

THE INFLUENCE OF AN EARLY CHILDHOOD ENDORSEMENT PROGRAM  
ON EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

By

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The call to improve high-quality educational opportunities for children ages birth – eight has received increased attention and federal and local funding opportunities have expanded to provide additional early childhood classrooms and to implement family engagement practices. Unfortunately, systems of support for principals aimed at increasing knowledge and skills necessary to lead an aligned Preschool – third-grade system within an elementary school remain relatively sparse. The purpose of this study is to examine the alignment between an early childhood endorsement program and early childhood leadership competencies.

This study will examine the perceptions of school leaders participating in an early childhood endorsement program regarding endorsement program alignment with leadership competencies and practices.

A document analysis will be completed to identify the levels of alignment between early childhood endorsement course content and early childhood

leadership competencies. In addition, endorsement program participants will be asked to complete a self-reflection addressing specific strategies, related to the early childhood leadership competencies, to determine if the competencies were addressed directly, indirectly, or not addressed throughout the endorsement program. Finally, two groups of leaders in early childhood, PreK-3rd grade, settings will be asked to complete a self-assessment rating demonstrating how evident specific early childhood leadership practices are in the practices they perform as a school leader.

The data collected will help determine if participation in early childhood endorsement programs can be used to develop early childhood leadership skills of administrators in early childhood settings.

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## Chapter 1: The Problem

### Introduction

While there are many programs to address the quality of teacher practices in the early grades, intentional professional learning opportunities for elementary administrators seeking to increase their leadership skills in early childhood are few to none (Brotherson et al., 2001; Lieber et al., 1997). Because opportunities to increase early childhood leadership skills, through systematic and coherent instructional programming rarely exist for administrators/leaders, school leaders must find or create their own opportunities to build leadership skills specific to early childhood.

Systems to support principals in gaining the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to support the work of the early grades are minimal and found in isolated pockets across the country. Each existing principal support program for early childhood leadership has its own unique goals and mission which may be influenced by the unique funding sources at play. The documented initiatives that focus on principal development as leaders of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade programs serve to enhance the administrators' understanding of aligning the program across grades, collaborating with families, and foundational concepts of child development. However, each program does so in a unique fashion (Hinton, 2017; Leadership Institute Will Focus, 2017).

Other professional development avenues such as administrator preparation programs are not designed to provide learning about early childhood practices (Gulosino & Xu, 2006; Hinton & Samuels, 2017; Leadership Institute Will Focus on

School as Hub for Birth–Grade 3, 2017). According to NicholSEN et al. (2018), several barriers were cited by graduate program faculty that hinder principal preparation programs from including early childhood leadership practices into coursework. These include program faculty that did not have any formal education in early childhood or child development, difficulty in adding another field of knowledge to the current program of study given current program completion requirements, and/or early childhood practices are still widely disconnected from professional standards for educators and academic standards for students (NicholSEN, et. al., 2018).

Leadership in early childhood education is a rapidly growing topic of national interest as more and more educational systems are looking to implement and maintain a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum of learning. Yet, there remain few programs of professional learning for principal preparation programs that address identified competencies. In fact, in 2014 only 50 self-reported programs across the country focused on leadership development specific to early childhood, and most were geared toward childcare center directors (NAESP, 2014).

Regarding principal preparation programs, most lack coursework on how to effectively lead programs of young learners, even when many principals are seeking training in this area. In a recent study by Nicholson et al. (2018) over half of the principals surveyed desired resources and professional learning to increase their knowledge in supervising early childhood classrooms. Even the leading organization for elementary school principals in the United States, the National Association for Elementary School Principals (NAESP) has outlined competencies

for leadership in early childhood programs and yet they do not generally provide suggestions for how these competencies can be met. These are competencies that building leaders should possess to ensure we are increasing outcomes for our youngest learners (Hinton, M., 2017; Kauerz, 2013; Marvin et al., 2003; National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2014).

1. Embrace the paradigm shift of a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade learning continuum
2. Provide developmentally appropriate and differentiated learning environments throughout the school
3. Utilize multiple data points to help teachers guide student learning
4. Build a culture of continuous professional growth and efficacy
5. Create a “school as hub” for families and communities

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (2014) identified these five leadership competencies due to little attention being paid to leadership development in early childhood (NAESP, 2014). These competencies support leadership in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade settings where instructional leaders must vertically and horizontally align standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment to create a continuum of learning in the early grades. When learning experiences in the early grades are not aligned or sustained from grade to grade the benefits tend to fade out after third or fourth grade (Gutman & Ritchie, 2014). This reduces the impact on students as well as the opportunity to close achievement gaps. Guncii & Main (2014) state that “school principals are critical for ensuring that preschool programs are implemented well; without the support of qualified and effective

school leaders, it is far less likely that preschool programs can live up to their potential.”

Leaders are key drivers for change and implementing a PreK-3 approach at a school is certainly considered a significant change with many nuances specific to the early grades. While there is a lot of knowledge in this area for principals of young learners to acquire, there are few opportunities provided to pick up these skills, concepts, and dispositions (Bloss, 2016). Furthermore, existing leadership preparation and recruitment systems create barriers and gaps in knowledge needed to effectively lead systems of early learning. Many preparation programs do not focus on instruction and rarely focus on PreK-3 developmentally appropriate practices. In a study by Shue et al. (2012) approximately 87% of principals surveyed reported that they received no training in early childhood education nor development, but 88% of the same respondents believed that it should be included in principal preparation programs. Of the participants in the study, only nine percent had previous experiences with preschool classrooms prior to becoming an elementary building administrator (Shore et al., 2010).

In theory, once principals have a greater understanding of the foundational concepts of early learning practices, they may have a better chance of being able to put systems and structures in place to provide a cohesive PreK-3 program in schools. This comprehensive PreK-3 program will provide the alignment and continuity of best practices necessary to initiate and sustain academic gains for students as they move from one grade to the next. When best practices are not

carried out across grade levels the impact on achievement lessens and may eventually fade away (Clements, Coburn, Farran, Franke, & Stipek, 2017).

Once again, the primary research suggests that building leaders who aim to create quality PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade learning continuums explore opportunities to develop leadership skills in this area. There are few programs that address such competencies. Nevertheless, access to early childhood endorsement programs, focused on teacher practices, are generally available across the country. These programs generally include graduate-level coursework provided by practitioners who have experience as a teacher in the early grades. Participants are primarily also practitioners in the early grades. Therefore, application to early childhood leadership skills is not intentional, aligned, or clear. However, early childhood endorsement programs are more accessible sources of professional development for leaders across the country. Because these conditions exist it is worth investigating the alignment of participation in an early childhood endorsement program and the development of leadership competencies specific to early childhood to see if these programs intended for early childhood practitioners can be used to develop leadership skills of administrators in early elementary settings.

Given the availability of early childhood endorsement programs for teachers, the goal of this study is to investigate the alignment of such a program with early childhood leadership competencies and the influence of such programs on an elementary school leaders' leadership competencies specific to early childhood leadership. To fully study this concept, the following research questions will be posed.

## Research Questions

What is the alignment between an early childhood endorsement program with early childhood leadership competencies and how does participation in such a program impact the early childhood leadership competencies of school leaders?

1. To what degree are the early childhood leadership competencies identified by the NAESP (2014) reflected in program requirements (i.e. syllabus, utilized textbooks, learning management system resources)?
2. Which of the identified early childhood leadership competencies do school leaders cite as being directly or indirectly addressed throughout the early childhood endorsement program most often (self-reflection survey)?
3. What is the difference between the self-assessment ratings of school leaders who have completed the early childhood endorsement program and those who have not completed such a program when asked how evident the early childhood competencies are in their work with the early grades (survey)?

## Operational Definitions

This section provides operational definitions of terms used in the study.

1. **Early Childhood Leadership Competencies** are the skills necessary to create conditions for age-appropriate standards and practices across the grade span of PreK-3 serves as the foundation of skills needed for a leader

in an early childhood setting (Principals, 2014) The five competencies for this study include:

1. Embrace the paradigm shift of a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade learning continuum
  2. Provide developmentally appropriate and differentiated learning environments throughout the school
  3. Utilize multiple data points to help teachers guide student learning
  4. Build a culture of continuous professional growth and efficacy
  5. Create a “school as hub” for families and communities
2. **Early childhood endorsement program** is defined as a graduate program of study where certified teachers or administrators may earn an endorsement in early childhood education. The endorsement is offered through an accredited university that requires six courses, eighteen credit hours, including a practicum experience in an early childhood setting. The sequence of coursework is paced out over two academic years and includes the following courses taught in sequential order (Omaha Public Schools, 2016):
1. EDU 556-Foundations and Best Practices of Early Childhood Education
  2. EDU 557-Investigating Critical and Contemporary Trends and Issues in Early Childhood Education
  3. EDU 558-Content and Methods Specific to Early Childhood Education
  4. EDU 559-Significant Concepts for Early Childhood Education

5. EDU 560-Assessment, Observation, Screening and Evaluation in Early Childhood Education
  6. EDU 561-Becoming an Early Childhood Teaching Professional
3. **Program Requirements** include objectives and activities determined by the early childhood endorsement program. These requirements identify the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help participants become reflective thinkers that can engage in personal and professional growth as part of the endorsement program (Gelfer et al., 2015). Course syllabi (which outline activities and objectives) and required materials outlined in course syllabi would be considered program requirements.
4. **Self-Assessment Ratings** will be measured through a self-reflection survey provided to a random selection of participants.

### **Conceptual Framework**

According to Shue, Shore, & Lambert (2012) and Jorde & Abel (2015), the rise of early childhood classrooms is one of the fastest-growing educational reforms in our country, and professional development is needed for both teachers and those who lead. Teacher professional development opportunities are reported to be provided at a three to one ratio when compared to those offered to school leaders (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). This lack of learning opportunities for principals is significant as research shows that principals represent approximately 25% of a school's influence on student achievement. This is second only to a teacher's influence (Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Jorde Bloom & Abel, 2015; Shue et al., 2012).

Administrator professional development programs are considered formal opportunities for continuing education that are undertaken while performing current job responsibilities (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). Principals seeking these opportunities are looking for alignment of professional development objectives to their needs as a leader in the early childhood setting. School leaders participating in early childhood endorsement programs may or may not find such alignment in program course requirements. Generally, early childhood endorsement programs are crafted to address the needs of the practicing teacher in the early childhood setting. These programs focus on high-quality instructional and assessment practices that are developmentally appropriate for young learners (Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Omaha Public Schools, 2016). In many cases, teachers completing such programs can expect to be able to do the following (Gelfer et al., 2015; Miron Mordechai & Mevorach, Miriam, n.d.; Omaha Public Schools, 2016):

- Understand basic curriculum models of early childhood education
- Organize successful learning environments that reflect an understanding of child development and academic success
- Utilize positive classroom management strategies focused on cooperative learning
- Plan and carry out interdisciplinary instructional activities
- Communicate and collaborate with a variety of stakeholders invested in the success of the early grades' classroom (parents, support staff, community agencies, school partners)
- Utilize appropriate assessment strategies to inform teaching and learning

- Employ a variety of developmentally appropriate teaching strategies to enhance student learning
- Demonstrate value and commitment to diversity and equity
- Grow as a reflective thinker and practitioner and in one's commitment to professional growth

While these descriptors align with the leadership competencies for early childhood administrators provided by NAESP (2014) it is yet to be determined if there is a direct alignment between the two. The way in which principals cultivate the knowledge learned in an early childhood endorsement program may be distinctly different from that of an early childhood teacher due to unique job responsibilities as well as the context from which the course material is taught. Each of the early childhood leadership competencies incorporates one or more of the endorsement program components above, however, the application for principals is much different.

### **Significance/Purpose of Study**

Federal, state, and district-level early childhood policies will only positively impact student learning if appropriate practices are put into place at the school and classroom level. Oftentimes policymakers introduce bills or policies intended to improve learning environments for children, but these often fall short of the goal. Without funding for professional development and systemic, ongoing support and accountability educators find it difficult to implement practices that address laws and policies crafted by those who often have little knowledge of the

educational system. As a result, many well-intended legislative efforts fail to see the results that policymakers envisioned.

At the core of successful school level implementation is the elementary principal. Elementary principals, as educational leaders, want the schools they lead to be places where children grow to be successful young adults. As administrators, policymakers, and other leaders work together to improve outcomes for young children it seems that many times they are working at cross-purposes, especially when it comes to merging developmentally appropriate practice with standards and accountability. “We are not rowing in the same direction and neither are we assuring that educators in each of these critical roles understand the importance of assuming a leadership stance for children” (Jablon, 2016, p. 1). Principals need intentional support and relevant training so they can help build teachers’ capacity to provide a successful learning environment for young learners (Clements et al., 2017; McCabe & Sipple, 2011).

Most elementary principals lead buildings that include Kindergarten through third-grade students. Nicholson et al. (2018) report that over 60% of elementary principals also supervise programs that have Pre-Kindergarten students. Yet most principal preparation programs lack coursework on how to effectively lead such programs of young learners, even when many principals are seeking training in this area. In a recent study by Nicholson et al. (2018) over half of the principals surveyed desired resources and professional learning to increase their knowledge in supervising early childhood classrooms.

This study holds value because the findings will identify if there is alignment between published early childhood leadership competencies and early childhood endorsement programs. Because teacher professional development programs outnumber those for principals it is worthwhile to study the impact that early childhood endorsement programs have on one's skills as a leader of an early childhood program.

Evidence from the analysis of research question one will help school leaders determine if participation in an early childhood endorsement program will meet the specific needs of an early childhood leader. School administrators will have information identifying the degree to which early childhood leadership competencies are addressed in early childhood endorsement program requirements. This information will help them make informed decisions as to whether this avenue of professional development is one they wish to pursue.

Findings from the second research question can provide additional information to school leaders considering participating in an early childhood endorsement program. Furthermore, school leaders already participating in endorsement programs can proactively supplement their own learning on the competencies not directly addressed with journal articles, podcasts, or by seeking out mentors with strengths in competency areas not addressed. School districts and graduate programs can also utilize the findings to analyze the value of such a program for school leaders. Also, graduate programs can look at the collected data and offer elective classes for the early childhood program, specifically for leaders. The elective classes can address the leadership competencies that were

not found to be directly addressed through this study. School districts can use the information in the same way, offering professional learning opportunities focused on the competencies not directly addressed.

Evidence from the data analysis from research question three can be used to analyze the impact of an early childhood endorsement program on a school leader's early childhood leadership competencies. (One must keep in mind that the data for this question is self-reported.) If a significant difference between the self-assessment ratings of the two groups is found, school districts and graduate programs can do further study into the specific program components that may have impacted the difference. If little to no difference is found, then additional thought can be put into how to provide avenues for early childhood professional learning specific to school leaders.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### History of Prekindergarten – Third Grade Approaches

Policymakers and school districts across the country are calling for a re-examination of best instructional practices in early grades. Over the years America has seen its share of educational achievement and accountability movements including A Nation at Risk, No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and Common Core Standards. These movements were meant to raise expectations for student learning in America, however, only slight increases in achievement have been reported and those increases have not been sustained over time. In fact, students from minority backgrounds fell further behind their non-minority peers and this trend continues today (Gutman & Ritchie, 2014). This achievement gap continues to grow at an alarming rate. The same is true for academic gaps between students coming from high- and low-income families. Today this gap is about 30-40% larger than it was nearly two decades ago (Gutman & Ritchie, 2014). Policymakers and educational institutions are hoping to mitigate these gaps by focusing on high-quality early education programs, including comprehensive alignment structures for preschool through grade three classrooms (McCabe & Sipple, 2011).

In 2001 the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) mandated standards in both reading and mathematics for all public schools across the country. Standardized assessments for all students, beginning in grade three, were also required. To prepare students for increased rigor and standardized testing that were included in the legislation knowledge, skills, and teaching practices from upper grades

began trickling down into the primary grades. McCabe and Sipple (2011) refer to this as the “accountability shove down”. Many school systems responded to the accountability movement by placing increased pressure on principals and teachers in the primary grades to place greater emphasis on reading and mathematical skills, which led to neglecting instruction in the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of students. McKay Wilson (2009) report several concerns that became evident in primary classrooms:

- primary teachers were limiting the reading and math skills taught to a narrow subset of only what was needed to prepare students for standardized tests in intermediate grades,
- recess and physical education classes were limited or eliminated to provide more time for instruction,
- instruction was based on rigid and scripted curriculum intended to ensure a guaranteed and viable curriculum for all students, and
- state and district academic benchmarks for primary students became unrealistic such as expecting all kindergarten or first-grade students to be fluent readers by the end of the school year.

Instruction in early grades classrooms, as well as intermediate and secondary classrooms, has indeed changed, yet the achievement gap remains. Other educational reforms such as the Race to the Top and Every Student Succeeds Act have been introduced, yet a solution to improving educational outcomes for all students, especially America’s most vulnerable populations, has yet to be introduced. Research in early education has shown significant potential for

addressing and closing the achievement gap through the implementation of high-quality educational programs in the early grades (Gutman & Ritchie, 2014; McKay Wilson, 2009). It is for this very reason that the focus on early grades is gaining momentum across the country. Prominent early childhood organizations are speaking out on the issue to inform and educate policymakers and school systems. The National Association for the Education of Young Children released a position statement in 2009 reinforcing the need for developmentally appropriate practices in preschool through third grades (McKay Wilson, 2009). Developmentally appropriate practices are described as practices that take the developmental needs of children into account (Enemuo & Obidike, 2013). This statement outlines twelve important principles of child development that preschool through third-grade teachers should implement into daily instruction. These principles address the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive needs of children in this age range. Both the Alliance for Childhood and the American Academy of Pediatrics also released statements indicating that too much time has been spent on isolated reading, writing, and mathematics skills which is not appropriate for students at this age; more time spent on play, self-discovery, and child-initiated activities is crucial to creating a developmentally appropriate classroom where students can thrive and learn best (McKay Wilson, 2009).

### **Impact on the Achievement Gap**

Data from the Chicago Child-Parent Centers showed that minority and low-income students who participated in a comprehensive PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade approach program enrolled at age 3 and stayed in the aligned program until the end of

third-grade outperformed peers on achievement tests in grade three, and then also in grade seven. These students also had fewer grade retentions, fewer special education placements, and higher graduation and employment rates (Kauerz, 2013; Gutmann & Ritchie, 2014). This study helped show that high-quality educational experiences in the early years can yield the highest rate of return and are essential to closing the achievement gap. Inversely, low-quality educational experiences contributed to poor developmental outcomes, and in some cases were harmful to children (Garrity et al., 2013).

Gutman and Ritchie (2014) and Duncan and Sojourner (2013) also describe several studies that show additional benefits of high-quality early education programs. Lower dropout rates, lower crime rates, increased achievement, and higher employment rates were reported as long-term results of the High Scope Perry Preschool project in 2005, a project that provided two years of preschool and a comprehensive transition to kindergarten to families of minority and low-income students. In addition, the Infant and Health Development Program did an analysis of the impact of a two-year early childhood center program, and the study found that achievement gaps based on income were substantially reduced, and in some cases eliminated, by age 5. The researchers in this study predict that by age eight if students continue to receive high-quality instruction focused on developmentally appropriate practices that one-third to three-fourths of the income-based achievement gaps would be eliminated (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013).

## **Opposing Philosophies**

Developmentally appropriate practice emphasizes the need to understand children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical needs, as well as a child's family and cultural background, whereas educational policy continues to push the agenda of academic readiness as a key component of early grades instruction (Kroll, 2013). Because of the evidence regarding PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade structures, more and more educators and policymakers are looking at how to maximize the learning experiences of young students to improve achievement and close the achievement gap. These efforts to increase student learning while also decreasing the achievement gap have led to two distinct and opposing philosophies in early grades instruction.

For almost twenty-five years early childhood educators planned instruction based upon a developmentally appropriate set of principles (McCabe & Sipple, 2011). Child-centered principles based on students' cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development influenced all elements of instructional activities and classroom environment. Primary teachers, especially preschool through first grade, focused on creating caring communities of learners, enhancing student development, planning activities based on individual learning and developmental goals and establishing relationships with families whereas the standards movement is considered an opposing philosophy as the practices that guide teachers are standards-based and focus on learning and accountability rather than child development. The standards-movement is based on the philosophy that all students are to learn a common set of skills and concepts at each age and grade

level regardless of developmental readiness. Learning experiences are based on the common set of knowledge and skills required at each level and assessed in ways that can be quantitatively reported to a system of accountability (McCabe & Sipple, 2011).

“This *misalignment* has forced teachers to choose between standards and assessment, whereas *alignment* makes a teacher’s job aligning instruction to standards and assessments easier,” (Clements et al., 2017, p.12). Educators and policymakers have begun looking at both philosophies to determine how to effectively merge the two to meet both the accountability requirements and produce students whose developmental needs have been adequately addressed. Seeing the need to incorporate both philosophies in the classrooms and align structures across the early grades, policymakers and educators are calling for schools to bring back developmentally appropriate practices into classrooms currently built on standards-based systems of accountability. This has caused a groundswell of educational leaders seeking to incorporate comprehensive PreK-3<sup>rd</sup>-grade structures into their schools and districts. It has also raised the key question of how to educate early grades teachers and principals in the key components of developmentally appropriate practice and PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade approaches because many of them have only been trained in providing an isolated standards-based education built around accountability requirements (McCabe & Sipple, 2011).

In response to the groundswell policymakers, researchers, and practitioners have begun to examine the supports and training that elementary school

administrators are receiving to prepare them for developing high-quality instruction in the early grades (Garrity et al., 2013).

### **Elementary School Leader Needs and Development**

Just as the importance of developmentally appropriate practice in a Preschool through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade approach is gaining momentum, so is the idea of the central role of the principal in increasing teacher effectiveness and student achievement in buildings. According to Shue, Shore, and Lambert (2012) the rise of early childhood is seemingly one of the fastest-growing educational reforms in our country, and while teachers are undoubtedly the number one factor in impacting student achievement school administrators also impact children's development by structuring the conditions to support teacher effectiveness (Jorde Bloom & Abel, 2015).

Principals are responsible for setting the tone of the building, which includes building a culture of warmth, care, high expectations, coaching teachers, managing people and students, analyzing data, and incorporating processes to improve the school. Jorde Bloom and Abel (2015) as well as Shue et al. (2012) also state that principals significantly impact student achievement by influencing school context including crafting school goals, policies, and practices.

Within these expectations falls the responsibility of supporting teachers in providing a developmentally appropriate classroom environment for students in all grades. And while a slowly growing number of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers have early childhood degrees many still do not, especially in grades K-3 which means that the administrator must be the one providing job-embedded professional learning

where teachers can learn how to implement developmentally appropriate practices into classroom instruction (Bornfreund, 2012). In the case where PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers do have early childhood certificates, the instructional practices, they exhibit may be very different than what the typical elementary principal may be expecting (Shore et al., 2010). Many elementary principals were former classroom teachers with an elementary education degree, but do not yet understand the need for having early grade classrooms that are developmentally appropriate. In most cases, principals are simply unaware that the instructional practices being pushed down into primary grades are not ones suited to meet the needs of their youngest students. Unfortunately, many times it is the principal who is encouraging and influencing teachers in the early grades to incorporate instructional practices that do not yield increased learning for young students. For some principals, this is due to the pressure to increase standardized test scores received from the district administration and community members (Bloss, 2016; Hinton, 2017; Jablon, 2016; Kauerz, 2016; Jorde Bloom & Abel, 2015; Göncü, Main, Perone, & Tozer, 2014).

Structured learning opportunities for principals to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively implement and manage a continuum of Prekindergarten through third-grade experiences for students are relatively scarce (Gulosino, C. & Xu, Z., 2006; Muijs et al., 2004). Leadership preparation programs, designed to prepare leaders for administrative roles in school buildings, do not generally provide professional development or learning opportunities for emerging leaders to learn about leading in an early childhood setting (Buffet Early Childhood Institute, 2017; Hinton, M., 2017).

## **Defining Early Childhood Leadership Competencies**

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (2014) identifies five leadership competencies that administrators need to effectively lead a comprehensive PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade program in an elementary school.

### ***Embrace the Paradigm Shift of a PreK-3rd Grade Learning Continuum***

A strong foundation in the early grades paves the way for future academic success. High performing principals define the PreK-3 continuum in their building as a seamless learning experience that minimizes boundaries and mitigates severe changes in instructional approaches for students PreK through third grade (NAESP, 2014). Kauerz (2013) describes PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade (or P-3 as written by the author) as a comprehensive approach with the core elements of a high-quality preschool program hosting three and four-year-old students, full-day kindergarten, and grades one through three. Each of these grades is vertically aligned and provides meaningful, developmentally appropriate instruction and supports students' emotional needs through nurturing and stable relationships. Instruction that is developmental in nature balances the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children and provides learning experiences that are standards-based and language-rich, but still child-friendly and relevant to student needs and interests. To provide this type of learning environment across the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum teachers regularly collaborate both horizontally and vertically sharing data and aligning assessments and instruction across grade levels. Meaningful family and community partnerships are prioritized and smooth transitions between grade levels are created to ensure students continue to achieve and make

significant learning gains as they move from grade to grade (Kauerz, 2013; Neugebauer, 2015; Oertwig & Ritchie, 2013).

Principals also set the expectation, and hold teachers accountable, for providing instruction that is developmentally appropriate and relevant for the students in the early grades. Expectations around collaboration with families and other internal and external stakeholders are also communicated and maintained. Leaders understand the long-term value and expected outcomes of early childhood programs, and they communicate the importance and benefits of early learning to stakeholders as well. Building resources are also directed toward and aligned to support the early learning framework (NAESP, 2014).

Principals support teachers in delivering developmentally appropriate teaching by providing space, time, and leadership in teacher collaboration, horizontally and vertically, aimed at aligning standards, curriculum, instruction, and age-appropriate assessments to create and maintain a consistent learning framework, ages three to eight. Leaders hold teachers accountable for providing instruction in this manner and assure opportunities for job-embedded professional learning are available to help sustain the learning framework across grades. One way of doing this is through the incorporation of professional communities of practices where the focus is on teachers learning from, and sharing with, one another. The alignment of instructional practices across grade levels through vertical teams provides seamless transitions from grade to grade (Carr et al., 2009). Principals also provide consistent and systematic coaching to teachers to reinforce desired

developmentally appropriate teaching as defined within the learning framework (NAESP, 2014).

***Provide Developmentally Appropriate and Differentiated Learning Environments Throughout the School***

What makes the instructional techniques and strategies utilized in Prekindergarten through third-grade classrooms unique to the early grades are how they are incorporated with the knowledge of the young learner in mind. One of the most significant ways that principals support early grades teachers is by emphasizing and helping to coordinate the alignment of standards, instruction, and assessment throughout the Prekindergarten through third grades (Oertwig & Ritchie, 2013). By engaging teachers in this work, principals are helping to ensure that students enter each subsequent grade with the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful, as well as reducing repetition in content and subject matter. Such alignment should be on a sequential and coherent curriculum that is built on mastery. While the same type of aligned curriculum should be in place in the older grades there is an additional component of developmentally appropriate instruction that must be incorporated in a high-quality curriculum for students ages three through eight. Understanding how to help teachers engage in this work requires that principals comprehend how young students learn coupled with knowledge of the content that they are expected to grasp. When a curriculum is aligned across the early grades, and individual student needs are addressed, gains in learning are more likely to be sustained (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2014).

Not only must leaders support teachers in aligning curriculum and instruction, they also ensure assessments that are incorporated appropriately assess student learning in a developmentally appropriate, yet rigorous and relevant manner. These assessment results are then used to facilitate conversations with teachers centered around student learning and appropriate instruction. Principals must be prepared to lead such discussion and provide professional learning for teachers that addresses student outcomes and teacher instruction that will enhance learning. This requires an understanding of what instructional strategies work best in the early grades to produce conversations that yield a positive effect on student achievement (Göncü et al., 2014; Oertwig & Ritchie, 2013).

While all of the curriculum areas are vital to the success of young learners a special emphasis is placed on foundational skills in math and reading (Ritchie & Gutmann, 2014). Young learners pick up early literacy and numeracy skills through instructional techniques that many principals discourage in classrooms, such as play and student choice activities, however, these instructional methods have shown to have a greater impact on student learning in the early grade as opposed to traditional techniques which may include lengthy teacher demonstrations and worksheets (McCabe & Sipple, 2011).

In addition, principals also commented on managerial tasks related to early learning environments that were unfamiliar to them as elementary principals. Some of these tasks included provisions for specific classroom fixtures, meal guidelines,

playground equipment, and building facilities and preschool regulations regarding student to adult ratios (Shore et al., 2010).

As administrators learn more about child development and program alignment, they will begin to understand the role that the school environment plays in learning for young children. Understanding how the environment can be a silent partner in improving outcomes for students is imperative for administrators working with primary teachers. Unfortunately, many school leaders do not see the power that the environment can have on its early grade learners and desire a traditional classroom setup that is meant primarily for teacher-directed, whole-class activities. When thoughtfully planned the classroom and school environment can serve as a teacher itself. The materials and spaces young learners experience can provide a voice that speaks to children and provide ideas and creativity. Spaces for hands-on learning, child-initiated play experiences, physical movement, social learning, and reflection are key for supporting our students in the early grades. Leaders need to have a vision for how early grades teachers can maximize their classroom environment to support developmentally informed practices, and then support teachers in turning the vision into a reality (Alloway & Rigolon, 2011).

### ***Utilize Multiple Data Points to Help Teachers Guide Student Learning***

Effective use of data is a key component of any continuous improvement cycle (Bernhardt, V, 2017). High-quality principals understand that the goal of assessment is to improve outcomes related to teaching and learning (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2014). For teachers in the early grades understanding the nature of how to administer and interpret assessment

results can be complicated. In the older grades, many assessments are in the form of a paper-pencil or computer-generated tests that can be easily scored. In early childhood, assessments of quality are individualized observations of student learning and behavior throughout the day. Knowing how and what data to collect during these observations can be cumbersome and confusing for teachers. Therefore, leaders need to be able to help teachers implement streamlined procedures for data collection, as well as assist them in understanding how to interpret multiple data points to inform instruction (Neugebauer, 2015).

An understanding of the principles of assessment for young learners will help leaders support teachers with using data for instruction (Neugebauer, 2015). In addition to providing support to teachers, principals also support parents, district leaders, and other community stakeholders in using information from these individualized, and often qualitative, forms of data such as portfolios, observations, and anecdotal notes to support student growth and instructional programming (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2014).

### ***Build a Culture of Continuous Professional Growth and Efficacy***

Another key condition for continuous improvement in schools is sustaining a culture of professional growth and efficacy (Bernhardt, V, 2017). Effective early grades' principals understand how to implement such a culture across the entire school while attuning to the unique features of instruction and academics for young learners. Such learning environments support the growth of all staff members, including the principal (Bloss, J, 2016; Hinton, M., 2017). This can take creative thinking, especially if faced with decreasing budgets, teacher shortages, and

minimal resources to support learning (Ang, 2012; Marvin et al., 2003). Leaders can encourage an environment focused on collaborative inquiry and job-embedded professional learning. This increases efficacy by “fostering and sustaining a culture of collaborative inquiry, which includes valuable teacher expertise and professionalism; the provision of relevant best practice research; and support for teacher-initiated changes supported by research, data, and experience,” (Oertwig & Ritchie, 2013).

An initial step leaders can take to build the professional knowledge of early grades teachers is to enhance their understanding of appropriate practices for young learners (Bloss, J, 2016; Clements, D et al., 2017; Kauerz, 2013; National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2014). In doing so administrators can plan and provide appropriate professional development that is ongoing, current, and relevant (Neugebauer, 2015). Oertwig and Ritchie (2013) state that principals should seek to create an environment where everyone is a learner, duplicating the experiences of students where ongoing learning is a non-negotiable experience.

### ***Create a “School As Hub” for Families and Communities***

Principals working with early grades work to build a “school as hub” by creating a welcoming environment where families feel a sense of belonging and are engaged in their child’s learning authentically, both in and outside of the classroom. These schools serve as the “hub” for families and the surrounding community where academic, social, and emotional needs of students and stakeholders can be addressed. This model replaces the traditional parent-teacher engagement model seen in many schools and reduces the burden placed

on teachers to single-handedly address the many needs of their students (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2014). Jorde and Bloom (2015) and Neugebauer (2015) identify several elements of this model, now a family-school-community partnership, that principals can incorporate in an early elementary setting:

- communication that is individualized and focuses on sharing data with families through school and home visits
- representation and valuing of family structures in instruction and learning environments
- decision making that involves children's learning or developmental growth is done in conjunction with the family ensuring families understand the implications and benefits of choices presented for their child
- barriers such as transportation and language are identified and addressed as needed

Engaging families at an early age leads to connections between school and home that increase student outcomes and impact learning from the start. By incorporating these elements principals are addressing key areas of school readiness and redefining what readiness means – effective principals understand that school readiness does not fall solely on a child's academic knowledge or ability, but on family and school readiness as well (Bloss, J, 2016; Gulosino, C. & Xu, Z., 2006). Meeting the needs of the whole family is not an easy task, but as a leader in an early childhood setting being ready to address these various needs is critical (Clements, D et al., 2017; McKay Wilson, D, 2009).

Once principals have a greater understanding of the foundational concepts of early learning and developmentally appropriate practice, they will be able to put systems and structures in place to provide a cohesive P-3 program in their schools. This comprehensive P-3 program will provide the alignment and continuity of best practices necessary to initiate and sustain academic gains for students as they move from one grade to the next. When best practices are not carried out across grade levels the impact on achievement lessens and may eventually fade away (Clements et al., 2017; McKay Wilson, 2009).

### **Defining Early Childhood Endorsement Programs and Program Requirements**

The National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators (2009) states that those working with students, eight years old or younger, cannot be of high quality without specialized early childhood preparation. Programs for early childhood certification were initially created by states across the country to ensure adequate teacher preparation for those working with young learners. In most states, an endorsement in early childhood education gives an individual the ability to engage in a specific teaching role. The endorsement, once complete, adds to, or limits, the specific student group(s) of which an individual is authorized to instruct (“National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators (NAECTE) Position Statement on Early Childhood Certification for Teachers of Children 8 Years Old and Younger in Public School Settings,” 2009).

Endorsement programs usually require about eighteen hours of coursework centered on early childhood education topics such as foundational concepts,

issues and trends, instructional methods and content, significant concepts, assessment practices, and professionalism, etc. (Gelfer et al., 2015; Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Miron Mordechai & Mevorach, Miriam, n.d.; Omaha Public Schools, 2016).

### **Early Childhood Endorsement Program Goals and Early Childhood Leadership Competencies**

There are parallels between the early childhood leadership competencies and early childhood endorsement program goals, both listed earlier as well as below in Figure 1. These parallels are discussed in this section.

<b>Early Childhood Leadership Competencies</b> (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2014)	<b>Early Childhood Endorsement Program Goals</b> (Gelfer et al., 2015; Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Miron Mordechai & Mevorach, Miriam, n.d.; Omaha Public Schools, 2016)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Embrace the paradigm shift of a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade learning continuum</li> <li>2. Provide developmentally appropriate and differentiated learning environments throughout the school</li> <li>3. Utilize multiple data points to help teachers guide student learning</li> <li>4. Build a culture of continuous professional growth and efficacy</li> <li>5. Create a “school as hub” for families and communities</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Understand basic curriculum models of early childhood education</li> <li>2. Organize successful learning environments that reflect an understanding of child development and academic success</li> <li>3. Utilize positive classroom management strategies focused on cooperative learning</li> <li>4. Plan and carry out interdisciplinary instructional activities</li> <li>5. Communicate and collaborate with a variety of stakeholders invested in the success of the early grades’ classroom (parents, support staff, community agencies, school partners)</li> <li>6. Utilize appropriate assessment strategies to inform teaching and learning</li> <li>7. Employ a variety of developmentally appropriate teaching strategies to enhance student learning</li> <li>8. Demonstrate value and commitment to diversity and equity</li> <li>9. Grow as a reflective thinker and practitioner and in one’s commitment to professional growth</li> </ol>

**Figure 1** *Competencies and Program Goals*

The first early childhood leadership competency, embrace the paradigm shift of a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade learning continuum, is the foundation for creating a system of

seamless learning experiences that minimize boundaries and mitigate severe changes in instructional approaches for students as they progress from PreK to grade three (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2014). In successful early childhood settings that have incorporated the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum, principals have been key to success. Principals set the tone and priorities for the building, are key players in providing support and professional learning for teachers, and build relationships with community partners. Principals help provide the balance that teachers need to provide developmentally appropriate instruction that is also standards-based and meets specific academic expectations. To be effective in doing this principal leadership skills, specific to early childhood, need to be cultivated and supported so that the principal span of influence can positively impact the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade classrooms in their building (Kauerz, 2013; Neugebauer, 2015; Oertwig & Ritchie, 2013). The knowledge principals would need to support an aligned PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum is incorporated in the nine early childhood endorsement program components listed above, but the application to the principal role may not be clear.

The second early childhood leadership competency is the ability to provide developmentally appropriate and differentiated learning environments throughout the school. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (2014) defines the most supportive and effective learning environments as those that are safe, nurturing, welcoming, and developmentally appropriate. In such an environment the students are treated as individuals within a community. Each student comes with a set of individual needs, skills, and interests that teachers

learn about as they seek to help students work at their own pace, even understanding that students may learn and master skills at different rates. Oertwig and Ritchie (2013) emphasize the need for teachers to personalize learning for individual students by providing opportunities for students to select the location for their learning, materials, the context in which they will learn it, and even the product that they work to complete. Supporting this type of learning environment requires principals to understand the instructional practices appropriate for young learners, as well as a knowledge of instructional techniques and learning tools they can help teachers incorporate to maximize student learning in the early grades. Providing such environments demands that principals understand basic curriculum models of early childhood education, as well as how to organize successful learning environments that reflect an understanding of child development. Both demands are program components found in early childhood endorsement programs. Other endorsement program components, necessary to support these types of environments, include utilizing positive classroom management strategies focused on cooperative learning and employing a variety of developmentally appropriate teaching strategies. Understanding these components of early childhood will help administrators support, coach, and effectively evaluate teachers in the early grades (Kindall et al., 2018).

The ability to utilize multiple data points to help teachers guide student learning (competency 3) is central to the continuous improvement of any program. Principals need to have a working knowledge of the principles of assessment for young learners so that they support teachers and lead discussions focused on

monitoring learning and adjusting instruction (Neugebauer, 2015). This competency is directly related to one of the early childhood endorsement program components which focuses on utilizing appropriate assessment strategies to inform teaching and learning. Assessment in early childhood grades needs to be flexible and varied. Information used to monitor the learning of young students is not always easily captured. Computer-based, multiple-choice, or whole group testing situations are not developmentally appropriate and will not yield accurate information for early learners (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2014; Neugebauer, 2015). Administrators must be ready to support teachers, parents, and community stakeholders in using multiple forms of assessment including observations, portfolios, and anecdotal records to guide student learning and growth (NAESP, 2014). In addition to having a working knowledge of how to administer assessments and analyze data at the early grades, administrators also need to know how to collect information and analyze data on the effectiveness of the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade learning continuum in the building (NAESP, 2014). This involves collecting information across grade levels and looking for patterns that identify areas of strength and opportunities for growth (Kindall et al., 2018).

Building and maintaining a culture of professional growth and efficacy is a key competency that all building leaders work towards on an ongoing basis. The building of this culture is equally important across the early grades. Participation in an early childhood endorsement program may help a school leader grow in their own identity as a reflective thinker and as a professional learner, especially

when considering the unique needs of the early childhood teacher. At times principals, not knowing how to include early childhood teachers in the culture and team of the school, unintentionally exclude the early childhood team from the continuous professional growth opportunities provided to other teaching staff. To avoid this common pitfall, principals of early childhood programs strive to craft a culture of continuous improvement that includes all teachers, spanning all grade levels, including early childhood. Collaborative working environments support the growth of the entire school staff, including the principal. Even within schools and districts facing significant budget cuts and resource restrictions, principals need to be flexible thinkers who identify ways to provide job-embedded professional learning for all staff that increases efficacy and effectiveness (Kindall et al., 2018; National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2014). The increase of efficacy is brought upon by “fostering and sustaining a culture of collaborative inquiry, which includes valuing teacher expertise and professionalism; the provision of relevant best practice research; and support for teacher-initiated changes supported by research, data, and experience,” (Oertwig & Ritchie, 2013).

The final competency identified by NAESP (2014) as a critical component for high-quality leadership in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade settings is the ability to create a school that serves as a center or “hub” for families and the community where academic, emotional, social and emotional needs of school stakeholders can be identified and addressed. Leaders work to replace the traditional parent-teacher engagement model of one-way communication focused on academics and behavior, with a community-school model that helps reduce the burden on

teachers by partnering with communities to address student and family needs holistically (Haslip & Gullo, 2018). Creating meaningful relationships with community partners who can identify and address family needs can help support a school's and family's readiness to support the learning of all children. Principals work together with healthcare providers, social services, and other community agencies to utilize the school to provide services that can help to ensure that families see school as the place where all go to learn, grow, and receive supports to make lives better (Neugebauer, 2015). Communicating and collaborating with community partners is a key component of early childhood endorsement programs and leaders could grow their knowledge in this area through an early childhood endorsement program. They could also increase their understanding and commitment to diversity and equity through their work with stakeholders.

### **Contemporary Findings**

While there is literature sharing the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary for leaders of primary programs there is little research sharing systemic professional learning opportunities for principals to advance their capacity in this area (Muijs et al., 2004). Federal, state, and district-level policies focused on educational opportunities for three to eight-year-olds will only positively impact student learning if appropriate practices are put into place at the building level. Oftentimes policymakers introduce bills or policies intended to improve learning environments for children, but these often fall short of the goal. Without funding for professional development and systemic, ongoing support, and accountability, educators find it difficult to implement practices that address laws and policies

crafted by those who often have little knowledge of the educational system. As a result, many well-intended legislative efforts fail to see the results that policymakers envisioned.

There are a few initiatives that are aiming to focus on principal development as leaders of P-3 programs in elementary schools. These programs focus on the role of the principal in aligning the PreK-third grade program, collaborating with families, and foundational concepts of child development (Hinton & Samuels, 2017; Leadership Institute Will Focus on School as Hub for Birth- Grade 3, 2017).

### ***Current Professional Learning Programs Addressing Early Childhood Leadership***

In Ontario, the Ontario Ministry of Education implemented the Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten program which focuses on providing a full-day of kindergarten with a play-based approach to instruction. As part of the implementation, each school was to create an Early Years Team to oversee teacher collaboration and program delivery. The principal was required to be a member of this team as it was a significant component of program implementation. As the supervisor and team member, the principal's role was to guide the early childhood teachers and team in building and maintaining a vision and philosophy to guide the instruction taking place in the early grades. Through this process, the Ministry quickly noticed that the principals did not have the depth of knowledge base necessary to provide effective leadership and direction to the team. Although Ontario had worked to incorporate the principal into the crafting of an effective early year's program, they, too, had noticed a lack in the principal's understanding of the

role of Early Childhood. The principals also identified themselves as leaders who were learners in this process, as their understanding of the early childhood program was ongoing. The district worked to identify leadership qualities necessary to lead an early childhood program and the study concluded with recommendations for how to provide professional development geared toward increasing the evidence of such qualities in principals (Shahbazi & Salinitri, 2016).

This example from Ontario provides context as to why it is important to provide professional development to building leaders who are working to develop early childhood programs that have positive and significant impacts on children and families. Mandates from policymakers and district leaders help increase levels of implementation but do not always increase levels of effectiveness. And, while literature shares the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary for leaders of primary programs, there is little research sharing systemic professional learning opportunities for principals to advance their capacity in this area. Few documented initiatives are aiming to focus on principal development as leaders of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade programs in elementary schools. The identified programs focus on the role of the principal in aligning the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade program, collaborating with families, and foundational concepts of child development (Hinton, 2017; Leadership Institute Will Focus, 2017).

The Alabama Pre-K-through-3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Integrated Approach to Early Learning is a pilot program where eight different schools, in five different Alabama counties, are working with the Alabama Pre-K-3 Leadership Academy to support leaders in schools that are trying to implement a comprehensive early grades

approach. This initiative is unique in that teachers and administrators are working together to align standards, assessments, professional development, and instructional practices across grade levels to enhance and align instruction for early learners. The program also stands out because it is the first in the nation to provide this pilot program for school leaders. The goal is to provide a seamless learning continuum from Pre-K to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Administrators participating in the leadership academy also have access to professional learning designed to teach them about child development and how young children learn (Hinton, 2017).

Omaha, Nebraska is home to another unique initiative aimed at improving outcomes for early learners, which includes a component of leadership development. The Buffett Early Childhood Institute works with 12 schools throughout several metropolitan Omaha school districts to implement a Birth-age Eight School as Hub approach. In this approach, schools provide a comprehensive and aligned program geared toward serving PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade students, as well as young children in the neighborhood community as young as infancy. Principals at the schools involved attend regular meetings with one another to discuss progress, concerns, and problem-solving. Professional development on child development and pedagogy is also offered three-four times a year. While this professional development is focused on practical strategies to incorporate into the classroom, principals gain knowledge and information on high impact strategies that they can support teachers in implementing. A leadership institute is also offered over the summer, and in 2017 over 120 Omaha area leaders attended the conference. Principals had the opportunity to present to one

another on things that were successful in their individual buildings' implementation of the School as Hub approach, and leaders from another state who had implemented successful PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade initiatives provided keynote sessions (Leadership Institute Will Focus on School as Hub for Birth - Grade 3, 2017).

While there are pockets of programs across the country aimed at increasing administrators' knowledge in creating a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum in elementary schools these exist in isolation, each program with its own goals and mission (Muijs et al., 2004).

### ***Are Principal Preparation Programs Addressing These Needs?***

According to Shue et al. (2012), programs that prepare leaders for principalship vary widely across the country, with few common requirements for obtaining licensure to become an elementary principal. In fact, in some states, there are no distinctions between the program necessary to become an elementary or a secondary principal. There are national standards and competencies that many programs recognize and utilize. There is also a principal licensure exam that is widely used. However, variability still remains in course requirements, and there is still a lack of knowledge about how leadership in early childhood settings is addressed in principal preparation programs (Shue et al., 2012). Principal candidates must be provided theoretical knowledge and practical application in preparation programs to be active participants and visible leaders in the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade setting.

Göncü et al.'s (2014) study discusses the passing of a 2006 legislation in Illinois that included a requirement that school leaders be certified Pre-

Kindergarten through grade 12. As an unfunded mandate, the legislation did not address how institutions should incorporate this. Other states also require that principal certificates include Pre-Kindergarten, but few intentionally address early childhood leadership specifically. Reasons for this could include a lack of faculty that have training in this area, the relatively recent rise of the paradigm shift, or lack of funding to revise course requirements. Also, there is still a significant gap in the literature that describes specific recommendations on what school leaders need to know and who is responsible for educating them in early education. Few peer-reviewed sources are available to provide information to principal preparation programs on what to incorporate and the best methods in how to do so. The National Association for Elementary School Principals provides the five competencies discussed in the Summary of Findings and extensive information on what each looks like in a school setting, but other resources such as this one are few (NAESP, 2014).

According to Nicholson et al. (2018), several barriers were cited by graduate program faculty in a recent study that hinders principal preparation programs from including early childhood leadership practices into their coursework. Most of the program faculty, in this study, did not have any formal education or training in early childhood practices or child development. Other barriers included the challenge of adding another field of knowledge to the current program of study. Given the present requirement for program completion; many states do not include early childhood education leadership concepts in credential requirements. This leaves principal preparation programs to determine whether they should include such

coursework. In addition, early childhood practices are still widely disconnected from professional standards for educators and academic standards for students (Nicholson et al., 2018).

## **Conclusion**

Kauerz (2013) writes that it becomes more difficult to close achievement gaps in populations of older children. It also becomes more expensive and taxing on the educational system. By improving the quality and effectiveness of PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade educational settings, through increasing the leadership capacity of elementary principals, an impact on the school, classroom, and teacher quality can be observed thus mitigating gaps early and improving outcomes for students. When principals comprehend the impact of highly effective early childhood programs they can leverage that knowledge to make key decisions affecting personnel, resources, and systems to maintain an exemplary program of early childhood in their school setting (Göncü et al., 2014). Principals are responsible for setting the tone, environment, and maintaining the culture and instructional integrity of the school. Understanding the qualities of an effective PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade program and the development of young children will impact how teachers are provided professional learning on curriculum, instruction, and assessment, setting expectations for adult-child interaction and the philosophy, mission, and vision of the school (Kauerz, 2013).

Although the field of early childhood continues to grow at an alarming rate .due to the demands and external shaping of policymakers and families, it is still a field that lacks clarity regarding purpose, funding, and boundaries (Jorde Bloom &

Abel, 2015). By providing principals the necessary tools and skills needed to serve as leaders and advocates for early childhood, our systems of education can embrace our youngest learners and provide high-quality learning opportunities to increase the chances of life-long success for the learner and their families.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the alignment of completion of an early childhood endorsement program with the development of leadership competencies specific to early childhood (grades PreK-3). This study will include the analysis of data in response to three research sub-questions. A document analysis will be completed to identify the levels of alignment between early childhood endorsement course content and early childhood leadership competencies. In addition, endorsement program participants will be asked to complete a self-reflection addressing specific strategies, related to the early childhood leadership competencies, to determine if the competencies were addressed directly, indirectly, or not addressed throughout the endorsement program. Finally, two groups of leaders in early childhood, PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade, settings will be asked to complete a self-assessment rating how evident specific early childhood leadership practices are in the practices they perform as a school leader.

The data collected will help determine if participation in early childhood endorsement programs can be used to develop early childhood leadership skills of administrators in early childhood settings. This chapter describes the research design, the research questions, and the data analysis used in the completion of this mixed analysis research study.

## **Subjects**

All study participants are current employees of a metropolitan Omaha school district and serve in a leadership role for early childhood classrooms, specifically grades Prekindergarten through three. The goal of this study is to have about forty – sixty subjects participating in the study.

## **Instrumentation**

Each research question will be studied using data gained from specific sample groups or course materials.

A Delphi Technique will be used to provide feedback and validate instruments that will be used for the document analysis as part of Research Question One, as well as for the Indicators of Alignment Rubric to be used for Research Sub-Questions Two and the two self-reflection instruments for sub-questions two and three. A group of four-six practitioners who serve as leaders in early childhood settings will be engaged in an online platform to exchange views and give independent feedback. These group members will include representation from leaders at both the school and district levels, all of whom have an endorsement in early childhood education. The researcher will serve as the facilitator. The facilitator will introduce the project, provide directions for the group members, review the data, and make revisions until the group reaches consensus. There will be four-six members in the Delphi technique group.

The researcher will provide, to each group member, a short video introducing the study, its purpose, and academic and social merit. Members will be provided and asked to review, literature briefly describing the early

childhood leadership competencies provided by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2014). This initial communication will also include written and oral (video) directions for the Keyword and Rubric reviews described below.

### ***Keyword Review***

Prior to initiating communication with the members of the Delphi technique group the researcher will identify key words and/or phrases that will be used for the document analysis in Research Sub-Question One. The key words or phrases will be determined by utilizing a free web-based keyword extractor. Text sections from *Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities Executive Summary* (NAESP, 2014) and *Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities Full Report* (NAESP, 2014) will be entered into the keyword extractor. Each text section will be comprised of the summary provided for each individual early childhood leadership competency. The resulting keywords for each individual competency will be recorded and compared to the resulting keywords for the other competencies so that keywords/phrases are not duplicated. The researcher may eliminate words that may not directly align with the meaning of the competency, but rather are general terms that may appear in the literature (ex. student, teacher, learning). The researcher may also combine keywords into phrases that provide greater alignment with the competency. No more than five key words or phrases will be identified for each competency.

The keywords selected for each competency will be compiled and organized by competency and sent to the group for review and feedback. The following question will be posed:

1. Which of the provided keywords/phrases align with the description of each competency as described in the provided resource, *Leading Pre-K-3 Learning Communities Executive Summary* (NAESP, 2014)?

Group members will not see one another's individual responses. The researcher will summarize feedback and revise the keywords/phrases. The summary of responses and the revised keywords will be sent to the group. The group will be asked to review the summary of responses and the revised keywords. The same question posed the first time will be posed a second time and responses will be collected by the researcher. The researcher will summarize the feedback and revise the rubric keywords. Additional rounds of seeking input from the Delphi group will take place, and a final list of keywords will be presented once consensus is reached.

### ***Rubric Review***

Another step the researcher will take, prior to the communicating with the Delphi group, will be to create a draft of the indicators of alignment rubric. This rubric is intended to provide additional support for Research Sub-Question Two survey respondents, as they determine the degree to which early childhood leadership competencies are identified early childhood endorsement opportunities such as course work, course discussions, and course materials. This draft rubric will be provided to Delphi group members and feedback will be requested. A short video recording providing background and the purpose of the rubric will be provided and participants will be asked to view this prior to examining the rubric.

Questions posed individually to the group members regarding the rubric will include:

1. Is the wording clear in each rubric domain? If no, provide the wording that is unclear?
2. Are the indicators in each domain clearly differentiated or is there overlap? If no, provide the wording and/or indicators that are not clearly differentiated.
3. Where do you see opportunities for clarity?

Group members will not see one another's individual responses. The researcher will summarize feedback and revise the rubric. The summary of responses and the revised rubric will be sent to the group. The group will be asked to review the summary of responses and the revised rubric. The same three questions posed the first time will be posed a second time, and responses will be collected by the researcher. The researcher will summarize the feedback and revise the rubric again. Additional rounds of seeking input from the Delphi group will take place, and a final rubric will be presented once consensus is reached.

### ***Self-Reflection Instrument Review***

The researcher will draft two self-reflection instruments: one instrument for sub-question 1 and another for sub-question 3. Group members will be asked to watch a short recording that provides the purpose of each instrument, the intended sample group, and the information that the researcher hopes to gain from the administration of the instrument. Group members will be asked to assess the clarity of the self-reflection items and the alignment of the items to the early

childhood leadership competencies (NAESP, 2014). Questions to be posed include:

1. Where do you see opportunities for clarity in the items provided for a response?
2. Which items do not align with the indicated competency?

Group members will not see one another's individual responses. The researcher will summarize feedback and revise the instruments. The summary of responses and the revised instruments will be sent to the group. The group will be asked to review the summary of responses and the revised instruments. The same two questions posed the first time will be posed a second time and responses will be collected by the researcher. The researcher will summarize the feedback and revise the rubric instruments. Additional rounds of seeking input from the Delphi group will take place, and final instruments will be presented once consensus is reached.

## **Procedures**

### ***Sample***

The sample for question number two will include any member of the described population that either (1) completed the early childhood endorsement program OR (2) completed 83% or more of the early childhood endorsement program requirements (5/6 courses). The sample group must have completed the first five courses to be considered. The sixth course is a field experience which some of the sample group may not yet have completed. The goal is to acquire a sample group of at least fifteen, but no more than thirty.

The sample of school leaders who have not completed an early childhood leadership endorsement for question number three will be a random selection of the population described above for question number three. All members of this population will be asked to complete the self-assessment. Approximately 30-40 of the completed self-assessments will be included in the study using a systematic random selection process. This systematic random selection of self-assessments will represent the sample selected. The remaining self-assessments will be used by district leadership to inform future planning for professional development. The goal is to acquire a sample group of approximately thirty.

### ***Research Sub-Question One***

1. To what degree are the early childhood leadership competencies identified by the NAESP (2014) reflected in program requirements (i.e. syllabus, utilized textbooks, learning management system resources)?

Research Sub-Question One will be answered by analyzing course objectives and required resources and materials through document analysis. This will include a process of nominal/categorical matching of terms to levels of alignment based on the Indicators of Alignment Rubric. Connections to early childhood leadership competencies will be identified by looking for key words and/or phrases that signal alignment to course objectives, course standards, course content covered, or assigned work as compared to the five competencies for early childhood leaders. Key words and/or phrases will be identified by a focus group of professionals currently serving in leadership positions in the early childhood field. The focus group will be provided with a definition of the early

childhood leadership competencies and will be asked to identify specific key words and/or phrases that best represent each individual competency.

The number of times these key words and/or phrases are found (that signify a connection to the competency) will be tracked, along with the strength of the alignment based on a created rubric to measure the strength of each alignment (directly, indirectly, or not addressed). The researcher will work with the focus group to determine indicators for each rubric component to measure the strength of each alignment. The focus group will be presented with a rubric containing the alignment measures and then will be asked to identify specific indicators that distinguish how well-aligned content that was identified using key words or phrases is with the early childhood leadership competencies.

Once the focus group has identified key words and/or phrases, as well as finalized the Indicators of Alignment Rubric, the researcher will analyze course syllabi and required course content (i.e. textbooks, available articles, and online repositories) looking for the identified keywords and/or phrases. The number of times each keyword and/or phrase for each competency is found will be tallied for each competency. In addition, as each key word and/or phrase is identified the strength of the connection will be analyzed by the researcher utilizing the Indicators of Alignment Rubric and a composite rubric score will be calculated.

### ***Research Sub-Question Two***

2. Which of the identified early childhood leadership competencies do school leaders cite as being directly, indirectly, or not addressed throughout the early childhood endorsement program most often (self-reflection survey)?

Research Sub-Question Two will be used to analyze which early childhood leadership competencies were cited by program participants as being directly, indirectly, or not addressed throughout the early childhood endorsement program. Participants will complete a self-reflection that addresses specific questions focused on strategies that leaders demonstrating each competency exhibit. The self-reflection would ask participants if they engaged in discussions or activities that focused on such leadership strategies in class sessions, class discussions, or within course materials. This self-reflection instrument will be crafted by the researcher with feedback from the focus group.

If participants respond that a specific strategy was addressed, they will then be asked to use the Indicators of Alignment Rubric to rate the level at which they perceived the alignment; directly addressed, indirectly addressed, or not addressed.

### ***Research Sub Question Three***

3. What is the difference between the self-assessment ratings of school leaders who have completed the early childhood endorsement program and those who have not completed such a program when asked how evident the early childhood leadership competencies are in their work with the early grades (survey)?

Research Sub-Question Three will be used to compare two groups of respondents. Respondents in sample group A will only include school leaders who have completed an early childhood endorsement program, while sample group B will only include school leaders who have not completed an early childhood

endorsement program. Each sample group will be asked to respond to a self-reflection survey outlining leadership practices in each of the five early childhood leadership competency areas. Each competency includes three-six practices provided by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2014) that directly align with each individual competency. Participants will respond to each specific practice, within each competency, by rating the degree to which they perceive each competency to be evident in the practices they perform as a school leader with early childhood grades PK-3<sup>rd</sup>. The ratings to be used include the following:

- 1 - Not evident
- 2 - Somewhat evident in my practice
- 3 - Consistently evident in my practice
- 4 - Consistently evident, with practices that elaborate upon or exceed expectations

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

#### ***Research Questions***

What is the alignment between an early childhood endorsement program with early childhood leadership competencies and how does participation in such a program impact the early childhood leadership competencies of school leaders?

1. To what degree are the early childhood leadership competencies identified by the NAESP (2014) reflected in program requirements (i.e. syllabus, utilized textbooks, learning management system resources)?

2. Which of the identified early childhood leadership competencies do school leaders cite as being directly or indirectly addressed throughout the early childhood endorsement program most often (self-reflection survey)?
3. What is the difference between the self-assessment ratings of school leaders who have completed the early childhood endorsement program and those who have not completed such a program when asked how evident the early childhood competencies are in their work with the early grades (survey)?

### ***Research Sub-Question One***

1. To what degree are the early childhood leadership competencies identified by the NAESP (2014) reflected in program requirements (ex. syllabus, utilized textbooks, learning management system resources, or other focus group suggestions)?

The number of times these key words and/or phrases are found (that signify a connection to the competency) will be tracked, along with the strength of the alignment based on a created rubric to measure the strength of each alignment (directly, indirectly, or not addressed). More specifically, the number of times each keyword and/or phrase for each competency is found will be tallied for each competency. In addition, as each key word and/or phrase is identified the strength of the connection will be analyzed by the researcher utilizing the Indicators of Alignment Rubric and a composite rubric score will be calculated.

While the number of times a key word and/or phrase is found will provide information about the quantity of potential connections, the composite score identifying the strength of connections will determine which competencies may have the most relevant ties to early childhood endorsement coursework. The range of scores on the rubric will range from one – three. A score of one is considered Not Addressed, two is considered “Indirectly Addressed”, and three is considered “Directly Addressed”. The higher the average composite score the greater the strength of alignment that can be assumed by the researcher.

Data from this alignment study will assist the researcher in determining if there is an alignment between course materials and early childhood leadership competencies. If there is alignment, then that would suggest that early childhood endorsement participants may have gained knowledge that would influence early childhood leadership competencies and the way in which those competencies interact in an individual’s leadership practices with early childhood students (sub-question three), but only if individuals were able to make the connection between course content and the leadership competencies (sub-question two).

### ***Research Sub-Question Two***

2. Which of the identified early childhood leadership competencies do school leaders cite as being directly, indirectly, or not addressed throughout the early childhood endorsement program most often (self-reflection survey)?

The number of times that specific strategies from the self-reflection were directly addressed, indirectly addressed, or not addressed will be compiled for

each strategy. Each individual response will be given the appropriate number of points based on the participant response:

1 - Not Addressed

2 - Indirectly Addressed

3 - Directly Addressed

Then a composite rubric score will be provided for each strategy. The composite scores for each strategy will then be aggregated by competency (there are 3-5 strategies per competency) and a single average composite score for each competency will be calculated. The array of scores will range from one – three. A score of one is considered “Not Addressed”, two is considered “Indirectly Addressed” and three is considered “Directly Addressed”. The higher the average composite score, the greater the strength of alignment that can be assumed by the researcher.

For the purposes of analyzing data, the researcher identified a mean score of 2.6-3.0 to represent a strong alignment. This mean score range was determined by analyzing potential combinations of scores that participants could provide, as well as the mean that would be calculated based on such scores. For example, if all participants provided a rating of a “directly addressed” (3 points each) then the mean average would be three, suggesting that all participants found that the practice was directly addressed. If three participants provided a response of “directly addressed” (3 points each), and one provided a response of “indirectly addressed” (2 points each), that would still reflect that practices were generally directly addressed, and would provide a mean of 2.75. However, if three

participants provided a response of “directly addressed” (3 points each) and one provided a response of “not addressed” (1 point each) then concluding that the practices were directly addressed would not be as accurate as one participant did not feel that the practice was even addressed. This would yield a mean of 2.5. Therefore, the research identified a score range of 2.6-3.0 to represent a strong alignment as that would suggest that the participants scored the strategies within the competency as being “Directly Addressed” more times than “Indirectly Addressed” or “Not Addressed”, and that none of the participants felt the practices were not addressed at all.

A score range of 2.0-2.5 would be considered indirectly addressed. This range takes into consideration the potential that some participants might provide a score of “directly addressed” while others may have provided a rating of “not addressed”. A mean of 0-1.9 would indicate that the practice was not addressed, as the participants would have had to provide more scores representing that the practices were either not addressed or indirectly addressed, and there would have had to be at least one score provided reflecting that the practice was not addressed.

Data gathered from the study of research sub-question two will generalize whether participants perceived alignment of early childhood course content to the early childhood leadership competencies. If such connections exist, that will suggest that there is an alignment between the early childhood endorsement program and early childhood leadership competencies. It will also be of value to identify whether the competencies where the participants identified an alignment

had a high level of alignment in study one. If such connections exist, that may suggest that endorsement program participants were able to make a connection between the course content and early childhood leadership skills, even when the connection was not intentional.

### ***Research Sub Question Three***

3. What is the difference between the self-assessment ratings of school leaders who have completed the early childhood endorsement program and those who have not completed such a program when asked how evident the early childhood leadership competencies are in their work with the early grades (survey)?

Responses will be differentiated by the sample groups and then analyzed to determine which specific practices are rated as having a higher degree of evidence, if any, in leaders who have completed the endorsement program. The analytic goal for the study of sub-question three is to find out how the groups of scores differ between the two sample groups. Therefore, a T-Test will be utilized as the test statistic for this question. If a significant difference exists, that suggests that the early childhood endorsement program had an influence on the early childhood leadership competencies of program participants.

## Chapter Four: Results

### Introduction

This chapter will present a non-evaluative reporting of the data captured to answer the research questions posed, supported by tables and graphs where appropriate. Data will be reported relative to each research question. This chapter will include a description of the sample, the statistics performed for relevant research questions, and a summary of the data presented to answer the research questions.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the alignment of completion of an early childhood endorsement program with the development of leadership competencies specific to early childhood (grades PreK-3). This study included an analysis of data in response to three research sub-questions. A document analysis was completed to identify the levels of alignment between early childhood endorsement course content and early childhood leadership competencies. In addition, endorsement program participants were asked to complete a self-reflection addressing specific strategies, related to the early childhood leadership competencies, to determine if the competencies were addressed directly, indirectly, or not addressed throughout the endorsement program. Finally, two groups of leaders in early childhood, PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade, settings were asked to complete a self-assessment rating of how evident specific early childhood leadership practices were in the practices they performed as a school leader.

The five competencies for this study include (NAESP, 2014):

1. Embrace the paradigm shift of a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade learning continuum

2. Provide developmentally appropriate and differentiated learning environments throughout the school
3. Utilize multiple data points to help teachers guide student learning
4. Build a culture of continuous professional growth and efficacy
5. Create a “school as hub” for families and communities

### ***Research Questions***

What is the alignment between an early childhood endorsement program with early childhood leadership competencies and how does participation in such a program impact the early childhood leadership competencies of school leaders?

1. To what degree are the early childhood leadership competencies identified by the NAESP (2014) reflected in program requirements (i.e. syllabus, utilized textbooks, learning management system resources)?
2. Which of the identified early childhood leadership competencies do school leaders cite as being directly or indirectly addressed throughout the early childhood endorsement program most often (self-reflection survey)?
3. What is the difference between the self-assessment ratings of school leaders who have completed the early childhood endorsement program and those who have not completed such a program when asked how evident the early childhood competencies are in their work with the early grades (survey)?

## **Description of the Sample**

The sample for question number two included any member of an early childhood endorsement graduate program at a specific university who (1) completed the early childhood endorsement program OR (2) completed 83% or more of the early childhood endorsement program requirements (5/6 courses). The sample group must have completed the first five courses to have been considered. The sixth course is a field experience which some of the sample group may not yet have completed. The goal was to acquire a sample group of at least fifteen. Invitations to participate were sent to eighteen potential participants. Eligible participants were given ten days to respond to the self-assessment. Twelve potential participants responded and eight declined to complete the self-assessment. The remaining four submitted a completed self-reflection. The self-reflection was sent out again to the original population to try to gain additional participants who did not complete the initial self-reflection. Eligible participants were given an additional six days to complete the self-reflection for study two and one additional participant completed the reflection survey. Therefore, for this study, the actual size of the sample group was five (N=5).

Research question number three included two sample groups. One group included the same respondents as was used for research question number two. Again, the sample size expected was at least fifteen, but the actual sample size was four (N=4). The self-reflection was sent out again to the original group to try to gain additional participants who did not complete the self-reflection initially. Eligible participants were given six days to complete the self-reflection and no

additional participants completed the reflection survey. The other sample group for this question included any district or school leader who works directly with teachers in grade PreK-third grade and did not participate in an early childhood endorsement program. The self-assessment was distributed to over 150 eligible participants. Thirty completed self-reflections were submitted. All 30 were utilized, and the sample size for this group was 30 (N=30). Eligible participants for both groups were initially given ten days to respond to the self-assessment.

## Analysis by Research Question

### Research Sub Question One

	Source One Keyword Extraction	Source Two Keyword Extraction	Final List of Keywords/Phrases
Competency 1  <b>Embrace the Pre-K-3 Early Learning Continuum</b>	Learning Stakeholders continuum Framework Governance Understanding Expectations Collaboration Transitions	learning stakeholders continuum grade transitions resources curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>early learning</li> <li>continuum</li> <li>grade transitions</li> </ul>
Competency 2  <b>Provide developmentally appropriate and differentiated learning environments throughout the school</b>	Curriculum Assessments Learning Teachers Instruction student	Technology Curriculum Teachers Instruction Math Environment Teaching student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developmentally appropriate instruction</li> <li>Learning environment</li> </ul>
Competency 3  <b>Use Multiple Measures to Guide Growth in Student Learning</b>	Learning Teachers Teaching Assessments Assessment Understanding student	Providers Continuum Learning Assessment Understanding Student Teachers discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assessment</li> <li>Understanding</li> </ul>
Competency 4  <b>Build Professional Capacity Across the Learning Community</b>	Teachers Learning Opportunities Continuum Knowledge Focus principal	Teachers Learning Opportunities Continuum Knowledge Principal Communities Programs Leadership Graduate Childhood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>teachers' professional learning</li> <li>opportunities for professional development</li> <li>learning communities</li> </ul>
Competency 5  <b>Make Your School a Hub of Pre-K-3 Learning for Families and Communities</b>	Learning Grade Funding Resource Environment Responsibility Transitions Braid sense	Learning Principals Opportunities Strategies Families Grade Competency Continuum Kindergarten School community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>learning opportunities</li> <li>school as hub</li> <li>Family involvement/engagement</li> <li>school community</li> </ul>

**Figure 2** Identified Keywords for Each Competency

Figure 2 displays the keywords/phrases identified for each leadership competency. The two columns, titled “Source One Key Word Extraction” and “Source Two Keyword Extraction” in Figure 2 represent the words that were extracted from the keyword extractor. They are organized by leadership competency. The final column, “Final List of Keywords or Phrases”, are the words or phrases identified by the Del Phi group for use in the Keyword Analysis for study one. Figure 3 represents the Indicators of Analysis Rubric that was utilized to identify the strength of alignment between keywords/phrases and the documents analyzed.

Documents and other required resources (i.e. syllabi and textbooks) from each early childhood endorsement course were collected by the researcher. Items were collected for all six courses and separated by course. Before beginning, the researcher identified text features and text sections to exclude from the analysis:

- Titles of sections, chapters, people, positions, organizations, places, websites, or other resources
- Introductory sections of books that were not identified as the first chapter
- Citations, bibliographies, or reference pages
- Activities or questions at the end of sections or chapters
- Glossaries
- Indexes
- Table of contents
- Dedication pages

Each document or resource was looked at individually. The researcher looked for each key word on each individual page, not including sections identified for exclusion. Each time a keyword or phrase was found the researcher read to determine the context in which the word or phrase was used. Next, the researcher utilized the Indicators of Analysis Rubric (see Figure 1) to identify the degree of alignment to early childhood leadership competencies with which the word or phrase was used.

When specific keywords and phrases are identified the following rubric will be used to determine alignment to leadership competencies:

	None	Indirectly Aligned	Directly Aligned
Indicators of Alignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No references to leadership practices that align with early childhood leadership competencies are evidenced in the artifact</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Practices that align with early childhood leadership competencies are evidenced in the artifact as related to the use of the key word or phrase</li> <li>Identified practices are not specifically connected to leadership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Practices that align with early childhood leadership competencies are evidenced in the artifact as related to the use of the key word or phrase</li> <li>Practical examples related to leadership practices provided by the NAESP (2014) are included</li> </ul>

**Figure 3** *Indicators of Alignment Rubric*

The Indicators of Alignment Rubric was referenced to increase consistency in alignment ratings and to decrease the likelihood of misidentifying the alignment of a keyword/phrase to a competency. For instance, the keyword/phrase “assessment” was found in almost 700 instances in a 2016 text on assessing early

childhood students by Hardin and Wortham. Assigning correct and consistent ratings in all instances that the keyword was found would be difficult. To identify the alignment correctly and consistently for each of these instances, it was necessary to refer back to the rubric and the indicators therein. For example, the following use of the keyword “assessment” was determined to be directly aligned because the idea of ensuring that early childhood assessment options reflect the diversity of the children in such programs is a key practice within early childhood leadership competency three. Examples of how this practice might look for programs with students of various cultures also followed the sentence where the keyword was found.

A concurrent concern related to current trends and practices in the assessment of young children is the question of how appropriate our tests and assessment strategies are in terms of the diversity of young children attending early childhood programs. (p. 15)

On page 21 of the same text the keyword was found again, but this time the alignment was determined to be indirect because the concept and practices are aligned with competency three, but not specifically connected with actual examples of leadership practices. A focus of competency three is about utilizing results of assessment for planning and instruction, however, the use of the term in the following example is specifically geared toward teachers. “The results of assessment are used to inform the planning and implementation of experiences, to communicate with the child’s family, and to evaluate and improve teachers’ and the program’s effectiveness” (Hardin & Wortham, 2016).

When no alignment was determined it was because the use of the keyword/phrase did not refer to any practices or concepts within the early childhood leadership competency. On p. 40 of the Hardin & Wortham (2016) text, the following sentence with the keyword “assessment” was found, but no alignment was identified. “School districts often use informal assessments or evaluation strategies developed by local teachers or staff members” (Hardin & Wortham, 2016). Because there was no reference to leadership practices or concepts within the competency three, it was documented as an instance of no alignment.

A record was kept documenting each time a keyword was found, the degree of alignment, and the source in which it was found. This process was repeated for each document and resource. There were a total of 22 documents and resources that were individually analyzed.

Next, the researcher totaled the instances that each key word was found based on the degree of alignment to the early childhood leadership competency for each individual document or resource. These totals were then aggregated by competency and degree of alignment. This data was used to create a composite score for each competency.

**Table 1** *Keyword Analysis Composite Data: Totals*

Keyword Analysis Composite Data						
Total Number of Times Keywords or Phrases Were Found for Each Competency						
	Competency One	Competency Two	Competency Three	Competency Four	Competency Five	Composite Total
Number of Times Keywords or Phrases Found	214	128	3360	223	120	4045

Table 1 displays the number of times each keyword was identified within each leadership competency. There was a total of 4,045 times that keywords, or phrases were found in the course resources. The greatest number of keywords or phrases found related to competency three with 3,360 instances of keyword or phrases indicated. The least number of keywords or phrases were found for competencies two and five with 128 and 120 instances of keywords or phrases found, respectively.

**Table 2** *Keyword Analysis Composite Data: Percentage*

Keyword Analysis Composite Data						
Percentage of Alignment to Competency						
	Competency One	Competency Two	Competency Three	Competency Four	Competency Five	Mean Percentage
Percent No Alignment	96%	50%	95%	83%	69%	79%
Percent Indirect Alignment	3%	38%	4%	10%	18%	14%
Percent Direct Alignment	1%	13%	1%	7%	13%	7%

Table 2 displays percentages that represent the number of keywords or phrases, for each competency, associated with each degree of alignment to early childhood leadership competencies. As seen in Table 2, the greatest percentage of words or phrases had no alignment to early childhood leadership competency. No hypothesis was developed for research sub-question one. Instead, the research intended to determine if there is an alignment between course materials and early childhood leadership competencies. However, given the data collected, the conclusion provided for research sub-question one is that there is little, and in some cases almost no, alignment between the early childhood leadership competencies and early childhood endorsement course materials.

### ***Research Sub Question Two***

Participants in the sample were provided a self-reflection asking individuals to report the perceived level of alignment of early childhood course content to early childhood leadership competencies. Participants were asked to reflect and score each strategy within each competency by identifying if the strategies provided for each competency in the self-reflection were “Not Addressed”, “Indirectly

Addressed” or “Directly Addressed” within class discussions, class presentations or course materials. The self-reflection was organized into three sections: “Class Discussions”, “Class Presentations”, and “Course Materials” and the same items were responded to within each section. Participants were provided the self-reflection digitally and given two weeks to complete the self-reflection.

The researcher analyzed data for each section of the self-assessment by competency and content delivery method (class discussions, class presentations, and course materials). The number of times that specific strategies from an individual section were directly addressed, indirectly addressed, or not addressed were compiled for each strategy. There were three-five strategies for each leadership competency. Then, composite scores were aggregated by competency and a single mean rubric score was calculated for each leadership competency. The array of scores ranged from one-three. A score of one was considered “Not Addressed”, two was considered “Indirectly Addressed” and three was considered “Directly Addressed”.

**Table 3** *Mean Rubric Scores for Class Discussions*

	Class Discussions			Mean Rubric Score
	Number Responded Not Addressed	Number Responded Indirectly Addressed	Number Responded Directly Addressed	
Competency One - Paradigm Shift	4.00	4.00	12.00	2.40
Competency Two - Curriculum and Instruction	1.00	8.00	10.00	2.35
Competency Three- Multiple Data Points	5.00	9.00	6.00	2.05
Competency Four - Professional Growth	0.00	9.00	6.00	2.40
Competency Five - Family and Community	4.00	4.00	12.00	2.40

Table 3 displays the data gathered specific to strategies that were or were not addressed during Class Discussions for each competency. Each individual response is accounted for in Table 3. Each individual response was given the appropriate number of points based on the participant rating:

1 - Not Addressed

2 - Indirectly Addressed

3 - Directly Addressed

Once each response was given the appropriate amount of points, a sum for each category within each competency was totaled, and then a mean for each competency was calculated. The score ranges determined to analyze results include:

0.0 - 1.9 Not addressed

2.0 - 2.5 Indirectly Addressed

2.6 - 3.0 Directly Addressed

As seen in this table there were a good number of participants who responded that strategies related to leadership competencies were directly

addressed, however, the mean rubric scores show that there was not a large enough group that said strategies were directly addressed to indicate a stronger alignment. The mean rubric scores range for Class Discussions range from 1.80 - 2.40 therefore a strong alignment is not suggested here.

**Table 4** *Mean Rubric Scores for Class Presentations*

	Class Presentations			Mean Rubric Score
	Number Responded Not Addressed	Number Responded Indirectly Addressed	Number Responded Directly Addressed	
Competency One - Paradigm Shift	5.00	3.00	12.00	2.35
Competency Two - Curriculum and Instruction	2.00	10.00	8.00	2.30
Competency Three- Multiple Data Points	9.00	5.00	6.00	1.85
Competency Four - Professional Growth	5.00	6.00	5.00	1.93
Competency Five - Family and Community	7.00	3.00	10.00	2.15

Table 4 displays the data gathered specific to strategies that were, or were not, addressed during class presentations. As seen in Table 4, the same number, or more, of the participants responded that the leadership competencies were not addressed or indirectly addressed in class presentations. The only competency that this is not true for is leadership competency number one, which focused on leaders embracing the paradigm shift of birth through age eight. Most participants felt this leadership competency was directly addressed. However, the mean rubric score for leadership competency one still falls below 2.59, which does not indicate an overall strong alignment between this competency and how well it was addressed in class presentation. In addition, the results shown in the mean rubric scores for all leadership competencies do not indicate a strong alignment between

class presentations and leadership competencies as all of the mean rubric scores fall below 2.59.

**Table 5** *Mean Rubric Scores for Course Materials*

	Course Materials			Mean Rubric Score
	No. Responded Not Addressed	No. Responded Indirectly Addressed	No. Responded Directly Addressed	
Competency One - Paradigm Shift	0.00	6.00	14.00	2.70
Competency Two - Curriculum and Instruction	4.00	5.00	11.00	2.35
Competency Three- Multiple Data Points	5.00	7.00	8.00	2.15
Competency Four - Professional Growth	5.00	3.00	8.00	2.13
Competency Five - Family and Community	5.00	2.00	13.00	2.40

Table 5 displays the data gathered specific to strategies that were, or were not, addressed in course materials. As seen in Table 5, respondents felt that there was not strong alignment as shown by the mean rubric scores, except for competency one. A strong alignment between the course materials and leadership competency one is suggested as the mean score is 2.70, which falls within the range between 2.6-3.0. Even though competency one showed strong alignment for being addressed in course materials the other leadership competencies did not, as the mean rubric scores fell below 2.59.

**Table 6** *Aggregate Mean Rubric Score*

Aggregate Mean Rubric Score for All Content Delivery Methods	
Competency	Aggregate Mean Rubric Score
Competency One - Paradigm Shift	2.48
Competency Two - Curriculum and Instruction	2.37
Competency Three- Multiple Data Points	2.02
Competency Four - Professional Growth	2.16
Competency Five - Family and Community	2.35

Table 6 displays the aggregate mean rubric score by competency for all three sections of the self-reflection representing content delivery (class discussions, class presentations, and course materials). The data suggests that the leadership competency that showed the weakest aggregate mean rubric score was leadership competency three, which focuses on leaders using multiple data points to help teachers guide student instruction. The highest aggregate mean rubric score was calculated for competency one, focusing on embracing the paradigm shift of the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade continuum. The respondents provided a response of directly addressed most often for competencies one and five. The competencies that received a response of directly addressed least often were leadership competencies three and four.

This information does not provide evidence of strong alignment between early childhood leadership competencies and early childhood endorsement courses in any of the identified areas, as none of the mean rubric scores are not between 2.6-3.0. The only instance in which participants' responses indicated a

strong alignment with the leadership competencies was within the course materials section. Participants' responses suggested that they felt a strong alignment between course materials and leadership competency one existed. However, when calculating the aggregate mean rubric scores none of the responses suggested a strong alignment between the competencies and the different content delivery methods.

### ***Research Sub-Question Three***

For research sub-question three, a self-reflection was used to compare two groups of respondents. Participants in sample group A included school leaders who have completed an early childhood endorsement program, while sample group B only included school leaders who had not completed an early childhood endorsement program. Each sample group was asked to reflect and respond to an identical self-reflection survey outlining leadership practices in each of the five early childhood leadership competency areas. Participants responded to each specific practice, within each competency, by rating the degree to which they perceived each competency to be evident in the practices they perform as a school leader with early childhood grades PK-3<sup>rd</sup>. The ratings included the following:

- 1 - Not evident
- 2 - Somewhat evident in my practice
- 3 - Consistently evident in my practice
- 4 - Consistently evident in my practices with additional practices that elaborate or exceed upon these expectations

The self-reflection was organized by competency with three-six aligning leadership practices within each leadership competency. Participants were provided the self-reflection digitally and given two weeks to complete the self-reflection.

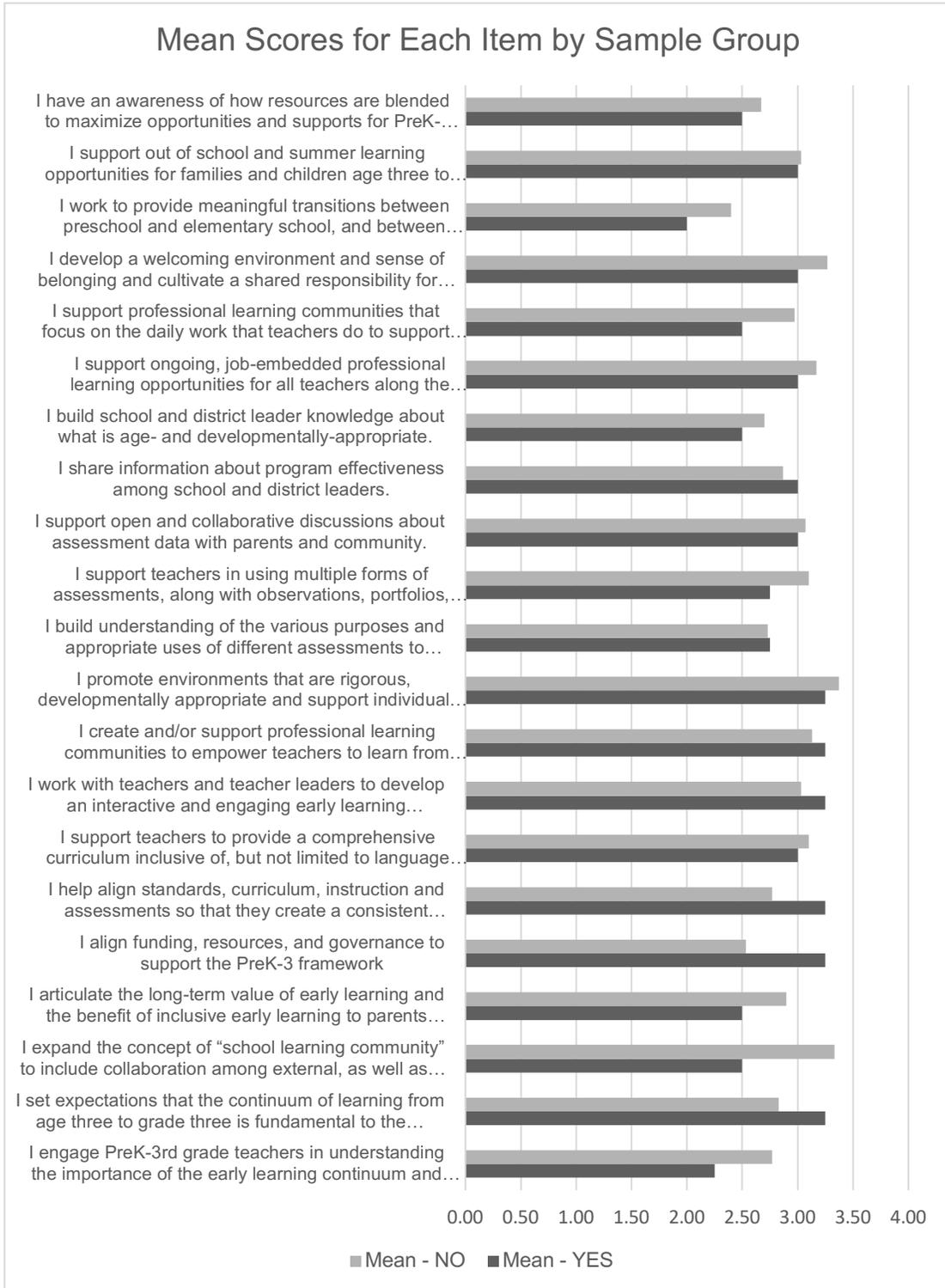
Responses were differentiated by sample group and then analyzed to determine which specific practices were rated as having a higher degree of evidence, if any, in leaders who have completed the endorsement program. The researcher disaggregated the data by sample group, and then analyzed data for each leadership competency in the self-reflection. A mean score was calculated for each item on the self-reflection. The number of times that a participant responded with “Not evidence in my practice”, “Somewhat evident in my practice”, “Consistently evident in my practice”, or “Consistently evident in my practices with additional practices that elaborate or exceed upon these expectations” were compiled for each self-reflection item. Each response was given a numerical value as shown below ranging from scores of one to four:

1 - Not evident in my practice

2 - Somewhat evident in my practice

3 - Consistently evident in my practice

4 - Consistently evident in my practices with additional practices that elaborate or exceed upon these expectations.



**Figure 4** Mean Scores for Each Item by Sample Group

**Table 7** *Aggregate Mean Scores by Sample Group*

	Aggregate Mean Score for YES <i>(Did Complete (or currently completing) Endorsement)</i>	Aggregate Mean Score for NO <i>(Did Not Complete Endorsement)</i>
Competency One - Paradigm Shift	2.75	2.87
Competency Two - Curriculum and Instruction	3.20	3.07
Competency Three- Multiple Data Points	2.88	2.94
Competency Four - Professional Growth	2.67	2.95
Competency Five - Family and Community	2.63	2.84

Next, the mean scores were compiled for each leadership competency into one aggregate mean score for each leadership competency and sample group. These results are shown in Table 7. For each competency, the higher mean score is shaded. Only one leadership competency reflects a higher mean score for those who completed the early childhood leadership endorsement.

Responses for each item were then compiled and a mean score for each item was calculated for each sample group. The results are shown in Figure 4. The red bar displays the mean scores for the “NO” group, the group of respondents who have not completed an early childhood endorsement program. The “YES” group, the respondents who have completed, or in the process of completing, an early childhood endorsement are represented by the blue bar. In general, the participants that have not completed an early childhood endorsement responded to that these practices were somewhat or consistently evident in their practices more so than those who are currently completing, or who have completed the endorsement program.

The analytic goal for the study of sub-question three was to find out how the groups of scores differ between the two sample groups. Therefore, a T-Test was

utilized to identify if significant differences between the two sample groups existed. Each self-assessment item was individually analyzed to determine the significance of the difference between responses.

**Table 8** *Competency One T-Values*

Item	Mean		Variance		T-Value
	Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 1	Variable 2	
I engage PreK-3rd grade teachers in understanding the importance of the early learning continuum and transitions along it.	2.83	2.25	0.41	0.91	3.18
I set expectations that the continuum of learning from age three to grade three is fundamental to the school's (or district's) mission.	2.83	3.00	0.41	1.33	3.18
I expand the concept of "school learning community" to include collaboration among external, as well as internal, stakeholders.	2.90	2.50	0.36	0.33	2.77
I articulate the long-term value of early learning and the benefit of inclusive early learning to parents and all school or district stakeholders.	2.90	3.25	0.43	0.25	2.57
I align funding, resources, and governance to support the PreK-3 framework	2.56	3.25	0.80	0.25	2.44

**Table 9** *Competency Two T-Values*

Item	Mean		Variance		T-Value
	Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 1	Variable 2	
I help align standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessments so that they create a consistent framework for learning from age three to grade three.	2.70	3.25	0.70	0.92	2.78
I support teachers to provide a comprehensive curriculum inclusive of, but not limited to language arts and math.	3.10	3.00	0.58	2.00	3.18
I work with teachers and teacher leaders to develop an interactive and engaging early learning curriculum for grades PreK-3.	3.03	3.25	0.45	0.25	2.57
I create and/or support professional learning communities to empower teachers to learn from each other and to improve instruction	3.13	3.25	0.33	0.25	2.78
I promote environments that are rigorous, developmentally appropriate and support individual learning.	3.37	3.25	0.24	0.25	2.78

**Table 10** *Competency Three T-Values*

Item	Mean		Variance		T-Value
	Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 1	Variable 2	
I build understanding of the various purposes and appropriate uses of different assessments to improve both teaching and learning.	2.73	2.75	0.34	0.25	2.78
I support teachers in using multiple forms of assessments, along with observations, portfolios, and anecdotal records, to guide student learning and growth all along the PreK-3 continuum.	3.10	2.75	0.44	1.58	3.18
I support open and collaborative discussions about assessment data with parents and community.	3.07	3.00	0.48	0.67	2.78
I share information about program effectiveness among school and district leaders.	2.87	3.00	0.40	0.67	3.18

**Table 11** *Competency Four T-Values*

Item	Mean		Variance		T-Value
	Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 1	Variable 2	
I build school and district leader knowledge about what is age- and developmentally appropriate.	2.70	2.50	0.49	0.33	2.78
I support ongoing, job-embedded professional learning opportunities for all teachers along the PreK-3 continuum in order to broaden knowledge and skills in early childhood practices.	3.17	3.00	0.28	0.67	3.18
I support professional learning communities that focus on the daily work that teachers do to support student learning.	2.97	2.50	0.52	1.00	3.18

**Table 12** *Competency Five T-Values*

Item	Mean		Variance		T-Value
	Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 1	Variable 2	
I develop a welcoming environment and sense of belonging and cultivate a shared responsibility for children's learning from age three to grade three.	3.27	3.00	0.48	0.67	2.78
I work to provide meaningful transitions between preschool and elementary school, and between elementary grades. These transitions include families and their input is gathered to support the devel...	2.40	2.00	0.80	0.67	2.78
I support out of school and summer learning opportunities for families and children age three to grade three.	3.03	3.00	0.45	0.67	2.78
I have an awareness of how resources are blended to maximize opportunities and supports for PreK-grade 3 students and families.	2.67	2.50	0.57	1.67	3.18

Table 8 through Table 12 shows the data analysis for each self-assessment item. No significant difference was found between the two sample groups for any of the self-assessment items. Given that one of the sample groups had 30 participants, and the other had four, makes it difficult to draw solid conclusions regarding this study. Instead, a general statement regarding the outcome of this study can be made to communicate that there was no difference between the self-assessment ratings of school leaders who completed the early childhood endorsement program and those who have not completed such a program when

asked how evident the early childhood competencies are in their work with the early grades.

### Ancillary Analysis

The data in this section is provided as interesting information that emerged as part of the analysis process. This is not an analysis of stated research questions, but instead provides additional insight into the perceived implementation practices demonstrating early childhood leadership competencies for leaders in the early grades.

**Table 13** *Highest and Lowest Scoring Items*

	Mean Score for NO <i>Did Not Complete Endorsement</i>	Mean Score for YES <i>Did Complete (or currently completing) Endorsement</i>
Highest Scoring Item	3.37	3.25
<i>I promote environments that are rigorous, developmentally appropriate and support individual learning.</i>		
Lowest Scoring Item	2.4	2.0
<i>I work to provide meaningful transitions between preschool and elementary school, and between elementary grades. These transitions include families and their input is gathered to support the development of transition plans.</i>		

The means for the highest and lowest scoring items for both groups were the same. Both groups felt that they promoted and supported teachers in creating developmentally appropriate environments consistently in their practices. Responses for both groups showed the least amount of implementation for

providing meaningful transitions between grades that include students and families. These items are shown in Table 13.

**Table 14** *Practices Rated with a Higher Degree of Evidence for Those Completing the Endorsement*

Competency	Practice (item)	Mean Score
Embrace the paradigm shift of a PreK-3 <sup>rd</sup> grade learning continuum	• I set expectations that the continuum of learning from age three to grade three is fundamental to the school's (or district's) mission.	3.25
	• I align funding, resources, and governance to support the PreK-3 framework	3.25
Provide developmentally appropriate and differentiated learning environments throughout the school	• I help align standards, curriculum, instruction and assessments so that they create a consistent framework for learning from age three to grade three.	3.25
	• I work with teachers and teacher leaders to develop an interactive and engaging early learning curriculum for grades PreK-3.	3.25
	• I create and/or support professional learning communities to empower teachers to learn from each other and to improve instruction	3.25
Utilize multiple data points to help teachers guide student learning	• I build understanding of the various purposes and appropriate uses of different assessments to improve both teaching and learning.	2.75
	• I share information about program effectiveness among school and district leaders.	3.0
Build a culture of continuous professional growth and efficacy	None	
Create a "school as hub" for families and communities	None	

Practices that were rated as having a higher degree of evidence in leaders who have completed the endorsement program are listed in Table 14. As shown in Table 14, there are seven practices that those completing the endorsement program rated as having a higher degree of evidence, however, there are an

additional fourteen practices in which the same group of participants' data reflects a lower degree of evidence when compared to the responses of those who have not completed an early childhood endorsement.

### **Summary**

Data collected does not demonstrate a strong alignment between course content delivery and early childhood leadership competencies. When analyzing responses to items asking about an alignment of course materials, class discussion, and class presentations to leadership competencies, responses generally revealed that the competencies were indirectly, but not quite directly addressed. This suggests that early childhood leadership competencies are not clearly identified nor reflected in the early childhood endorsement program requirements.

The document analysis did not result in finding direct alignment between leadership competencies and course content delivery. This aligns with the data results for sub-question two in which participants cite that the one early childhood leadership competency that was directly addressed in the endorsement program was leadership competency one; Embrace the Paradigm Shift for the PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Continuum. The others were addressed, but the data does not suggest a direct alignment.

When comparing the self-assessment ratings between school leaders who completed the early childhood endorsement program, and those who have not completed such a program, no significant difference in responses was demonstrated. Both sample groups responded similarly to the self-assessment

items, and for the majority of the items the leaders who did not complete the early childhood endorsement program responded with higher self-assessment ratings than the sample group who did complete the endorsement.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will provide a summary, discussion, and conclusions based on the results from the study and the research questions the initial research questions identified. Limitations that impacted the study will be provided as well as implications for future practice and recommendations for further research.

### **Interpretation of the Results**

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (2014) identified five early childhood leadership competencies to support leadership in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade settings where instructional leaders must vertically and horizontally align standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment to create a continuum of learning in the early grades.

1. Embrace the paradigm shift of a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade learning continuum
2. Provide developmentally appropriate and differentiated learning environments throughout the school
3. Utilize multiple data points to help teachers guide student learning
4. Build a culture of continuous professional growth and efficacy
5. Create a “school as hub” for families and communities

For most elementary school principals to increase their knowledge of the early childhood leadership competencies they must find their own resources or opportunities. In a 2018 study by Nicholson et al. (2018), over half of the principals participating desired resources and professional learning to increase their

knowledge in supervising early childhood classrooms but did not have them readily available.

The purpose of this study was to identify if there is alignment between published early childhood leadership competencies and early childhood endorsement programs. Because teacher professional development programs outnumber those for principals it was worthwhile to study the impact that early childhood endorsement programs have on one's skills as a leader of an early childhood program.

### ***Research questions***

What is the alignment between an early childhood endorsement program with early childhood leadership competencies and how does participation in such a program impact the early childhood leadership competencies of school leaders?

1. To what degree are the early childhood leadership competencies identified by the NAESP (2014) reflected in program requirements (i.e. syllabus, utilized textbooks, learning management system resources)?
2. Which of the identified early childhood leadership competencies do school leaders cite as being directly or indirectly addressed throughout the early childhood endorsement program most often (self-reflection survey)?
3. What is the difference between the self-assessment ratings of school leaders who have completed the early childhood endorsement program and those who have not completed such a program when

asked how evident the early childhood competencies are in their work with the early grades (survey)?

This was a mixed analysis study utilizing quantitative results from individual self-reflections and a comprehensive document analysis. Results did not provide data to suggest an alignment between an early childhood endorsement program and early childhood leadership competencies. Results from the document analysis showed that most of the time when key words were identified in course materials they did not directly nor indirectly align with the leadership competencies. In addition, results also did not show that participation in the program produced a significant difference in the self-assessment ratings of school leaders who completed the endorsement program when compared to school leaders who have not participated in such a program.

## **Conclusions Based on Results**

### ***Research Sub-Question One***

Overall, the document analysis for research sub-question one revealed that 79% of the over 4,000 keywords and phrases identified in 22 required course documents and texts showed almost none to very little alignment to leadership competencies. Leaders in these courses would not be exposed to required course materials that provide a direct alignment to leadership competencies. Therefore, leaders in these programs should not expect that they would increase their early childhood leadership skills through engaging with the required materials for these courses.

Interestingly, the data analysis for competency two (Provide developmentally appropriate and differentiated learning environments throughout the school) resulted in 51% of the key words or phrases showing that they were directly or indirectly aligned to the early childhood leadership competencies. In conclusion, keywords and phrases identified for each early childhood leadership competency are not generally reflected in course materials, except for competency two.

### ***Research Sub-Question Two***

According to participant responses, the self-assessment ratings from the school leaders did not indicate that the early childhood leadership competencies were directly addressed throughout the early childhood program, except for competency one (Embrace the paradigm shift of a PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade learning continuum) which school leaders cited as being directly addressed during class presentations. In the other two content delivery methods, class discussions and course materials, Competency One also received the highest self-assessment ratings, although the responses did not suggest a direct alignment. Data from the self-assessment ratings show that this competency was the one that school leaders perceived as best addressed in the three content delivery methods.

Although Competency Two (Provide developmentally appropriate and differentiated learning environments throughout the school) did not receive self-assessment ratings that suggest an overall direct alignment to early childhood leadership competencies, the responses show that aside from competency one

this was the next competency that school leaders cited as being indirectly or directly addressed the most times.

### ***Research Sub-Question Three***

The goal of research sub-question three was to determine if there was a significant difference in the perceptions of school leaders as shown through the self-assessment ratings of leaders who have completed the early childhood endorsement program when compared to leaders who had not completed the program. Results, utilizing a t-test for data analysis did not show a significant difference between the responses of the two sample groups for any of the individual self-assessment items. In fact, the leaders that had not completed an endorsement program for early childhood reported higher self-assessment ratings than the sample group who did complete the endorsement for all competencies except one, when comparing mean scores. The single competency in which the leaders in the endorsement program rated themselves higher, when comparing means, was competency two (Provide developmentally appropriate and differentiated learning environments throughout the school).

The findings for these three sub-questions suggest that, through the school leaders' perceptions, there is little demonstrated alignment between early childhood leadership competencies and participation in an early childhood endorsement program. In addition, according to the responses demonstrating perceptions of school leaders, there is little data to demonstrate that there was a significant impact that participation in such a program had on the early childhood

leadership competencies of school and district leaders who work with PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers and students.

## **Discussion**

Professional learning opportunities for leaders to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively implement and manage a continuum of Prekindergarten through third-grade experience for students are still limited (Gulosino, C. & Xu, Z., 2006; Muijs et al., 2004). Leadership preparation programs, designed for upcoming elementary school administrators, do not generally provide professional development nor learning opportunities for emerging leaders to learn about leading in an early childhood setting (Buffet Early Childhood Institute, 2017; Hinton, M., 2017). Since graduate programs offering endorsements in early childhood education are readily available, some school leaders might gravitate toward these teacher-practitioner focused programs. However, the results of this study do not indicate alignment between early childhood leadership competencies and early childhood endorsement programs.

When examining course materials for six early childhood endorsement programs none of the early childhood leadership competencies were found to have a direct alignment with course materials. In fact, only seven percent of results identified a direct alignment with the course materials, while 14% indicated an indirect alignment. And even when an indirect alignment was indicated, the leader would still need to make their own personal connections from the content to the leadership practices and competencies that may or may not have occurred. The instances of direct alignment were the only instances in which connections to the

leadership competencies were explicit in the course materials. Therefore, if a leader participating in the program is not intentional about making connections from course materials to leadership competencies and practices then the skill development may not be positively influenced. For leaders in such programs making these intentional connections may seem like it would be intuitive, but we cannot claim that this is the case for all leaders.

Competency two (Provide developmentally appropriate and differentiated learning environments throughout the school) emerged with the greatest number of direct or indirect alignment identifications with 51% of the results correlating with these two indicators. This is the same competency that school leaders who completed the early childhood endorsement program provided the highest self-assessment ratings for based on their perceptions. All the leaders participating in this study received limited professional development in the last three years focused on developmentally appropriate learning environments for PreK and Kindergarten classrooms. While not conclusive, it could be that the small number of professional learning workshops that they participated in provided some context for them to implement actions based on this competency.

This was also the single competency in which these school leaders rated themselves higher than the school leaders who did not complete the endorsement program. And, although this was not the highest-rated competency for school leaders when rating content delivery methods and alignment to leadership competencies, Competency two received the second-highest self-assessment ratings with results suggesting a perceived indirect alignment between leadership

competencies and early childhood content delivered amongst three different methods. These results may be an indicator that competency two was perceived to be fairly aligned to the early childhood endorsement courses, materials, and content delivery, even if the other competencies are not. Competency two is focused on leadership supporting developmentally instructional practices and classroom environment. Much of the early childhood endorsement coursework concentrates on developmentally appropriate instructional methods and developmentally appropriate, child-centered environments. This could explain also be why the perceptions showed a stronger alignment here.

The self-assessment ratings demonstrating participant perceptions provided for study three also presented an unexpected outcome. Leaders who did not complete an early childhood endorsement program reported higher self-assessment ratings for many of the items in the self-assessment. This could be due to the assumption that those who did complete the program may have a better understanding of the competencies than those who did not, and therefore they may have rated themselves lower than the leaders who did complete the program. Policymakers and educational leaders paying attention to these findings may be concerned that those who did not complete the program perceive their use of practices related to early childhood leadership competencies higher than those who completed the endorsement program. This may indicate that leaders have a false assumption about the practices and concepts within each of these early childhood leadership competencies. These leaders may perceive that the practices they are implementing are beneficial to PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade students, when

many times the practices they think are appropriate for early childhood students are actually a detriment and not connected to the leadership competencies at all. Educational leaders could work to help school and district leaders identify the misaligned practices that are unintentionally being reinforced but are in opposition to providing a rigorous, but developmentally appropriate learning environment and experience for students. School and district leaders need intentional and specific support in implementing early childhood leadership competencies if the goal is to continue to improve learning environments for young children.

Upcoming school leaders expect that what they are to learn from their experiences in elementary administration coursework will prepare them to lead a school of learners, including PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade students, but they are still ill-prepared. Results of this study suggest that participating in an early childhood endorsement program may not be the answer either (Clements et al., 2017; McCabe & Sipple, 2011). As previously stated, they may complete elementary administrators' programs with an understanding that misaligned practices will be appropriate for PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade students. Whose responsibility is it to correct these conflicting practices that leaders implement in their schools and districts? Should policymakers require elementary administrators to have received professional development in early childhood leadership competencies to possess or maintain an elementary administration endorsement? Should elementary administration graduate programs adjust coursework or requirements to include early childhood leadership competencies or should school districts be responsible to help elementary leaders in this area?

Policymakers working to improve outcomes for children in early grades classrooms have not yet taken actions to create and propose better informed legislative actions that incorporate funding and opportunities for principal professional development focused on leadership in early childhood. Therefore, policymakers may not see the results that their proposed educational policies envision. Policymakers in some states have attempted to require that elementary leaders be more knowledgeable in working with students in the early grades. Goncu et al.'s (2014) study discusses the passing of a 2006 legislation in Illinois that included a requirement that school leaders be certified Pre-Kindergarten through grade 12. As an unfunded mandate, the legislation did not address how graduate institutions should incorporate or maintain this which led to little changes in their program. Policymakers in other states also require that principal certificates include Pre-Kindergarten, but few intentionally address early childhood leadership specifically. Reasons for this could include lack of faculty that have training in this area, the relatively recent rise of the paradigm shift, or limited resources needed to revise course requirements. In addition, there is still a significant gap in the literature that describes specific recommendations on what school leaders need to know and who is responsible for educating them in early education.

Many graduate programs do now boast of providing a program that includes Pre-Kindergarten, but few peer-reviewed sources are available to provide information to principal preparation programs on what to incorporate and the best methods in how to do so. The National Association for Elementary School

Principals provides the five competencies discussed in this study, and extensive information on what each looks like in a school setting, but other resources such as this one are few (NAESP, 2014). Therefore, principal preparations will have to be intentional, and maybe even creative, in their incorporation of these competencies into their leadership development programs. Perhaps programs could consider providing elective courses focused on leadership in early childhood, requiring a minimum number of practicum experiences in early childhood classes or through incorporating early childhood leadership competencies into current courses where appropriate.

Even before graduate programs begin altering their course requirements, it imperative to analyze the gaps published leadership standards like the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015) when it comes to the inclusion of early childhood leadership competencies. Many graduate programs use standards such as these to guide their coursework and learning experiences. The document states that conditions for learning, characteristics of children and families, and accountability expectations and measures are ever-changing which requires educational leaders to have a set of standards to steer their work. However, there is no mention of early childhood or early childhood leadership practices or competencies that should be used to guide the work of leaders working with PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade classrooms. Only one out of 50 references cited reflects a focus on early childhood, and most of the contributors to the work were post-graduate institution faculty members. The standards are meant to be somewhat general in nature

because they are intended for all school-level leaders, like principals and assistant principals, as well as district leaders in some domains. However, when working to develop school leaders for the early grades in elementary schools a very specific set of leadership competencies is required and are not found within this document. This conveys a significant gap in the standards, especially since these are also intended to be used within the education profession to develop, supervise, and evaluate leaders, as well as inform the policymakers that oversee the profession.

School districts and graduate programs both bear the responsibility of supporting upcoming and current leaders in this area. If either of the entities chooses to ignore the importance of supporting leaders in this manner, then outcomes for children will continue to remain stagnant. Furthermore, school and district leaders will continue to, unknowingly, support practices that do not provide an appropriate education for early grades students.

The principal has a key role in supporting and evaluating teachers. They must be able to reinforce, or correct instructional practices to best support student learning to produce instructional opportunities and environments that best support students at varying levels (Bornfreund, 2012). This could even be said to be more important in the early grades, as teachers must be supported in helping each child build a foundation on which the rest of their learning will rest. Given this responsibility, how can graduate programs or school districts ignore the obligation to ensure that elementary school leaders understand how to create and support learning environments for early learners?

### ***Limitations***

Drawing strong conclusions for this study proved somewhat difficult due to the small sample sizes. The goal was to acquire sample sizes of at least fifteen because there are eighteen leaders who have completed the early childhood endorsement program. The sample size for study two was only five, which makes it difficult to complete an accurate quantitative analysis based on a normal distribution. The sample sizes for the two groups of participants in study three were four and thirty. Making broad generalizations for a larger population can be challenging when the actual sample sizes are small.

Unfortunately, uncontrollable factors may have impacted participants' willingness to participate in the study. During the time of this research study, the world was facing a global Coronavirus pandemic which drastically altered the work and lifestyle culture of much of the world, including the populations sampled for this study. Due to the threatening and mitigating circumstances of the spread of COVID-19, many people experienced a heightened sense of fear, anxiety, and stress. In addition, many were confined to their homes which resulted in working remotely from home daily. This was a new experience for the specific population studied. School and district leaders are used to a fast-paced, minute-by-minute daily school experience. The impacts of COVID-19 required them to run their schools from behind a computer at home, facilitating and leading meetings via web-based video conferences and completing other computer-based work. For many this led to various levels of exhaustion, frustration, and stress. Not only were a number of these leaders supporting staff from home, but they were also working

with their own children to provide home-schooling, caring for ill family members, ill themselves, or struggling to maintain positive mental health conditions for themselves and those around them. The invitations for studies two and three were sent out around the time that many school and district leaders had just completed the end of the virtual school year and they may not have prioritized participation in such an online experience, given their circumstances and assumed fatigue with digital devices due to working remotely.

### ***Conclusion***

In conclusion, this research suggests that school leaders do not perceive that there is an alignment between an early childhood endorsement program with early childhood leadership competencies. However, there is evidence of some impact on the leadership competencies for those completing the program specific to competency two. This is not to suggest that school leaders should not consider early childhood endorsement programs as viable avenues for professional development. If leaders are interested in participating in such programs, they will need to be intentional about making connections to early childhood leadership competencies while completing the program. This might be done by creating peer or study groups with those in like roles so that leaders can discuss connections to leadership and the competencies.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study suggests that the sample group did not provide evidence of perceptions of alignment between the early childhood endorsement program and the early childhood leadership competencies, however, due to the small sample

size, the conclusions are difficult to generalize. Even so, it may still be beneficial for elementary school leaders working with early grades to participate in structured learning opportunities such as early childhood endorsement. If this is the path chosen by leaders, it may prove to be a more advantageous opportunity if several things are provided to increase the likelihood that leaders can increase their awareness and implementation of practices demonstrating early childhood leadership competencies.

The specific early childhood endorsement program studied was a cohort program where participants stayed in the same class group for each course (Omaha Public Schools, 2016). District leaders managing course registrations might consider placing school and district leaders in the same cohort rather than dividing them into different class groups. By clustering the leaders into one class group it could increase the probability that leaders, through discussion and group work, can help one another make connections between course content and early childhood leadership competencies. Currently, there may be two to three school or district leaders in each class group, but if leaders are placed into one class group with one another, this provides a group of leaders of about seven to nine per class group.

Additional supports to help leaders make connections between early childhood endorsement course content and early childhood leadership competencies could also be considered. District and university endorsement program facilitators could provide an alternative elective course for school leaders, addressing leadership in early childhood education with a focus on the leadership

competencies. In addition, systematic structures for leaders to support and work with one another outside of class could be provided. These could include peer visits to each other's worksites to observe how others are implementing practices demonstrating early childhood leadership competencies.

The school district might also consider other avenues of support school and district leaders to learn more about early childhood leadership competencies outside of the early childhood endorsement program. Perhaps, there are opportunities for in-person or virtual professional development that can be incorporated into the school year or provided as optional learning opportunities throughout school breaks. Because time is also limited, there may be few occasions where district leaders can focus solely on early childhood leadership competencies with district and school leaders but pairing this information with prioritized topics of interest for leadership and professional development would be key. According to Student Achievement Partners (2019), professional learning must be content-focused and connected to the daily work that practitioners do. In this case, the information on leadership competencies would be not be presented in an isolated manner, but instead connected and infused within topics that are already being highlighted and of interest to principals in their day to day work with early grades teachers and students.

In Omaha, Nebraska we are also poised with community partners who can support metropolitan Omaha school districts in increasing the number of elementary school and district administrators who are in a position to support leaders in understanding early childhood leadership competencies. Two

organizations that are set up well to provide this support to districts in a coherent way include the Metropolitan Omaha Education Consortium and the Buffett Early Childhood Institute.

High-quality early education that increases the likelihood that students enter school ready for kindergarten is one of MOEC's primary goals and a key lever in closing the achievement gap and improving outcomes for students (Gutman & Ritchie, 2014; McKay Wilson, 2009). Another MOEC goal is to ensure students graduate from high school prepared for college or career. Both goals go hand in hand, and by focusing on education in the early grades school systems can impact the number of students that are on track for success in upper elementary grades throughout high school graduation. Building leaders play a significant role in helping to craft learning environments that focus on student learning and developmental needs in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade and MOEC is an organization that is structured in such a way as to help districts, and partnering universities, work together to increase principal competencies in this area.

Since MOEC has already engaged district leadership in conversations around providing successful transitions into kindergarten and beyond, the organization is poised to work with leaders to determine a standard set of competencies that principals of elementary school buildings should exhibit as leaders of early childhood programs, PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Districts could use these standard competencies to build their own programs of principal professional learning that can be sustained over time and connected to current district systems

and programs. School districts could also align these competencies to principal evaluation systems that are used to evaluate and provide feedback to principals.

By providing a venue for collaboration between district leaders and local universities, MOEC can also take its partnerships with districts even further by standing ready to lead discussions on how these stakeholders can bring together resources, theoretical knowledge, and practical expertise for Omaha area principals that is focused on leadership in PreK-3<sup>rd</sup> grade settings. Creative solutions for addressing and increasing principal competencies in this area might be initiated and cultivated through MOEC committee discussions or superintendent meetings. Discussions around pooling resources for professional learning opportunities, or opportunities for districts and the University to work together to provide practical learning experiences for principals across the metropolitan area, could be an avenue that MOEC helps district leaders explore.

Many of the participating MOEC districts are looking to increase access to quality early childhood in their respective districts, but simply providing funding and access does not guarantee high-quality learning experiences for students. According to Shahbazi and Salintri (2016), the value of early childhood education is on the rise and school leaders and policymakers should seek ways to provide and support ongoing professional development and expertise of practitioners, including school leaders.

Another Omaha based organization that has already begun supporting Omaha's educational leaders in early childhood is the Buffett Early Childhood Institute (BECI). The institute has many components included in their work and

advocacy for young children. They currently provide instructional, classroom, and leadership support to schools in 12 of the metropolitan area elementary schools. Principals receive significant support from a leadership mentor, as well as participate in collegial learning communities where they can discuss successes, concerns, and problem-solve with one another. The institute also offers specific workshops aimed at increasing school and district leaders' practices in supporting early grades initiatives (Leadership Institute Will Focus on School as Hub for Birth - Grade 3, 2017).

Since the Buffett Early Childhood Institute is already set up to support the work that leaders do to implement practices that demonstrate early childhood leadership competencies, perhaps this is an area where the organization could seek to expand their influence. As was suggested for MOEC, BECI too could partner with graduate programs to support the incorporation of early childhood leadership competencies into their coursework. They might even support the graduate programs in providing, or creating, elective coursework to expand an upcoming leader's knowledge in the early childhood leadership competencies. The Institute could also look at providing their own competency-based leadership programs for cohorts of early childhood leaders that focus on a systematic and aligned series of topics, focused on leadership competencies for early childhood leaders.

## **Recommendations for Further Research**

There is limited research on the alignment of early childhood leadership competencies and early childhood endorsement programs, which suggests the importance and of further research to be conducted in this area.

The small sample groups utilized for portions of this study also suggest the need for additional research when or where larger populations to sample from might be available. Having a larger sample group may help the researcher draw stronger conclusions from a normal distribution of data. The sample group might come from a different early childhood endorsement program or the researcher might combine several programs together to draw from a larger population.

A study of this topic from a qualitative perspective may lead to new and interesting themes and conclusions. If participants can respond to open-ended questions, then the researcher may be able to draw out key evidence to further explain findings from the study. The researcher may also be able to identify specific ways that study participants have implemented practices related to the early childhood endorsement competencies, which may better inform whether or not there is an alignment between the endorsement course work and the early childhood leadership competencies.

In addition, a pre- and post-analysis of participant self-assessment ratings based on the early childhood leadership competencies may provide greater insight into how the participants in the study may grow in their understanding and use of early childhood leadership competencies.

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