et al. 2008; Shulting et al. 2005). In a nationally representative sample in the U.S., Cook and Coley (2017) found that more transition practices reported by kindergarten teachers was related to higher prosocial skills at the end of kindergarten. Specifically, parent orientations were related to children's literacy and math skills, controlling for prior functioning. In a study of state prekindergarten programs, LoCasale-Crouch et al. (2008) found that transition practices were related to higher social, self-regulation, and academic skills among children following entry to kindergarten.

Other research suggests that schools with fewer resources that serve more low-income children engage in fewer transition practices overall, and specifically in less individualized practices (Early et al. 1999; Schulting et al. 2005). Some research also suggests that children from low-income families benefit the most from transition practices, but receive the least amount of them (LoCasale-Couch et al. 2008; Schulting et al. 2005).

Coordinated Practices with Elementary Schools and LEAs

Practices where efforts are coordinated across ECE programs and LEAs or elementary schools may require multiple parties and more intensive planning. These practices often include information sharing, joint decision making, or coordinated activities for children and families, where both Head Start and elementary school personnel are involved in planning. For example, LoCasale-Crouch et al. (2008) found that when prekindergarten teachers shared information about curricula use or specific children with kindergarten teachers, kindergarten teachers rated those

children as having more social competencies and less behavior problems in kindergarten. In a nationally representative sample of Head Start children, analyses showed that when a child's Head Start director reported that someone from Head Start had met with a kindergarten teacher at the elementary school, the Head Start children had higher language skills in kindergarten (Cook and Coley 2019).

Some international studies have found similar results. A study of children transitioning to formal schooling in Finland found that teachers' reports of cooperation between ECE and elementary schools on curricula and passing on written information about children were significant predictors of children's academic skills at school entry (Ahtola et al. 2011). In a Norwegian sample, researchers found that when elementary school teachers received curriculum and child-specific information from ECE centers, children had higher social and academic adjustment at school entry (Cook et al. 2017).

This research provides some evidence that transition and coordination practices have small positive relationships with child outcomes in kindergarten. However, many studies reported data from surveys where the participant reported yes/no to a series of activities. Little information is known about whether these practices were implemented universally for all children, or about the timing, content, and intensity of these practices. Moreover, although some research suggests that coordination practices are less commonly engaged in than child and family focused transition activities (Ahtola et al. 2011), there is little systematic data on the patterns of transition and coordination activities or factors and how and why they vary.

Present Study

To address these limitations in prior literature, the present study uses multiple methods with two distinct datasets in order to better understand the practices that Head Start programs implement to support children and families preparing for the transition to kindergarten. Multimethod approaches allow researchers to combine multiple sources of data and analysis techniques in the same study in order to gain greater knowledge (Hunter and Brewer 2015). By focusing on Head Start programs which function under universal policies concerning transition and coordination practices, we sought to explore the patterns of successful implementation within a supportive regulatory environment. Specifically, we sought to provide a rich description by addressing the following research questions:

1) What kindergarten transition practices do Head Start directors report?

- 2) What are the patterns and variability in the engagement of kindergarten transition practices reported by directors?
- What is the timing of these practices?
 - Are they universally implemented or targeted to certain children or families?

Data Source 1: Nationally Representative Survey Data

Method

Data & Sample

The first data source was the center-level data from the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES): 2009 Cohort, a nationally representative survey of Head Start programs, centers, and children in fall 2009 through spring of the child's kindergarten year in 2011 or 2012. Data were collected from program directors, center directors, education coordinators, children, and families from across all 50 states and Washington DC (Malone et al. 2013). The present study analyzed the center-level data file which includes reports on transition practices from Head Start center directors ($N = 129$). In the fall of 2009, Head Start directors completed a questionnaire including questions about their transition practices. Directors in the sample were primarily women (90%), and had an average of 11 years of experience at their center ($SD = 8.13$; range $< 1-29$). All directors had at least some college coursework as their highest level of schooling, with 32% having some coursework or an associate's degree, 32% a bachelor's degree, 11% some graduate coursework, and 36% a master's degree or higher. Centers varied in size, employing an average of just under 5 lead teachers ($SD = 4.04$; range 0–15).

Measures

Head Start center directors reported whether they had a formal transition process in place and when in the year the process begins. They also reported on whether or not they engaged in six child and family focused transition practices and eight coordination practices with elementary schools (see Table 1 for items). Questions delineated general engagement in practices and not whether practices were conducted for specific children or with specific elementary schools. These items were assessed individually and as a summative index of the total number of practices engaged in ($\alpha = 0.65$). This follows prior research on transition and coordination practices with similar moderate internal reliability when these types of practices are combined in one

Table 1 Head Start director reported transition & coordination practices in FACES 2009

Practice	% Yes	% No	% Don't know	N=
Child & family focused transition practices				
Ask parents to discuss kindergarten transition	99	1	0	129
Give parents info on school	98	2	0	129
Send parents letter with info on transition	97	3	0	129
Teach parents skills to advocate	88	11	1	129
Schedule parent to child's school	81	18	1	129
Accompany parents to the school	67	32	0	126
Coordination practices with elementary schools				
Participate in development of IEPs	95	5	0	129
Help schools identify kindergarten students	84	16	0	129
Provide Head Start records for children	82	16	2	128
Meet with kindergarten teacher at school	77	22	2	128
Share curriculum information	74	25	1	129
Share expectations	70	26	4	129
Share program policy information	67	33	0	128
Joint trainings	52	47	0	129

Total transition and coordination practices sum index: Mean = 11.21, SD = 2.25. Numbers are rounded to the nearest whole number and row percentages may not add up to 100. *Source:* Author analysis of Head Start FACES 2009 center-level data file

scale (Cook and Coley 2017, 2019; LoCasale-Crouch et al. 2008; Shulting et al. 2005).

Analytic Plan

To examine Head Start transition practices, weighted descriptive statistics were conducted in Stata 16.0 (Stata-Corp 2019). Survey weights were applied using the Taylor Series linearization method with the center weight (C1WT) and PSU and stratum variables to make data representative of the population of Head Start centers in 2009 and to adjust for clustering and provide proper variance estimates.

Results

Ninety-five percent of directors reported having a formal planning process in place for the transition to kindergarten. Directors were split on when the process began, with 37% starting their process at the start of the school year, 38% starting halfway through the year, 22% starting a couple of months before the year ends, and 2% a few weeks before the end of the year. Table 1 shows the engagement prevalence in each of the transition and coordination practices. The vast majority of Head Start directors report sending parents letters (97%), asking parents to discuss the transition, (99%) giving parents information on schools (98%), and participating in the development of individualized education programs for children with disabilities (95%). The least common practices were joint trainings with elementary schools (52%), sharing Head Start policy with schools

(67%), and accompanying parents to schools (67%). The child and family focused transition practices with the most variability were accompanying parents to the school and scheduling a parent to the child's school (81%), two practices that are notably different from the others in that they require involvement from three parties—Head Start, families, and elementary schools. The coordination practices with elementary schools overall had more variability than the child and family focused practices.

On average, directors reported yes to 11 of 14 total practices ($SD = 2.25$). The modal number of practices was 13 out of 14 (31% of directors), while only 10% reported all 14 practices. A closer analysis examined which practices were omitted by centers that were engaging in at least 13 out of 14 practices. Of the directors that engaged in 13 out of 14 practices, the most commonly omitted were engaging in joint trainings, accompanying parents to schools, scheduling parents to schools, and Head Start meeting with kindergarten teachers. While this amounts to small numbers of programs omitting these practices, this information may indicate which practices Head Start programs with even the most robust transition planning find challenging. The commonality of these practices are that they all require some level of engagement by elementary schools and often parents as well, beyond the engagement by Head Start programs.

To further examine where variability may exist, descriptive analyses were conducted to examine inconsistency across centers under the same umbrella Head Start program. The FACES dataset includes 129 centers (individual sites) embedded within 60 Head Start programs, with two to three

centers, on average, within each overall program. Descriptive analyses sorted by program examined whether centers within the same program reported consistent engagement in practices, revealing that only 25% of programs had centers that reported the same amount of transition and coordination practices as one another. This indicates that transition practices and policies are likely implemented locally and may vary by the program staff and location, despite national Head Start policies and regulations and guidance at the Head Start program level.

Data Source 2: Local Interview Data

Method

Participants & Procedures

The authors collected original data from Head Start directors ($N = 16$) in one state in the northeastern United States through twelve semi-structured phone interviews between December and January of the 2016–2017 school year. Participants were recruited through the state Head Start Association. All programs who responded with interest were invited to identify the best person to provide information on transition practices. All identified respondents participated in the study. The participants were all women with administrative responsibilities who ranged in professional title, including seven Head Start program level leaders, such as Directors with oversight of multiple centers. Nine participants were center level leaders with titles such as Education Manager or Center Coordinator. For the sake of simplicity, all of the participants are referred to as Head Start directors in this study. The participants reported various responsibilities, with some assigned to one center location and others to multiple centers across the Head Start program, but each was either directly responsible for or oversaw the staff responsible for transition practices. Participants represented programs and centers that varied in terms of how many children they served, how many sites they oversaw, and where their sites were located in the state. Programs served between 90 and 700 children. Six served primarily urban areas, four suburban, and two rural.

Phone interviews were conducted one on one, with the exception of two interviews where the participants chose to participate as a group from the same Head Start program. Interviews lasted an average of 42 min, and all were recorded and transcribed. Written and oral consent was obtained from all participants, who received a \$15 retail gift card for participation. The semi-structured interview protocol was developed with input from an advisory committee that included Head Start and other early education stakeholders, was guided by research and theory, and was approved by the Institutional Review Board. Questions

included topics such as the participant's experience and their program's transition and coordination practices. Participants were asked broad questions about their transition processes and practices. Specific practices were not pre-identified by the researchers in order to potentially gain a broader view of transition practices than the constrained practices asked about in past quantitative survey data, including the Head Start FACES data.

Analytic Plan

Interview transcripts were analyzed using NVIVO software (NVivo 2015). The authors and a research assistant developed a code list and participated in coding activities. Initial a priori codes were developed based on the literature and research goals, and were added upon throughout the coding process. These codes included main codes such as demographic information, connecting parents and/or children to elementary schools, who practices are for, benefits, and room for improvement. Most main codes were also divided into subcodes. See Appendix 1 for a full code list. A first cycle of coding involved codes assigned to phrases in order to categorize and organize the data (Saldana 2016). At least two researchers coded each interview, with 97% intercoder agreement. Subsequent cycles of coding included code mapping and tabulations for which interviews covered a code/topic. Codes were revised and turned into process codes. Coded activities were thematically grouped by type. Finally, short vignettes from three exemplar interviews were chosen as illustrative examples to describe different transition processes. These three examples were chosen to illustrate themes that arose in multiple interviews; to show a diversity of perspectives from programs that serve children and families in different contexts; and due to the details they provided in terms of the process and timing of the transition planning process.

Results

With the overall mission of school readiness, participants stated that preparing children for kindergarten is their main priority, with lengthy processes in place to prepare children for the transition throughout the year before the child enters kindergarten. Yet, they varied in the degree to which their transition efforts are done universally for all children, and how coordinated their efforts are with the elementary schools that children are entering. Many discussed having an eye towards children's transition to school from the moment they first enroll in Head Start. Table 2 shows a list of practices described in the interviews. Three subtypes of practices were identified: (1) child and family focused transition practices, (2) coordination practices with elementary schools, which were similar to the categories and practices in data

Table 2 Head Start transition and coordination activities discussed in interviews

Activities by category

Child & family focused transition practices

- Supporting literacy and school readiness (reading books and sending them home with families, and modeling other activities children can do at home)
- Providing transition kits or backpacks to children/families
- Making books or bulletin boards about the schools children will be going to
- Grouping children and/or parents based on schools they will be entering and providing activities or support

Child & family transition practices requiring elementary school engagement

- Supporting, promoting, and ensuring children are registered for kindergarten enrollment
- Promoting LEA and elementary school sponsored activities
- Planning a kindergarten parent night with elementary representation
- Providing parents with child assessment data to share with schools
- Planning visits for children and families to elementary schools

Coordination practices with elementary schools

- Collaborating about special education needs of children
- Sharing information or joint planning on program, curriculum, standards, assessment
- Attending each other's events
- Sharing data on children
- Participating in community councils or other community or school committees together
- Meeting in person
- Planning classroom observations for teachers

Data reflect 12 interviews with 16 Head Start directors

source 1, as well as (3) a third subset of practices that were focused on children and families, yet required some coordination with elementary schools in order to execute them, such as planning a kindergarten parent night with representation from the elementary school.

Child & Family Focused Transition Practices

Many participants highlighted school readiness activities to support the development of language and academic skills as well as social-emotional skills needed for children to succeed in elementary school. Programs supported the development of such skills both through the provision of activities and learning opportunities provided directly to children within the Head Start program (e.g., literacy activities), as well as by events and activities for parents to continue supporting their children at home (e.g., sending home books, a calendar of activities). Programs also highlighted activities focused directly on preparing children for what to expect in the transition, such as including books and activities about kindergarten, or changing their dramatic play areas to resemble kindergarten classrooms at the end of the school year. Understanding that the transition can be a challenging time for children and families, some programs described ways they create groups so that children get to know peers who will be attending the same school the following year. One participant described the popularity of “kindergarten

friendship groups” created to connect children from different Head Start classrooms within their center who will be going to the same schools for kindergarten. Others created bulletin boards or books to show families which children are attending the same schools. Acknowledging that many of the families served by Head Start may lack the resources to provide their children with the physical materials needed for kindergarten, several participants described how their programs provide backpacks filled with supplies like books, scissors, and pencils for children to use during the summer and to bring to kindergarten. The activities done to directly support children and families were primarily described as universal activities, aimed at all Head Start children and families during the year before kindergarten.

Coordination Practices

Many coordination practices were discussed in which Head Start programs engaged directly with elementary schools to share information, hold joint meetings, and coordinate planning. All participants discussed working with elementary schools in some way to collaborate around the needs of children receiving special education services, and nearly all discussed some information sharing around programming, curriculum, standards and/or assessment. Yet, there was more variability in terms of the other practices, such as sharing child records, and working

together on registration, with programs engaging with only some of the LEAs to which children were transitioning, rather than universally for all children.

Child & Family Transition Practices Requiring Elementary School Engagement

Through the analysis process a third category of practices emerged that were focused on children and families, but required some coordination with elementary schools in order to execute them. All participants discussed working with schools and families on kindergarten registration. Registration efforts were discussed in detail in all interviews, with strong concerns voiced that families would not be able to navigate the kindergarten registration process without support from Head Start. Other examples in this category included ways in which Head Starts promoted LEA and elementary school-sponsored events by sharing the information with their families, encouraging them to attend, and in some cases providing transportation and translation services for parents. They also planned their own events in coordination with elementary schools such as setting up visits for Head Start to bring children and families to elementary schools, and inviting an elementary school principal or kindergarten teacher to attend a parent meeting at Head Start. All of these practices require coordinated efforts with elementary schools, but are focused on children and families, and are therefore different from practices focused solely on children and families and from coordination efforts between Head Start and elementary schools not directly involving children or families. Unlike the child and family -focused transition practices that do not involve elementary schools, the practices that require some coordination with schools were not described as being done universally for all children, and often varied by the school or LEA.

Overall, most of the activities were focused on 4 year olds who would be entering kindergarten the following year, although some directors expressed that 3 year olds in their program may be included and benefit from certain activities. Most child and family-focused practices were done universally for all children and families, such as planning a parent night where a kindergarten teacher attends or helping parents with registration. In contrast, the activities focused on joint activities between Head Start and elementary schools varied by relationships with different school systems, formal partnerships, and location. It is important to note that the interviews asked open ended questions about the transition and coordination practices Head Start engages in, and not questions about specific practices. As such, the responses may not fully capture all of the activities each program is engaging in.

Vignettes

Three short vignettes are included below to show the depth and breadth of transition activities described by Head Start in their own words. Specific program information is not included to maintain confidentiality, and all names are pseudonyms.

Rural Head Start Transitions (Vignette 1)

Anne co-directs a Head Start center in a rural area that serves about 200 children. She has been with the Head Start agency for nearly 20 years in different positions, and in this particular position for less than 5 years. About half of the children in her center transition to kindergarten each year (~100). Although the center transitions children into eight different LEAs, each with one elementary school, the relationships and activities with each LEA vary. Anne describes an overall transition process that is based on a specifically laid out plan that begins in early January when she “goes to the public schools and [says] ‘it’s getting to be that time.’ I want to know when kindergarten registration is going to be, I want to know when they’re having an open house, and then I ask if we can participate in all of those things... I send a letter to the public school elementary principals, and then they’ll come back to me...” She also explains how she has a training meeting with her staff in January to go over the transition plan. The information sharing between the elementary schools and the Head Start program is bi-directional. Around February or March, Head Start asks parents for permission for them to provide their child’s name, birth date, parent’s names, address and best way to reach the family to the appropriate elementary school principals. Anne explains this as a way to support the registration process so that LEAs can cross-reference this list with their town censuses to send out registration packets to families. For the LEA they work closest with (and transition the most children to), they shifted to registration onsite at the Head Start program a few years ago. The elementary school principal and secretary visits the Head Start program multiple times in the spring so that families can register for kindergarten on site. In addition, the Head Start staff attend any informational meetings the LEAs hold for parents so they are aware of the types of paperwork the families will need to provide.

Around March and April visits across Head Start and the elementary schools begin. “So the next thing that happens...we set up to have the principal come to our parent meeting and talk about what it is like to be in kindergarten. Anyone can participate from any of the towns, but she is really focusing on what it is like to go to [that] school.” Next, in the spring, Anne schedules visits to two elementary schools that many of the children will attend. “So we visit the school, we might have a snack, and then we come back.

This is maybe an hour and usually the principal or guidance counselor gives the kids a tour to see what it is like to go to the big school.”

The final step in the transition process for Anne’s program is a final home visit with every family at the end of May. During this visit the home visitor and the parents work on a kindergarten transition form about what the child learned during Head Start, talking about skills and other areas that the elementary school may want to know about the child (e.g., IEP status, mental health services). The parent then has the option to sign the form, giving Head Start permission to share this information with the elementary school. At the beginning of June, the Head Start lead classroom teachers will set up individual meetings with the principals and guidance counselors at each elementary school to discuss each child and provide them with the child’s form. Anne notes that sometimes kindergarten teachers participate in these meetings. Although she reaches out to *all* schools that children will attend, not all will schedule a meeting with Head Start and thus receive the transition forms. She notes that these are often the schools that call them in September asking for advice on how to work with a specific child. In addition to the carefully planned transition process, Anne notes that they also receive information about elementary school readiness expectations from different sources including conversations with school staff at community meetings and IEP meetings for specific children. Figure 1 provides a timeline for the activities that Anne describes across the year before children enter kindergarten.

Transitions from Multiple Sites (Vignette 2)

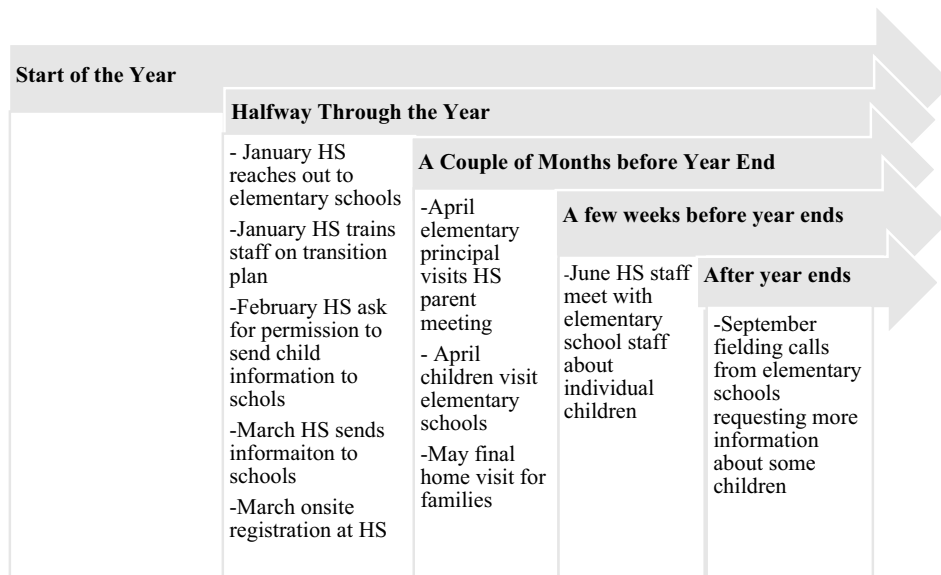
Jen is a director of one Head Start site under an agency with multiple sites. Her center serves about 90 children, with

about 50 going off to kindergarten each year. She has been with her Head Start agency for 20 years and in this particular role for about 10 years. Jen’s children attended the program she now runs. They primarily serve three suburban LEAs, although they can transition children to up to seven or eight. Each LEA has multiple elementary schools. Jen states that “We always say that the transition to kindergarten, the school readiness, starts the second they walk in our door. We always identify our kids who are going to kindergarten right away and start talking to the parents about the importance of being engaged in their children’s learning.” She described weekly activities that are sent home for children to do and monthly parent meetings that occur on different topics throughout the year all as part of the transition to kindergarten.

Like Anne’s center, Jen’s specific transition activities start about half way through the school year. Starting in February they begin to track and share information with parents on kindergarten information nights at each school. They also check in with parents to make sure they know the screening date and have all of the paperwork. In the spring, the center hosts a kindergarten night for parents where a kindergarten teacher visits the Head Start program. They also put up display boards in their center with pictures of each elementary school linked to the children who will be attending. All children who are transitioning meet with the social worker in small “kindergarten groups,” stories are read about going to kindergarten, and there is a kindergarten ice cream social. Jen describes that they have “[a] whole kindergarten transition checklist that we go through and make sure we’re always documenting the activities that we do throughout the year.”

Like Anne, Jen notes that each of the centers in their Head Start agency follow the same transition procedures and that the only thing that might differ is some of the events.

Fig. 1 Transition practices timeline for Vignette 1



However, the activities do vary by the different elementary schools, particularly around information sharing and in-person connections. Jen notes that some LEAs send over a questionnaire for the Head Start staff to fill out for each child that will be going to their school. She notes they always get them from one town, usually get them from one other town, and every now and then get them from a third town. Beyond the questionnaires, they have the Head Start teachers talk directly with the schools for some children (with parental permission). She notes that if a child does not have an IEP, but is considered a “tricky situation,” then “A lot of times the kindergarten teacher would end up calling us to see how we best supported them.” Although not done in the last 2 years, in the past Jen explains that one of the LEAs would have the kindergarten teachers come observe the Head Start classrooms, and then in the spring the Head Start teachers would go and observe the kindergarten classrooms, citing benefits for both sets of teachers. Figure 2 provides a timeline for the activities that Jen describes across the year before children enter kindergarten.

Alphabet Head Start (Vignette 3)

Operating a large Head Start program with nearly 700 children across six center sites, three leaders from Alphabet Head Start participated in the interview. They have MOUs with 28 LEAs that they transition about 400 children to each year. However, they work most closely with the one LEA that the most children they transition will attend. All three were agency level leaders, with many years of experience at the same Head Start program. Although she was not available for the interview, they also have a “transition specialist”

who works across all of the HS sites. One of the participants held this job in the past, and all participants work closely together. They described the transition specialist job as the following: “She’s responsible to get the families ready for kindergarten so she has a lot of different jobs.” One of her jobs was described as handing out a monthly calendar of activities for children to do with parents at home, starting in September before kindergarten. In November, they send out a parent guide to kindergarten to start to support families in the transition process.

In order to help elementary schools identify children who will attend kindergarten in the fall, Alphabet Head Start sends prospective lists of children who will likely attend their schools. The schools also let Head Start know about open houses so they can encourage families to attend. For the LEA they transition the most children to, they also hold kindergarten registration on site at one of their centers. “With our family advocates we already have most of the paperwork on the families so that helps the parents. In addition to knowing what the school system is asking for [the family advocates] work with the parents to get the paperwork in.” They did this with two sites in the past year. For the other four sites, they described processes where the education specialists worked with the school systems to be aware of any registration days coming up and to share the information with families and help with transportation if needed.

To support families, in March the transition specialist will give a summer transition packet to each family. At the final home visit of the year in April or May, Head Start staff go over the transition profile sheet for each child with the families. This transition profile sheet is sent to each school for each individual child. They note that the

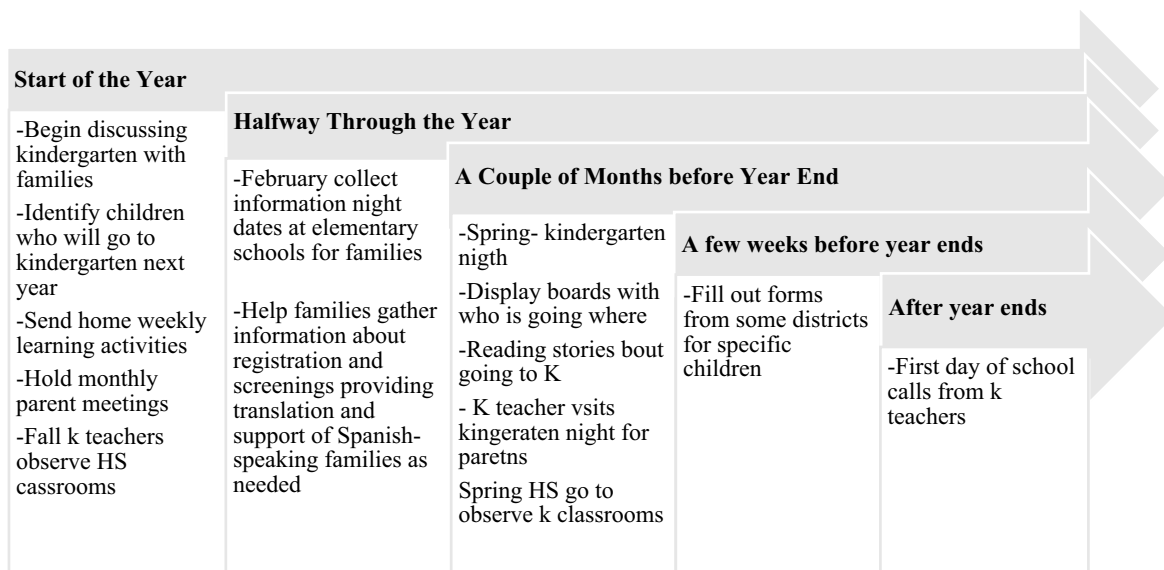


Fig. 2 Transition practices timeline for Vignette 2

recipient of this profile sheet is different at each school. “It’s who the district would like us to send them to. Sometimes they go to the principals, the early childhood center, sometimes it’s the kindergarten teachers. It really depends, each district is different.” The transition profile form was developed by one of their receiving LEAs many years ago. Although they are not exactly sure how the schools use this information, they have been told that some are using the information over the summer to decide on how to place children in different classrooms for the fall. The form has also been “tweaked” over the years, with input from local schools provided during an annual school readiness meeting. These meetings are written into their memoranda of understanding (MOU) with LEAs. “It’s a big part of when we have these committee meetings that we discuss anything that we could do better at to work cooperatively... So transition would be a subject, school readiness, what would you like to see from us... It’s great networking and it’s great collaboration, and we’re able to really work cooperatively. So that it helps them, and it helps us.”

Alphabet Head Start also discussed how transition and coordination efforts have changed over time. “Well to show you how some things have changed for me over the years, I used to be in an education specialist position before, years ago it was a little different. We had more time one on one with local kindergartens and to visit...” However, they stressed that there were opportunities to connect with elementary school personnel through different committee meetings and joint trainings. “It depends on the year, but we’ve been invited to participate, and it depends on the town. Our staff will go there. One district was really good with including our staff in any of their trainings they had on disabilities...So that was a joint effort. It’s just hard because when they offer it on their training day, it’s not our training day, and our staff are working.” Figure 3 provides

an overview of the activities engaged in by Alphabet Head Start.

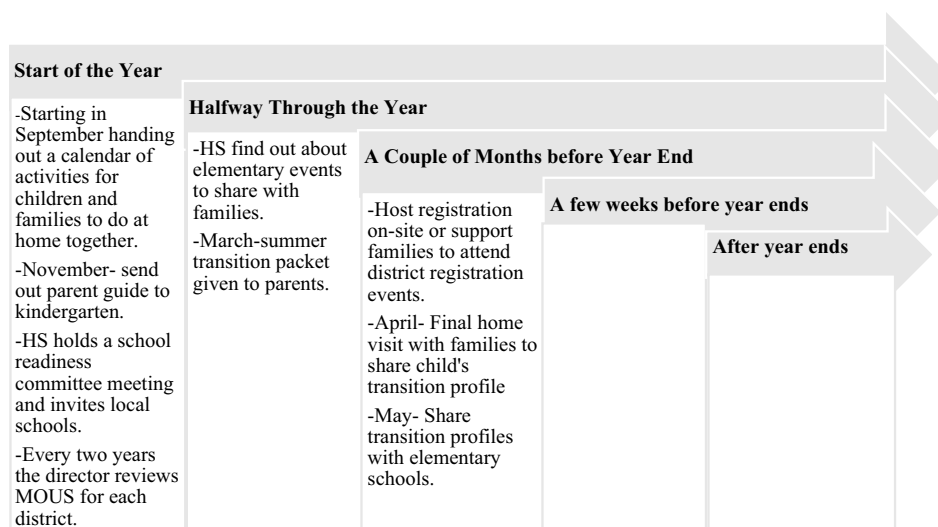
Discussion

This study used multiple methods to describe the transition practices that Head Start programs engage in to support the transition to kindergarten, using quantitative survey data that is nationally representative of Head Start center directors, as well rich qualitative data that sheds additional light on specific practices and processes. Together, these two data sources and methods help provide a more comprehensive picture of the transition practices implemented.

Transition Planning Throughout the Year

The study sought to provide a descriptive picture of the different types of practices Head Start directors report to support children and families in the transition to kindergarten and the practices that require coordination with elementary schools. Analyses of nationally representative data from FACES showed that 95% of centers had a formal process in place to support the transition. However, they varied in whether they engaged in transition activities throughout the school year (37%) or began their processes mid-way (38%) or towards the end of the year (24%). Separate qualitative data replicated this finding of variability in the timing initiating transition activities. These data also provided insights into the ways Head Start programs think about their transition processes and planning in the year before children enter kindergarten. For example, in Vignette 1, the Head Start director explained a specific transition process that began with a plan and training in January and went through the end of the school year. Yet in Vignettes 2 and 3, the Head Start

Fig. 3 Transition practices timeline for Vignette 3



directors discussed a broader vision of the transition that begins “The second they walk in the door” even if many of the most targeted activities did not begin until mid-year. This helps shed some light on how different directors may think about their processes and may answer survey questions like those in FACES differently.

Common Practices & Variability

The FACES data showed that the most frequently reported practices were those in which Head Start directly engaged with children and families. Practices that required coordination with elementary schools were less prevalent. Out of the practices focused on children and families directly, a subset of the practices that by nature required some coordination with elementary schools were the least prevalent child and family focused transition practices. This suggests that practices that require two or three parties may be more challenging for Head Start. However, research has shown that practices that connect parents and schools (Cook and Coley 2017; Shulting et al. 2005), or connect ECE programs and schools (Ahtola et al. 2011; Cook and Coley 2019; Cook et al. 2017; LoCasale-Crouch et al. 2008) may have the largest benefit for children during the transition to kindergarten.

The qualitative interviews with Head Start directors revealed that practices focused on children and families were generally universally implemented for all children. In contrast, practices that required coordinated efforts with elementary schools varied greatly by Head Start’s relationships with the schools children would be entering. This variability is important to understand further. Analyses of the FACES data found that even the Head Start programs that reported very high levels of all types of practices (13 out of 14 total practices), struggled with implementing practices that required elementary school participation (joint trainings, meeting with kindergarten teachers), and participation from both parents and elementary schools (accompanying parents to schools, scheduling parents to schools). These practices were also the ones that most commonly differed across Head Start centers (sites) within the same umbrella Head Start program. This indicates that even the centers with the most robust transition practices, including program-wide transition policies and practices, likely vary in their implementation based on their relationships with individual schools and LEAs. Qualitative interview data added depth to this variability, suggesting that some differences across Head Start centers, schools or LEAs may be driven by factors such as the number of children that go to a specific elementary school and the relationships that Head Start directors have with different school leaders.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Head Start’s engagement with child and family focused transition practices vary slightly, but coordination practices with

elementary schools varied more depending on the Head Start center’s relationships with the elementary schools and LEAs children were transitioning to. The vignettes provide an in depth examination of how the simple reports of practices are operationalized and implemented within Head Start programs, including when they occur, and how much they are targeted to specific families or school systems children will be entering. In addition, these data sources suggest that Head Start policy and guidance around transition practices is leading to high implementation of transition practices that Head Start has control over, but also that more supports may be needed for Head Start to build relationships with elementary schools in order to strengthen coordination practices.

Study Strengths & Limitations

This study adds to the growing body of literature on the transition to kindergarten (Mashburn et al. 2018) and the ways early education programs and elementary schools can support smoother transitions for children and families. Head Start is a rich system in which to study this topic given the programs’ long history of policies and guidance on supporting the transition to kindergarten. While the information from this study provides a nationally representative, descriptive picture of practices engaged in by Head Start, it is likely that the findings do not generalize to other early childhood programs such as subsidized child care or other community-based providers that do not have the policies in place to support transition activities. Given Head Start regulations requiring transition practices, it is also likely that Head Start directors in the FACES data may over-report the practices they engage in if they see them as mandated. Nevertheless, the variability across practices and the rich information from the interviews provide a deeper picture of where programs may struggle with implementation.

It is also important to note that this study only provided the perspectives of Head Start programs, not elementary schools. Therefore, the LEA and elementary school perspectives on transition practices, expectations for the transition, and coordination with Head Start programs were not captured in this study. These are important issues to address in future research. There are also general strengths and limitations of each dataset analyzed in this study. The FACES data are nationally representative, yet the questions asked to directors were binary (yes/no) questions about their practices, lacking nuances of when practices take place, who is involved in them, and whether they are universal or targeted to specific children or elementary schools. Greater depth of this type might be added to future surveys about kindergarten transition practices. The qualitative data provides a balanced perspective with rich data on practices including the who, what, when and how of transition practices. However,

the interview data were from a small sample in one state, and, given the open-ended questions, directors may not have discussed all of the transition practices they engage in. Separately these datasets are limited; together, they provide a rich descriptive picture of the types of practices Head Start programs engage in, a benefit of a multiple method approach.

Conclusion and Implications

This study has insights that can be used to inform policy and practice. For example, theory has suggested that connections across systems are important for children as they transition to kindergarten (Rimm-Kauffmann and Pianta 2000; Yelverton and Mashburn 2018), but there is minimal empirical work that has delved into whether, where, and how transition and coordination practices take place, who is implementing them, and when they are being implemented. Information from this study can help inform Head Start at multiple levels and provide a deeper understanding of how policies function. Despite the variability, overall this study shows that Head Start programs are implementing transition practices at relatively high rates, with more than half of programs implementing each practice. This suggests that having policies in place (i.e., Head Start Program Performance Standards 2016), is moderately effective in promoting implementation of transition practices, but that more needs to be done. In addition, other ECE programs can consider whether and how to set policies for their programs around transition practices. For example, states and locales that have requirements for programs to be included in universal prekindergarten programs could include requirements for transition practices across systems. It is important to note that the quantitative data for this study were collected prior to, and the qualitative data just after, the reauthorized Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, which requires LEAs to coordinate transition efforts with Head Start and other local programs that receive funding from the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) (U.S. Department of Education 2017). More research is needed to examine whether this policy has increased LEA buy-in and enhanced transition and coordination practices with Head Start and other ECE settings.

Additionally, there are multiple areas for future research to extend our understanding of transition and coordination practices. As noted, it is likely that findings from this study may be specific to Head Start and may be quite different across the diverse settings that children attend in the year prior to kindergarten entry. More research is required to better understand the transition supports needed for children who do not attend Head Start, particularly children from low-income families who attend subsidized child care programs, universal prekindergarten programs, family

child care homes, or who have no ECE experiences before kindergarten. In addition, much more research is needed to better understand the perspectives and experiences of kindergarten teachers, and elementary school and LEA administrators. This understanding is critical to developing policies and practices that engage both ECE and kindergarten teachers and administrators to best support children and families. While some qualitative research has begun to unpack the barriers and opportunities that both Head Start programs (Cook et al. 2019) and elementary schools (Purtell et al. 2019) face when engaging in transition practices, additional research in this area is needed across settings and systems to further support implementation of positive transition and coordination practices for all children and families.

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Appendix 1: Qualitative Code & Subcode List

Demographic information
Current position
Job responsibilities
Years with Head Start
Location
Program size or number of children served
Number of districts/schools transitioning to other
Activities for getting children or families ready while still in Head Start
In Head Start activities
Kits or materials
Preparing parents for the transition
Connecting parents and/or children to elementary schools
Connecting children to elementary schools
For parent and/or child visits to schools
Providing parents information they need
Registration
To promote other elementary school sponsored activities

 Communication between Head Start and elementary schools

Attending each other's events
 Joint professional development
 Joint planning sessions
 Contact after the start of kindergarten
 Meeting in person
 Observing classrooms
 Who to contact at elementary school level
 Sharing general information
 Sharing child records
 Other
 Alignment of practices
 Assessments
 Curriculum
 Standards
 Who are practices for
 All children
 Specific children
 Behavior concerns
 Disabilities
 Family trauma or other risk
 Medical concern
 Certain districts
 Benefits
 Children
 Families
 Teachers or schools
 Other
 Room for improvement/challenges
 Changes over time
 Data sharing
 Parent/child participation
 Teacher/elementary school participation
 Time or resources
 No challenges
 Attitudes towards transition and coordination
 Importance of
 Reflection and improvement
 Wanting invitation to table
 Relationships
 Longevity
 Leadership
 Special education
 Keys to success
 Community or state partners

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