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THE DEVELOPMENT OF STEP UP TO QUALITY:

WHAT IT MEANS FOR FAMILIES

By

Patricia A. Drewes-Hynek

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

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Major: Educational Leadership

Under the Supervision of Dr. Jeanne L. Surface

Omaha, Nebraska

April 2017

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF STEP UP TO QUALITY:
WHAT IT MEANS FOR FAMILIES

Patricia A. Drewes-Hynek, M.S./CCC-SLP

University of Nebraska, 2017

Advisor: Dr. Jeanne L. Surface, Ed.D.

In June 2013 the Nebraska legislature signed into being LB507, also known as the Step Up to Quality Act. Designed to answer the need for quality early childhood care and experiences across the state of Nebraska, Step Up to Quality is Nebraska's Quality Rating and Improvement System. Years in the making, Step Up to Quality aims to provide accountability for child care programs receiving state child care subsidy returns, increase family access to early childhood experiences through lowering of the income requirement levels to receive child care subsidy, and to provide an objective rating system for child care providers that will allow families to visually see the level of quality in a prospective child care program. This study identifies the history of Step Up to Quality, including how the bill was developed and implemented through the use of pilot studies, nationwide examinations of quality rating systems currently in use, and focus groups in order to answer questions relating to the involvement of families during the development process. This study also seeks to answer questions about how the results of Step Up to Quality will be shared with families and communities in Nebraska.

Acknowledgements and Dedication

Dedicated to my husband, Jim, for always believing I could.

And to Dr. Jeanne Surface, for helping me to discover new ways to ask and answer
questions.

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Chapter 1: The Girl in the Warm House

The thermostat in the car read 98 degrees as the air conditioner ran on high, blasting myself and my partner for the day with cold air on the drive to the next appointment. She and I reviewed the case file for the next family we were approaching. This was an older mother and father who had one older, school aged son in the home and a younger daughter who just turned two and a half. The mother contacted the school district with continued concerns with her daughter's language development. This was the school district's third visit with this family and child. As I read through past reports, it was evident that the mother's concerns were variable, and as my partner reflected on her past experiences with the family, this evidence became even more grounded. At times, the mother had concerns with the daughter not walking or talking, but typically when the school district arrived, the concerns were diminished or the mother retracted her statements. As my partner stated, "we have been trying to catch this little one for a year, we are worried, but can't seem to convince the mom to be worried, too." This was expected to be a case of asking to please, let us evaluate and help your child and family.

We pulled up to the small home with a front yard full of weeds and overgrown bushes and parked in a driveway filled with cracks. The family's service coordinator is also there, waiting in her car, enjoying her last few minutes of cool air. As we exited the blessedly cool car into stifling, hot, humid air, we gathered our items from the trunk and walked to the front door, greeting the services coordinator. The doorbell was broken, so we knocked. And we wait. We try again. Finally a third try and the mother comes to the door. She is apologetic and welcomes us into her home. She again apologizes, the air

conditioner is not working, there is no cool air in the house, but luckily she has some fans set up to try to move the air around. To say it was hot is an understatement and my first thought is what resources do we have to help this family fix the air conditioner; this cannot be a safe environment for the child or family. As we engage with the family, it becomes clear the mother is sincerely concerned about her child's development, and we also can see the need in the child's language and play skills. As we begin our conversations, I ask about child care. The mother admits she struggles to find someone to take care of her daughter, and she just can't afford a "good place." She frequently used the term "good place" when describing where she would like to take her daughter during the day, but never clarifies what this means. Does she mean somewhere safe? Somewhere with other children her daughter's age? The mother also does not name the childcare she has been using, so we probe some more. We ask more questions, trying to find out where her daughter is during the day, and the mother finally states that she is with a neighbor who watches several children during the day, but the mother knows this is not a great place for the young girl and wants to find a "good place." Again, those words. I ask more about what she means when she says "good place." She begins by saying, "you know, one of those good places you see." I ask more questions, finally narrowing her description of "good place" to someplace with nice toys, where the teachers are nice to the children, and where her daughter is safe and can learn and be ready for Kindergarten. This is a common response from families when asked about childcare – they want their children to be kindergarten or school ready, but often aren't sure what that means beyond writing their name and knowing the letters.

Once we have an idea of what she wants in childcare, we talk about providing her a list of licensed providers within the school district, and her first question is what it means to be licensed. I start to explain about state requirements and how many children can be in the home. The mother begins to ask more questions about the cost of these places. As I continue to explain and answer questions, it becomes clear that this mother is not interested in finding out if a childcare provider has met the state requirements; this mother is mostly concerned with how to pay for the childcare, how to transport her child there, and what hours the childcare is open. A license is a small piece of the puzzle to this parent, and a piece that in the end would potentially be discarded in favor of an environment that is close to home and within the budget. Our challenge with this family is not helping them understand the importance of quality childcare, they clearly want what is best for their child, but rather, to help them find childcare that is within a specific area, price range, and hourly availability range. The quality and licensing is low on the list of childcare requirement. We finally leave the home after extensive conversations about the young girl and what the next steps are with the school district, as we have determined that this child qualifies for early intervention services.

As we climb back into the car and turn back on the air conditioner, my partner comments to me that “it shouldn’t be so hard for a family to find good childcare that is affordable.” And she is right. Early childhood education should not be un-obtainable to families. Families should have the knowledge to investigate early childhood educational opportunities to determine if they are the right fit for their family and child needs, and then be able to pursue those opportunities at every income level. Steve Barnett, a researcher whose focus has included the long term impact preschool has on a child’s

educational development, as well as early childhood education opportunity disparities, including his best known work on benefit-cost analyses of the Perry Preschool and Abecedarian projects, noted in his writing on preschool education policy, early childhood education should not be viewed in terms of an economic deficit or privilege, and it should not be assumed that if a family believes early education is a good investment that they will provide that opportunity, as many families are economically unable to invest in their children through early childhood opportunities (Barnett, 1990). Things such as having air conditioning in the dead heat of summer often become more important and crucial to the family well-being than providing early childhood experiences.

The youngest learners, the children upon which society will grow, are the key to success for society and community. These young learners will grow into successful, contributing adults, but only if they are provided with the components of development that lead to success. Early childhood education is a hot topic, and for good reason. Through the provision of high quality early childhood experiences, children can reach outcomes and experiences which they may not have access to without the early childhood initiatives. Through exposure to high quality learning opportunities and interactions, a child's trajectory for success can be changed for the better, and it is up to the community to ensure that children have those opportunities.

Early childhood learning is social activity. Children learn through engagement with others, both adults and peers. As noted in Vygotsky's work, social learning is an important component to early childhood education. Children learn through observing and participating in social interactions. By providing children with the opportunity to observe

and participate in high quality social interactions, early childhood educators are providing a solid foundation from which future learning and interactions can grow.

Early childhood education is a term that has fluctuated and changed throughout history. The changes have come when changes in family needs for childcare have developed. Initial childcare programs in the United States were focused on religious studies for the affluent children and families. With the industrial revolution, the need for childcare developed out of the need of families to work and child labor laws. From there, early childhood has continued to progress and mold into the current state of early childhood education, which includes structured programs and family care, along with a variety of family needs related to early childhood. One component that has been present, often in the background, has been a need for quality early childhood programs. From an early time, proponents of early childhood education have called for quality early childhood experiences and have touted the impact that a quality experience can have on life-long goals and accomplishments for children. How quality is implemented, what it means, and how state, federal, and local legislations have become involved has developed into the current state of policy development and implementation and the current early childhood practices now in place.

The idea of quality early childhood experiences, and the impact that early childhood experience has on long term success, both in educational and social settings is not a new idea or concept. What is required from early childhood programs, how families access those programs, and what is considered a quality early childhood experience has changed. As society has moved from less to more economically driven and families have changed from patriarchal monarchies to dual income, dual led families,

and even the term “family” has changed, the need for and requirements of early childhood programs has changed. This change of need leads to changes with policy, with programs, and with what is offered to families. The issue is which is most important, and which of the three spokes drives the changes or determines what is “quality” in early childhood.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has included “quality” as a part of their accreditation system for years. The NAEYC website states that part of the purpose of accreditation is “ensuring the quality of children’s daily experiences in early childhood programs.” In this way the term quality is used as an overarching term under which falls components, such as environment, leadership, curriculum, relationships, and staff. It should be argued that no one of these components equals quality, but rather by a program ensuring that it is exemplary in each area does it become a quality program.

This is just one organization’s definition of quality that has led to policy development. Policies and legislation, along with learning standards and requirements have also been developed based upon state learning standards, and the need for students to meet specific marks of achievement. There is a large push currently to create early childhood experiences that create students that are “school ready.” This school readiness idea has found itself being closely tied to quality, and a program can be perceived as lower quality if the ideas and learning being presented is not creating or leading to school readiness.

The idea of quality from a childcare center or school perspective must also be considered. Early childhood staff tend to focus on the working conditions, the hours and

the pay, along with the communication and support from management and their co-workers (Ishimine & Tayler, 2014). Early childhood directions and leads focus on teacher ratios, teacher qualifications, and licensing requirements when considering quality. With ongoing licensing requirements, including continuing education, directors can be focused on meeting state criteria as a way of determining if they are a quality center.

Family perspective of quality in early childhood experiences is a third component of promoting and ensuring quality in early childhood. Families are varied, and so are their thoughts on what is considered a quality early childhood setting. Some families choose to enroll their children in highly structured, accredited early childhood learning environments. Some families choose to place their children in a home based program, which can be a smaller, more family like environment. Some families choose to have an adult be home with the child during the day, be that a parent, nanny, or other caregiver. Each of these experiences is different, yet it cannot be assumed that one is less quality than another. As noted by Ishimine and Tayler, family views of quality in early childhood education tend to be focused primarily on flexibility of operating time and sick care, with a high emphasis being placed on the need for early childhood services to be available when needed by the family (Ishimine & Tayler, 2014). This viewpoint is seconded by the input from the mother in the above case. This is a parent who knows she wants her daughter to be in a safe, “good” environment, but also recognizes that cost, location, and available hours are going to outweigh quality checkpoints pushed by others.

Family involvement with quality experiences in early childhood is also hindered by the issue that the responsibility of finding, paying for, and monitoring the quality of

the early childhood environment in which the child is placed, typically falls upon the family (Olson, 2002). While licensing and accreditation requirements can help to ease this burden on families, many families are not aware of what the requirements for licensing and accreditation are, or are unaware of how to determine if a child care provider is licensed, just as the mother above was not aware of what it meant to be licensed, and even when educated on the meaning and intent behind licensing in the state, reiterated that her priority was cost, location, and hours. Again, while this family recognizes the importance of what the mother called “a good place” for her child to learn and develop, economical and family needs outweighed the ability to procure and fund a high quality early childhood experience. This family in particular had to make a choice between paying more for child care and having basic needs met at home.

With the knowledge that early childhood education is family driven and often the participation in early childhood experiences is based on family economic stability, the idea of early childhood education being comprehensive and inclusive of all areas of the child’s life is important. By providing a comprehensive program that includes the family and the well-being of the entire child, not just the educational component, a quality early childhood experience can turn into a journey of success for that child and family. But that success hinges on that concept of “quality” in early childhood.

In Nebraska, the Buffett Early Childhood Institute has recently taken a lead in the charge to improve early childhood education across the state, with a majority presence in Omaha and Lincoln. This agency defines quality in early childhood in regard to the class size, staff to child ratios, skilled staff, and the environment. The agency also includes the responsiveness of the caregivers and the instructional tools that are used in defining

quality. By analyzing the variety of terms and perspectives, it can be generalized that the idea of quality is a vast idea with a clear definition hard to pin down. However, the majority of the leaders in the field recognize that quality in early childhood hinges upon the environment that the child is placed within and the adults, materials, and instruction that then surrounds the child.

A more clear way to approach the idea of quality in early childhood, a way that includes the environment and the people and processes within that environment that surrounds the child, is to view quality in terms of two separate agencies – process and structural. Process quality includes the dynamic and difficult to measure components of care, which include the interactions between the children with the adults, the environment, and with other children. These components are changeable and can vary between environments. The second agency, structural quality, includes the features of child care that do not change; the static features. This includes the child-staff ratio, teacher qualifications, curriculum and instructional content, and accreditation (Jenkins, 2014). Both types of quality must be addressed in order to obtain a high quality early childhood experience, and both types of quality must be considered when developing and implementing a policy focused on early childhood.

Policy in Early Childhood

As early childhood programs and needs have changed over the years, so have policies related to these changes. Policies have addressed licensing requirements, structure, and facility or environments. Most recently, as the push toward quality early childhood experiences for all has moved forward, policies have been developed across the nation to address how to manage and monitor what are deemed to be quality practices

within the early childhood environment and educational setting. Within Nebraska a new policy has been implemented that addresses this issue within community child care centers across the state. When considering if a new policy will be successful, we must consider a variety of components.

Early childhood policy can best be described as a three legged stool, in which each leg is a necessary component to a successfully implemented and developed policy. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, the three legs include a focus on health and nutrition, as a child who is not properly fed or in good health cannot access the educational environment around him. The second leg is focused on early care and education, which is typically the main focus of early childhood education. The final leg is parent and economic supports. With all three legs of the stool considered, a quality early childhood policy should encompass the entire child, which includes wrap around services that bring the family into the equation of success. With any component missing, the stool would fall over; a policy would not be considered to be successful. Early childhood policies and education varies greatly between states and even between counties and school districts within a state. Many programs include home based services or interventions in conjunction with school based education, however just as many programs and services only focus on the component of the early childhood stool.

In addition to addressing the above three components, a successful policy is one that is built and developed from an identified need. In the case of early childhood, that need must also define what a child needs in terms of quality child care or early childhood experiences (Rust, 2003). As educators, we are also aware that early childhood experiences reach well beyond the public school setting, so an inclusive, successful

policy must also extend beyond the realm of public school districts to include the wider community within its guidance.

In addition to identifying a need or an area of focus for a policy, it also must be considered that the determined “need” in the area of early childhood could fluctuate in the future. As society continues to change and morph from highly patriarchal, single income homes to dual income, often multi-professional homes with more than two generations within a home, the identified “need” in the area of early childhood continues to morph. Currently, in Nebraska, 46.5% of 3 and 4 year olds are enrolled in school (Voices for Children, 2016), and this number will continue to rise. Historically, public school pre-kindergarten enrollment has steadily increased since 1998 (4,137 children) through 2013 (14,457 children). This steadily increasing pace of enrollment is an important factor when considering how to implement a quality control policy across the state. Adding to the challenge of success for this type of policy is the capacity of and availability of licensed child care for families across the state. According to the Kids Count report for Nebraska, there are a total of 3,385 licensed child care facilities within the state, with a total capacity of 113,735, with distinct areas of the state going without any licensed facilities. The identified need of both licensed and quality programs across the state strongly supports the need of a policy to manage these programs movement toward becoming “high quality.”

In Nebraska, the answer to the need for a policy addressing quality early childhood experiences has been to implement LB 507, also known as the “Step Up to Quality Act.” This act and system is targeted at improving early childhood education programs statewide. Through the quality improvement process that is the act, early

childhood programs will continuously reflect on their strengths and needs, while participating in program activities designed to improve the overall quality of the program. As with any new policy, success is determined by outcomes. With a new policy being implemented, the initial success will be based upon “building shared understanding and the capacity of educators to apply new knowledge and to support change and improved practice within their service” (Irvine & Price, 2014). As with any policy change, shared vision and the ability of the participants to take new knowledge and skills and change practices is the cornerstone of success. With Nebraska’s new policy, the ability of those early childhood providers to change and build upon current practices will be what determines the outcomes of the policy.

Another component to the consequences of policy implementation is how the individual’s tasked with implementing and following through on the policy components interpret the policy details and requirements, and in turn act on those details and requirements. A policy can be well written, and well thought out, but without consideration of the local issues that could impact policy implementation and interpretation, a policy could fail (McLaughlin, 1987). With a policy that is designed to be implemented state wide, within a variety of communities, which includes a variety of social-economic and cultural components, the policy could face different local issues in different locations. These local issues could be “make or break” situations for the policies success.

In regard to any change within a community, society, or organization, the capacity and will of those participating in the change must be considered. While the policy can address the capacity of the individuals or organizations through trainings and professional

development opportunities, “will” is the mysterious unknown factor. Will refers to the attitude or motivation that are a part of the individual’s approach to the policy. This includes the person’s consideration of the value or importance of the policy and its requirements (McLaughlin, 1987). While a policy might present pressure and support to encourage participants to adhere to the requirements to create change, the motivation and the “buy in” that those individuals have to the identified change is what will create success. If those we are asking to change are not motivated to change or do not see the benefit in the change, the change will not occur.

Step Up to Quality Overview

Step Up to Quality, the quality rating improvement system that Nebraska has chosen to implement, addresses quality experiences in early childhood education through the actions of the adults around the child, not by directly measuring child outcomes. Through the use of rating scales, observations, and professional development, Step Up to Quality attempts to create exceptional learning environments for any child anywhere in the state. This type of rating system allows the providers to embrace the tasks and challenges associated with the program. As one provider writes in her blog, “we see ourselves as a critical part of the solution to closing the achievement gap among Nebraska’s youngest children because the environments we offer to children in our care are healthy, stable, and stimulating” (Schneider & Bimler, 2015). Step Up to Quality offers providers the skills to be advocates for their own programs in aiding children in bridging the gap between young learners.

Step Up to Quality is also unique in that it encompasses both the environmental safety issues that are related to “quality” as well as the issues relating to preparing our

youngest learners to be able to participate in Kindergarten, or school based learning environments. Each is equally important, as without a safe environment, a child cannot participate and focus on learning the skills needed to access education. Step Up to Quality nicely handles both components, as the developers recognized that each component cannot alone dictate quality in early childhood (Common ground, 2015).

Using a quality based rating program allows programs to not only concretely receive feedback on areas of success and improvement, but also allows programs to be recognized for their gains and levels of functioning. The Step Up to Quality program will be offering to the public ratings on the participating programs. Program information will be shared that shows the level at which a program is currently functioning. The public will also be made aware of the steps within the rating scale, and how a program could move between the steps. Some programs will enter at Step 1, other programs will enter at Step 3, based on funding received and how the program is classified. For example, a school based program will automatically enter at Step 3, due to the higher levels of requirements for that type of certification from the state. In other words, the school based program already met Steps 1-2 within the rating scale. By offering coaching and professional development activities, Step Up to Quality will support programs who desire to move up on the rating steps/scale. The program also offers some financial incentives to programs, which may also encourage further growth in programs that are lacking.

While the main focus of Step Up to Quality is on the childcare programs themselves, the rating system also includes family and community education as a key component. Step Up to Quality will provide family and community information and resources, directly related to how to select a quality early learning experience for your

child, as well as information on what “quality” in early childhood means or how it might appear. Recognizing that the family is a key component to success in early childhood, Step Up to Quality ensures that they are included in ensuring every child has the opportunity to access a quality early learning experience.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to identify the links between past and present early childhood policy development, early childhood program development, and family influence on the early childhood experience. Through the use of a review of a current early childhood policy, this study will seek to learn how a current policy came into being, including the development of, the use of, and the proposed intent of the policy, including how data from the targeted study will be used to educate families within the state in regard to early childhood education and policy. This study will also identify the history of the targeted early childhood policy at the state level, including information on the purpose of policy changes or updates, and the relationship between the policy and the drive toward quality experiences. Finally, this study will identify the role of family perspective on early childhood experiences, and identify if families are driving the changes and progression in early childhood experience or if families are responding to the changes. This study will utilize family perspectives on a current policy in early childhood in Nebraska to analyze if that policy was developed with the family perspective in mind, along with determining if the implementation of the policy impacts family involvement in building quality in early childhood.

Research Questions

Who participated in the development of this policy? Did families and childcare providers actively have a voice in the policy development, as they are going to be key to the implementation and success of the policy?

How does this policy compare to similar policies implemented in neighboring states? Did policy developers consider the impact similar policies have had on the increase of quality in early childhood in other states? Is this policy based directly off another state's policy?

How will the results and the data from the policy be used to inform families and the state about improvements to quality in early childhood? Will families be made aware of changes that have occurred within early childhood programs or what changes are necessary? What form of family education will occur to help families become familiar with the policy and its required changes?

Methodology

Qualitative research is driven by the researcher's philosophy related to society. Articulation of the philosophy upon which the research questions and research design are based, can clarify for both the researcher herself as well as the readers the assumptions and stance the researcher takes in relation to the research questions and data being gathered.

The underlying philosophy driving this study is that of Pragmatism, and the approach is that of Basic Pragmatism. This philosophy drives the research as it proposes to link theory and practice related to the development of LB507. Savin-Baden, noted qualitative researcher, with a focus on examining the value and use of qualitative research

in higher education, noted in her book “Qualitative Research: The Essential Guide to Theory and Practice,” that the Pragmatism philosophy recognizes that “the truth of an idea is dependent upon its workability; ideas or principles are true in so far as they work” (page 60). By searching for the answers to the presented research questions in the processes used to develop the legislation, this study proposes to determine the workability or potential success of the theories and ideas behind LB507.

The Basic Pragmatism approach can include a mixture of several approaches, drawing upon the most sensible and practical methods available in order to answer the given research questions. The research approach in question for this study is what Savin-Baden refers to in text *Qualitative Research: The Essential Guide to Theory and Practice*, as Basic Pragmatism, which is considered to be a meeting point of description and interpretation. Through the presentation of facts, feelings and experiences of the participants, this can include the researcher, and the researcher’s interpretation of those facts, feelings, and experiences. While there is no one correct way to conduct a study using the Pragmatic approach, the advantage of using this approach for this research is that it allows the researcher to pair the facts relating to the development of the policy in question to the feelings and experiences of families directly impacted by this policy. In addition to the families, the researcher herself is impacted by the policy in question in the daily work for her professional role. The outcome of this study will enable the researcher to identify the systems in place that developed the policy, who was involved in that policy development, and the impact the policy has on families in Nebraska and their ability to access quality early childhood experiences for their children.

The research approach of Pragmatic qualitative research aligns with the research questions and the drive to understand the processes related to the creation and implementation of LB507. Through the use of document analysis the data will be investigated to find the relationship between the policy, its development, the history of early childhood programming in Nebraska, and family involvement in both the development of the policy and in accessing early childhood educational services. Informal interviews and conversations with a selected family who is living in poverty will enhance the findings in the analysis by providing a low socioeconomic family perspective on the data. The selection of a family living in poverty was made as the challenges that occur with families with lower incomes accessing high quality childcare that accepts subsidies or is within the budgetary range necessary provide a unique perspective on the issues. As the conversations take place, the researcher will take notes and develop further probing questions or topics to further understand the intent behind the family's message. Documents and data to be considered include items related to the development of LB507, including the policy itself, along with any historical documents related to the development of the legislative bill, including news articles, research connected to the policy, and legislative information related to the passing of the bill.

Conceptual Framework

The framework upon which the research questions are based is built upon the definition of quality in early childhood as two agencies working together to create a comprehensive quality experience, with those agencies being structural and process quality. In addition to this viewing of quality in early childhood, using the three legged approach to building a quality educational policy is also a key concept in the

development of this research project. The necessary components of a focus on child health and nutrition, early care and education, and parent and economic supports collide together to create a successfully developed and potentially implemented policy. By using these concept lenses to view the educational policy in question, the answers and findings to the research questions can lead to valuable information on the development and implementation of the policy in question.

Definition of Terms

Quality: There are two components to quality in early childhood education, structural quality and process quality. (Ishimine & Tayler, 2014).

Structural Quality: Components of the early childhood facility that relate to resources, such as staff ratio and qualifications. These components tend to be more easily identifiable and measurable, and are typically influenced by government policies and regulations, financing, and curriculum (Ishimine & Tayler, 2014).

Process Quality: Components of the early childhood facility that relate to the “nature of interactions between the children and teachers, among children, and among adults” (Ishimine & Tayler, 2014). These components require more in-depth observations to measure, as they are social components.

Child Care: Regularly scheduled non-parental care for children aged birth-12 years that can occur in a variety of settings, including a child care center, a child care home, a relative’s home, or any other location outside of the family home environment (Jenkins, 2014).

Head Start: A federally funded program for children aged 3 and 4 years who are financially disadvantaged. This program provides family centered care and center based

care for the child. Head Start is typically a program that is provided through partnership contracts with local agencies or school districts, and which uses the three legged stool approach to child development (Jenkins, 2014).

Pre-Kindergarten: A part day program that provides 1-2 years of educational services for children aged 3 or 4 years of age before entry into kindergarten. These types of programs focus only on the educational programming and do not typically provide “whole child” levels of care (Jenkins, 2014).

Home Visiting: Education and coaching provided by a trained practitioner with the parent and child inside the family home. Visits typically focus on child development or family needs (Jenkins, 2014).

Early Childhood Center: A brick and mortar building that provides childcare programs for children from birth through school aged. Services from birth include the earliest point after birth that a center would accept a child for services. For many centers, this is 6-8 weeks of age. An early childhood center can include a preschool program, childcare program, or after school program.

School Aged: Children that are of kindergarten age through age eight years. For the state of Nebraska this includes any child who is age 5 by July 31st of the given year, per the Nebraska Department of Education website (www.education.ne.gov).

Early Childhood: A term that describes the field of study relating to children age birth through age eight years.

Family: Any person or persons who provide direct care for a child which includes food, shelter, and clothing. This includes any person who lives with the child. A family can

include biological parents, foster, step, or adoptive parents, grandparents (biological or otherwise), siblings, aunts, uncles, or non-relatives.

Delimitations

As this study is limited to the analysis of one legislative bill and policy within the state of Nebraska, generalizations regarding policy development in other states and legislative bodies should be undertaken with consideration of the unique properties of the state and policy in question.

The family being considered during this research limit the collection of a variety of viewpoints and experiences related to early childhood experiences. The information they provide will be based on their experience and personal bias. Some data may be missed during the conversations and time with the family, as the conversation may follow a direction that was not predicted. In addition, the family being considered is one in which poverty is part of their lifestyle, and the challenges that go along with a lower socioeconomic situation can create unique perspectives on the issues within this research.

Positionality Statement

As an early childhood professional who communicates daily with families and community childcare providers, the issues that surround the access and availability of high quality early childhood experiences is foremost in my mind. Families struggle to understand the licensure requirements, and are often forced to accept childcare opportunities that are less than quality due to cost and location. Providers are faced with recruiting and retaining employees that are educated and well trained, and who implement curriculum and learning opportunities in the best manner, but are often limited in the compensation they can offer employees. Often neither group is well educated on

the policies that are already in place, or are in development, that impact both areas. The overall policies that govern childcare licensing, and even the policies that determine the offerings of childcare and preschool opportunities to targeted groups of children are driven by a variety of reasons, including societal need and the changes that have occurred in childcare needs over time. As an increasing number of children participate in out of the home child care, including extended days of child care, careful policy development should consider family input, provider input, and current needs. Through this research I hope to further inspect the relationship between policy development, changes in childcare needs, and the role of the family in both. By identifying the relationships, future change can be implemented to increase the involvement or education of families or providers if needed.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Research: A review of professional research indicates that more research is needed in the area of family contribution to early childhood policy development and in the area of family education on quality in early childhood. The review also indicates that the development of early childhood policy is often foreign to families.

Contribution to Practice: This research will be shared with early childhood professionals in order to guide practices related to family involvement in developing and pursuing quality early childhood practices and policy in Nebraska. This research will also help to guide potential family engagement and learning opportunities to enhance family knowledge related to early childhood policy and quality, along with aiding families in becoming advocates for early childhood.

Contribution to Policy: Based on this research, policy makers may include families more frequently or to a higher level in policy development related to quality in early childhood.

Summary of Chapter 1

Policy development in early childhood strives to embrace the changes in the field of early childhood while also supporting the current needs of families for early childhood experiences for their youngest learners. Seeking out quality early childhood experiences for young learners can often leave families feeling uneducated and lost when wading through the numerous choices with which they faced. Step Up to Quality seeks to aid families in finding quality early childhood experiences by putting a number on the level of quality a family can find from an early childhood provider participating in the program. This study seeks to determine if Step Up to Quality was designed with family perspectives in mind and with family voices heard as a part of the development team. The study also seeks to examine the history behind the development of Step Up to Quality to analyze the level of family participation in the development of the legislature, along with looking at the implementation of the policy and its inclusion of family education and involvement.

Chapter 2: The History of Quality in Early Childhood in Nebraska

What is now known as Step Up to Quality, or Legislative Bill 507, began to surface back in 1999 when state legislatures first began to toy with the idea of measuring quality in early and childhood in Nebraska. At that time only two other states in the nation had implemented Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS), with Oklahoma being the first to start a quality rating system in 1998 (LB507:Step Up To Quality, 2013). While this first chatter of systems of measuring quality faded away, it remained in the background of conversations at the state level, arising again in 2001 and 2005.

Consortium Study

A group of states, a consortium, made of up researchers in Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, and Nebraska was formed in 2001 to complete a randomized stratified study of childcare providers in those four states, as supported by the Gallup organization (LB507:Step Up To Quality, 2013). The outcome of that study demonstrated that a large percentage of early childhood providers and programs were not high-quality early childhood care. The study assessed high quality through the use of a test instrument that utilized rigorous observations to determine a level of quality. Dr. Helen Raikes, in her testimony to the Health and Human Services Committee on February 20th, 2013, noted that while many programs did not demonstrate high quality, at least 30% of the programs surveyed did, which showed the team that levels of quality in programs across not just Nebraska, but all four states, can be varied. In 2004, this same consortium then implemented a second set of studies that used a quality rating system pilot. This pilot study included early childhood providers in urban and rural areas across Nebraska, to

include 34 center based programs and 47 family childcare providers. The outcome of this pilot program demonstrated that programs would make significant improvement in the levels of quality through the use of training, coaching and feedback, and focus groups. Dr. Raikes noted that the greatest growth seen in the pilot study were in the areas of health and safety and in parent engagement. Dr. Raikes noted that the pilot study showed that a quality rating system could be implemented, and that improvements could be made.

Importantly, the findings from this pilot study led researchers to identify concerns and perceptions related to participating in a QRIS program, along with identifying what supports participants would need in order to participate in such a program in the future. Participant perceptions that were identifying included that QRIS is a tool that provides a standard of quality and leads to improved quality. The participants also recognized that QRIS is a guide for families to select child care, along with being a learning and validation process for the staff members participating. Supports needed in order for programs to participate included financial and technical assistance to both access and use trainings, along with time to make improvements to the programs. A final support would be specific feedback regarding recommendations that were made for improvement. Among the concerns raised by participants in the pilot programs were concerns regarding the observation process. The participants noted that the observation process appeared to be subjective, as there appeared to be observer bias, which could lead to reluctance to be observed. The participants also noted concerns with the length of time required to participate, along with the expense and lack of incentives.

Nebraska State Board of Education Early Childhood Policy Study

In 2005 the Nebraska State Board of Education approved to have the Nebraska Early Childhood Policy Study completed. This study clearly indicated a need in the state for high quality early childhood services for all children in the state. In fact, the identified desired outcome of the policy study was to “Provide high quality, inclusive early childhood services for all Nebraska children from birth through age eight.” The policy study team then went further to identify a vision for early childhood in Nebraska, which included access to early childhood services, having “well-prepared, well-informed, and valued providers of care and education including parents and extended families, who are committed to all children and understand how they learn,” and “education and community services that are ready and able to meet the range of diverse needs of all children” (Nebraska Policy Study, 2005).

This study also identified themes and priorities. One of the themes that arose was the identification of the lack of “quality options for families of young children.” One of the key recommendations that came from this study, based on the identification of the theme of lack of access to quality childcare was to “establish a system for exchanging information with families about the development and learning of young children from birth through age eight” and to “ensure access to high quality early childhood education and care services for all children birth to age three whose families would choose to access such services” (Nebraska Department of Education, 2005).

The participants of the policy study had identified as early as 2005 the need for quality early childhood services across the state, and further addressed the idea of implementing a quality rating system. As one of the solutions for the identified problem

of providing services to children aged birth to three years the policy study team suggested the implementation of a quality rating system (Nebraska Policy Study, 2005).

Race to the Top

Race to the Top, was a federal initiative designed to push states towards education reform using ambitious, transformation plans. Through grants, programs are awarded money to work on those plans and later provide examples for state and local education agencies across the country. As a smaller part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), the Race to the Top funding was set aside to create this competitive grant program. In 2011, Nebraska submitted an application to the third phase of the Race to the Top program, a phase focused on early childhood. The grant submitted would have focused on implementing a quality rating system in the state (Reist, 2011). As a part of the application process, QRIS criteria were revised and included. The revisions proposed five levels of the program, with licensing being the entry level, or Level 1. This was also the time when the name “Step Up to Quality” was proposed for the program. The use of QRIS in the application for Race to the Top spurred interest and a meeting on June 29, 2012 was held with senators. At this meeting interest was expressed in Step Up to Quality and questions were raised regarding how to proceed with implementing the criteria as proposed.

While the application was not successful, a representative for the Holland’s Children’s Movement, a key early childhood advocate in the development of Step Up to Quality, noted that the work that went into the application for Race to the Top was invaluable for the later development of the policy.

Quality Rating and Improvement System Criteria Review Team

The Race to the Top application led directly to September of 2012 and the development of the Quality Rating and Improvement System Criteria Review Team. This team included representatives from the Department of Health and Human Services, specifically in regard to public health, child care licensing, and the child care subsidy, Nebraska Department of Education, specifically the office of Early Childhood, University of Nebraska Medical Center and other universities and colleges, First Five Nebraska, Building Bright Futures, the Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children, and many other stakeholders.

The team began to recognize the impact that a QRIS would allow the state to address. Recognized issues that a QRIS could allow to be addressed by the state included the issue with child care licensing requirements being too low, having few programs across the state that are working to meet national accreditation standards, and the impact that low quality early childhood care and education can have on a child's development. The use of child care subsidy dollars also came to the forefront during these conversations.

Statutes Relating to Child Care Licensure

In 2014, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) published the Statutes Relating to Child Care Licensure, which sourced numerous laws dating back to 1971. This publication included declarations and dictations relating to a variety of child care licensing issues, but also highlighted a documented need for quality child care measures in Nebraska. This document also delineated legislative declarations,

in subset 43-2603, which declared that it would be the policy of the State of Nebraska to recognize

“the family as the most important social and economic unit of society and support the central role parents play in raising children. All parents are encouraged to care for and nurture their children through the traditional methods of parental care at home. However, to the extent early childhood care and education and school-age-care programs are used, parents are encouraged to participate fully in the effort to improve the quality of such programs.”

This clearly indicates the importance of families in child development and to the development and continuation of quality early childhood services in the state. The importance of the family component in early childhood was also brought up in the Nebraska Early Childhood Policy Study, as the study committee identified the need for families to be involved in both establishing a system of communication exchange with providers and families, as well as families being a key component to the development process for young children. As the state moved forward with pursuing the idea of implementing a quality rating system in Nebraska, the theme of family involvement continued to surface, however as the review of this study found, was often placed on a backburner to focus on the early childhood providers, or child care providers.

Step Up to Quality Act

All of this background work, pilot studies, and policy reviews, led the state of Nebraska’s legislature to develop The Step Up to Quality Act. The Step Up to Quality Act, or Legislative Bill 507, is an early childhood policy initiative designed to implement a Quality Rating and Improvement System in Nebraska. The Step Up to Quality Act was

signed into being in June 2013, with steps to implementation placed in the policy. The overall purpose of the policy is to “provide a path to higher quality child care and early childhood education programs” for current programs within the state of Nebraska. By engaging child care providers in a systematic approach to improving quality in early childhood environments, the state hopes to target improved child development and school readiness for children across the state of Nebraska.

This act also hopes to provide families with a tool to use to evaluate the quality of community child care providers. By using the rating provided by the system, families can accurately determine the level of quality of care their children could receive from a specific provider. Currently, families are provided “look for’s” and general tools to help determine if a provider both fits the needs of their family situation and has quality markers, but there is no standard way of measuring quality across the state that a family can rely on; no way to visualize and quantify the level of quality for any provider. By providing families with tools to better understand the child care services they are accessing, child care providers are then driven to offer better services, at better ratings, as a response to a market demand for better services.

Finally, the act drives to provide a level of accountability for public funds invested in child care providers in the state. In the state fiscal year of 2012, a total of 62 providers received more than \$250,000 in child care subsidy reimbursement individually, for a total of over 27 million dollars. At that time there was no way to account for the spending of those funds or the level of care and education the impacted children received. Through LB507, the state will institute a system that will allow for evaluation of the public investment in child care subsidy. Current research shows that many children who

are served by the child care subsidy do not receive quality early childhood experiences, and so arrive to Kindergarten behind their peers developmentally. This causes the public to pay twice for these children – once for the child care subsidy, and then again when they enter school and require special supports to bring them to the same level as their peers.

With the implementation of LB507, policy makers determined that a scaled step up or a gradual implementation of the rating system would best benefit all participants. The policy included specific starting points for child care providers as it also outlined the steps in the rating system and determined when ratings would be made available to the public. Beginning in July 2014, any child care providers receiving more than \$500,000 annually in child care subsidy in fiscal year 2011-2012 would be required to participate. In July 2015, all providers receiving more than \$250,000 annually in subsidy in fiscal year 2011-2012 would join the program, and in July 2016, any provider receiving more than \$250,000 during the previous fiscal year would be required to join. This allows those child care providers who are receiving a substantial amount of public funding to be the first to join the program, and the first to access the supports through the program to improve their quality rating. Any child care provider who does not meet the financial subsidy requirements is not required to join Step Up to Quality, but is able to join and access both the rating scale and the supports.

Jointly overseen by both the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the rating scale outlined by the policy includes five steps, with each step having requirements to meet to then move upward. There are also financial incentives to meeting the requirements and moving

upward through the rating scale. As described in the Program Guide for Step Up to Quality, the first step in the program, Step 1, requires a child care program to apply to participate in Step Up to Quality. In order to apply, providers must complete certain requirements, including having each staff member complete a personal professional record in the Nebraska Early Childhood Professional Record System. This record will include contact information for each staff member, as well as information about that staff member's education, training, credentials, and work experience. A second requirement is for the child care provider to include in their application information about the child care site, including the number of children served, rates charged, if the program is providing services to children with special needs, and if the program provides transportation. Any child care provider who completes all of the requirements for the application process, and is licensed through the state, will receive a rating of Step 1 and can begin to work towards Step 2. The policy does recognize that certain programs have already met the requirements for Step 1 and 2, and automatically begin at Step 3. This includes Head Start programs, nationally accredited programs, and public school district approved programs (Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).

Child care providers can also withdraw from the program at any time. If the child care provider is required to participate, that provider risks loss of the child care subsidy agreement and reimbursement from the Department of Health and Human Services. Withdrawal can also impact that child care provider's license. For a voluntary provider who is participating, that provider can withdraw at any time, however at the time of withdrawal forfeits any advertising of their program or rating and are not eligible for any incentives through the Step Up to Quality Program. If a child care provider chooses to

re-enter the rating program, they will enter as a new program and complete all initial participation requirements.

Once a provider has mastered Step 1 and begins to work towards Step 2, the provider contacts the Nebraska Department of Education Step Up to Quality office for a Coach Interest Questionnaire. If a program is interested, a coach will be assigned to them to facilitate the provider moving through the steps in the Quality Rating and Improvement System. Providers are not required to have a coach, however coaching is an evidence based practice that can help programs to maximize its strengths (Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Coaching can help providers to identify areas of needed improvement, while also providing support for current success. Other benefits to accessing a coach includes having access to a professional who can clarify the Step Up to Quality process while also offering suggestions so that programs can self-assess their own quality levels and be more comfortable with on-site observations.

In addition to completing the Coach Interest Questionnaire, providers must demonstrate completion of designated trainings, including the Early Learning Guidelines Domain Series, the Safe With You Series, and other trainings previously associated with state licensing requirements. Once a program has demonstrated completion of the requirements, they will be assigned to Step 2, and are then able to access incentive bonuses. The amount of incentive rewarded is dependent on the type of license the child care provider carries.

Step 3 begins with the child care provider indicating to the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) their intent to work towards Steps 3-5. Once that intent has been

made clear, child care providers must select an observation tool to be used in their center, and complete introductory training related to that observation tool. The two tools identified by Step Up to Quality are the Environment Rating Scale (ERS) or the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). Child care providers are also encouraged to attend the Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care (Go NAP SCC) training, and then to develop and use a program action plan based on the results of that assessment.

In order to determine the rating of the child care provider, points are earned during both an independent observation and during a review of quality indicators. Child care providers must earn at least one point in each area and at least 30 points overall to be rated at a Step 3. The Quality Standards and Indicators were determined by the Nebraska Department of Education and the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services to be evidence of high quality programs. A sample of reasons these standards were selected include that child care providers regularly assess children's strengths, skills, and needs, select and implement developmentally appropriate learning activities that address all domains of learning, actively engage children in everyday learning, engage with families to support child learning and development, and promote effective and professional staff who pursue lifelong learning (Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Each identified standard is made up of quality indicators that effectively describe the specific expectations of that standard. By focusing on specific indicators within a standard, child care providers can fine tune their focus and development as they work towards improving their overall quality.

Some of the quality indicators are verified through a review of records, policies, and procedures. Other indicators are verified through an on-site observation by an independent observer or rating reviewer. Once a thorough review and observation has been completed, a program is then assigned a rating of Step 3-5. If a child care provider believes that they are ready to be re-evaluated to move up a Step in the rating system, the provider can submit a request to have an observation of ERS or CLASS, the two rating systems used, once a year. Programs are otherwise reviewed at least every two years, for Steps 3 and 4, and every five years for Step 5. Once a program is rated at Step 3, 4, or 5, they are eligible for a quality incentive bonus. The child care providers are also then eligible for a higher rate of child care subsidy reimbursement. As noted on the Nebraska Department of Education Step Up to Quality website, a child care provider who reaches Step 3 could be eligible for up to a 5% increase in subsidy rates, with an additional maximum of 5% increase when they reach Step 4 and Step 5. This could mean an additional \$744 dollars a month for an Urban Child Care Center with 10 preschool children, 20 days a month at Step 4. Providing this level of financial incentive, to highly needy programs, is a step towards creating “buy in” by providers as to why they should participate in such a program. In addition to being able to advertise themselves as achieving a higher rating, which in turn leads families to seek them out as being higher quality, these same child care providers are also then able to benefit by receiving more funds, which can then be returned to investing in the program in ways to meet more quality indicators, which in turn increases the quality of the program. It becomes a cycle, with the children benefitting from being provided with continued access to a child care

provider who is striving to meet quality indicators which in turn means the children are being provided with higher quality early childhood experiences.

In addition to providing subsidy bonuses and incentives for providers participating in QRIS, the Nebraska law makers also tied to LB507 an increase in subsidy amounts for child care providers along with a decrease in the income level requirements for families to receive child care subsidies. In Section 14 of LB507, it is noted that to determine the rate of reimbursement for child care, the DHHS will conduct a market rate survey of the providers across the state. An adjustment to the reimbursement rate will then occur every odd numbered year at a rate not less than the 60th percentile and not to exceed the 75th percentile of the market rate survey. In Section 15 of LB507, it is then noted that DHHS will also participate in the federal child care assistance program and provide assistance to families with incomes up to 125% of the federal poverty level for fiscal year 2013-2014 and 130% of the federal poverty level for fiscal year 2014-2015, and each fiscal year after (LB507:Step Up to Quality, 2013).

The inclusion of the childcare assistance program modifications was a hotly contested component of this legislation. Prior to the change in eligibility requirements, Nebraska was ranked 50th in the nation for eligibility work support programs. In 2002, during the economic depression, the state legislature decreased the eligibility program requirements. The eligibility level was cut from 185% of the federal poverty level down to 120%, and had not been adjusted since then. Movement of the eligibility level to 125% would place Nebraska closer to the “median value with what our sister states have” (LB507:Step Up to Quality, 2013-Sen Conrad). In regard to national ranking, this would move Nebraska to 44th in the nation for the program. Senator Conrad went on to explain

the impact that this eligibility program would have on the participants, as he referenced a report from the Center for People in need. Senator Conrad shared that when people did not have access to childcare they would leave their child at home alone, leave their child with an untrustworthy person, be fired for lack of childcare, or even quit their job or school due to lack of childcare. By including the increase in eligibility requirements to LB507, the state legislature is pairing quality in early childhood education with access to early childhood education. While having quality experiences available to families is excellent, that quality is not going to be impactful without access to those experiences.

Legislative Bill 507, now known as the Step Up to Quality Act, has many components. While at first glance it appears to be a piece of legislation aimed at both improving quality in early childhood across the state of Nebraska, the bill is much more than that. While it does implement a quality rating system, the bill also includes child care subsidy changes, both for providers accepting the subsidy and for families trying to access the subsidy and childcare. The bill provides a comprehensive system for families to access early childhood experiences that are high quality in any area of the state.

Chapter 3: Stakeholder Involvement in the Development of Step Up to Quality

A key component to the success of any new policy is that of creating a shared vision or creating “buy in” from those involved with implementing and benefiting from that policy. If those that are going to be required to make changes to current practice are not fully invested in the policy driving those changes, the success of that policy could be impacted. One way of creating buy in for a new policy is to include those crucial stakeholders in the development of the policy. For Step Up to Quality, those stakeholders, those who stand to gain from the policy, and those to who may need to change due to the policy, are families and childcare providers.

Family engagement or involvement in early childhood is a component of success in early childhood that cannot be ignored, nor do policy makers or early childhood advocates disagree with the importance of family involvement. In the final reading of Legislative Bill 507, or Step Up to Quality Act, in Section 10, Line Item 4 states “support that expands family engagement in and understanding of high-quality early childhood education in ways that are inclusive and respectful of diversity in families and children with special needs,” demonstrating the policy maker’s enthusiasm and support for family engagement in and understanding of the policy and the need for quality early childhood experiences for their children.

While family involvement in early childhood has been identified as key component to a child’s success and a child’s ability to thrive in an early childhood environment, opinions can differ on what family involvement means or even how it can appear. As noted in the Early Childhood Policy Study for Nebraska, completed in 2005,

parents and extended families are key components to the success of early childhood experiences (Nebraska Department of Education, 2005). However, while that policy study group identified family involvement as a key component to success, out of the 63 total participants on the policy study team, only two were classified as parents. As policy makers and early childhood proponents continue to make strides forward with increasing quality across the state of Nebraska, should those identified as key players to the success of those programs and policies be involved in the development and discussion of those policies?

Early childhood providers are a second key component to the success of any program or plan directed at improving quality in the state. Providers are the ones who are on the ground daily with the children providing the services the legislation is trying to evaluate as being high quality. In the Early Childhood Policy Study, out of the 63 participants, seven were teachers or childcare providers. The majority of the participants in the study were members of administration teams at school district, in child care centers, or at the state level.

Keeping Families in Mind

When policy makers and early childhood advocates began to narrow the focus on implementing a quality rating and improvement system in Nebraska, following the pilot study, they developed focus groups, which began meeting in January of 2013. These focus groups met frequently to discuss the possibility of implementing a quality rating and improvement system in Nebraska, and referenced the information gathered from the pilot program. Terry Rohen, an educational specialist with the Nebraska Department of Education's Office of Early Childhood, stated during his testimony for the Health and

Human Services Committee on February 20th, 2013, that the focus groups were made up of “childcare center directors, family childcare home providers, public school staff who work with early childhood education programs, Head Start programs, public health officials, parents, college universities, and professional development staff.” He further broke down the participants into the following groups: 33% from childcare centers, 15% from childcare homes, 3% from public schools, 23% from Head Start, and 23% that were classified as “other” (LB507: Step Up to Quality, 2013). While the 23% that were classified as “other” would lead one to believe that parents and families were a large participant in those groups, follow up with a member of the Holland’s Children’s Movement, an early childhood advocacy group who helped to develop the focus groups, focus group questions, and the policy itself, noted that no parents or family members were involved in the focus groups, as the logistical difficulties of including them were too high (Kotchian, 2016).

Further inspection of transcripts of legislative testimony and debate, noted that many of the senators who were proponents of the bill would often include personal experiences with obtaining child care programming for their own children, referencing the cost and difficulty of making such decisions. For example, Senator Jansen referenced the expense of “daycare”, having accessed providers for his children (LB507:Step Up to Quality, 2013). He later again referenced his current family need for child care programs, and that his use of child care programs for his children causes him to be highly invested in the decisions related to ensuring quality in child care centers in the state. The inclusion of personal experiences, and personal “buy in” to the idea of measuring quality in childcare demonstrates that many of the proponents of the Step Up to Quality Act were

working and thinking, not just as early childhood advocates or as state senators, but as parents and family members of those people who are currently faced with the difficult decisions of where to leave their child during the work day, and what financial impact accessing child care can have on the family.

This leads to the question of how difficult would it have been to include families and child care providers in the process of developing this policy. If the policy makers are going to identify family involvement and engagement as a key component to success in early childhood, and are going to rely heavily on family understanding of the quality rating system being put into place, families should be key players at the table discussing the rating system and discussing the needs in early childhood across the state. Families are the ones who are accessing the early childhood care and the ones who are making decisions on which placement or environment best meets the needs of their family, their voices should be heard in what they need from early childhood experiences and care.

Reflect back on the young girl in the warm house introduced in Chapter One. That family, which clearly identified the need for early childhood care, had difficulty explaining what exactly they were searching for. The reference of someplace “good” was frequently brought up. As the team probed what the term “good” encompassed, the family was able to identify that their needs from early childhood care included location, hours, and price. While the idea that they wanted their child in a quality, or “good,” place during the day was important, the other factors outweighed quality.

While the Step Up to Quality Act has components that strive to allow families to access high quality early childhood experiences regardless of location and price, and even includes financial support to aid families in accessing childcare, without families having

a voice in the development of the program, will families be able to “buy in” to the program and use the quality rating tools as designed?

Family Fears in Early Childhood

Further conversation with a family who is struggling with accessing early childhood care demonstrated an underlying fear of early childhood programs, which is preventing them from accessing early childhood experiences. This family shared that they had heard too many stories and are fearful of a program of which they know nothing about. This family has instead chosen to make sacrifices at home in order to have an adult be able to be at home at all times to care for the child in the home. While the family recognizes that this child may not be experiencing all of the social components important in early childhood, the fear of the unknown and the fear of having their child someplace with inexperienced, inattentive staff outweigh the desire to provide their child with a fully comprehensive early childhood experience.

While the family agreed that a quality rating system, a system that will allow them to objectively identify programs that provide a higher level of quality for their child, would allow some easement of their fears, the family further identified deeper components to the fear beyond just the quality issue. This family identified the fear that child care programs providing low pay for employees leads to them obtaining employees who are not invested in the program or in young children. They agreed that providing an increase in pay, or even health benefits, could have a positive impact on the type of employee engaged and that employee’s commitment to both the field of early childhood and that center.

A second fear, beyond the pay issue, is that staff in early childhood programs are not trained and educated in the field of early childhood and in teaching. The mother expressed that she was concerned that her child would not be challenged enough in some areas, but then also not supported enough in areas of struggle. She stated that a young adult, just out of high school with no additional training in education or child development may not have the tools necessary to help children develop at individual rates. This unskilled adult, who was going to be responsible not just for her child's safety during the day, but also his educational growth, did not have the skill level needed to accommodate the different needs within a classroom, which in turn could cause children to act out, which could then spiral into an uncontrolled classroom, extreme behaviors, and finally become an unsafe learning environment.

Summary

The first research question approached is that of determining what stakeholders participated in the development of Step Up to Quality or LB507. Specifically, the question focused on the involvement of families in the policy development process, as families are going to be the key players in using and understanding the rating system put into place by Step Up to Quality, thus determining the level of success Nebraska will experience with a policy such as Step Up to Quality.

In reviewing the history of Step Up to Quality, and the path policy makers took from the initial conversations about a quality rating system to final readings and initiation of the bill, families were a frequent topic point. During a policy study and later focus groups, the idea of family was frequently brought up by members of the groups involved. The importance of families in accessing early childhood experiences was recognized many times during the many activities that occurred along the way to full implementation

of Step Up to Quality. However, it was found that families were not actively involved in developing the policy itself.

Focus groups, policy studies, even testimonies provided to the legislative committees neglected to include representatives of the families across the state of Nebraska. While many of the policy proponents and early childhood activists provided testimony and information that was on behalf of families, and produced data to support why families needed a quality rating system, the voice of families in Nebraska was not presented. Many legislators provided debate turns that included perspectives on their own experiences with seeking out early childhood experiences, but without included samples of family testimony and perspectives from the varied communities and families that make up Nebraska, policy makers missed out on hearing from the stakeholders for Step Up to Quality that the policy would most impact.

Chapter 4: Developing Step Up to Quality-Looking at Other States

Developing a new policy from scratch can be a daunting task, however policy developers often rely on policies and standards currently in place in other states and localities to drive the current policy in development. For Step Up to Quality, policy developers had the opportunity to explore similar policies and quality rating systems already in place in neighboring states, and across the country.

When developing Nebraska's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), policy makers utilized a variety of tools, and compiled information about QRIS systems from across the country before developing what is currently known as Legislative Bill 507, or the Step Up to Quality Act. While participants on the team that developed LB507 based many of the components of the plan on Washington state's hybrid system, some members of the team found that Nebraska's system most closely resembles the system currently in place in Iowa. In an interview with a member of the Holland's Children's Movement, an agency instrumental in the development and implementation of LB507, that member noted that Step Up to Quality was based primarily on a hybrid program found in Washington state. However, in an interview provided to the Omaha World Herald in May of 2013, Senator Campbell stated she "modeled her bill after the Iowa program, with some differences."

Nationwide use of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

A review of Iowa's QRIS, the system, which has been in place since 2006, found that Iowa's quality rating system shares many similarities to Nebraska's Step Up to Quality, with the differences stemming from the exact requirements at each level along

with the exact activities required to earn points at each level. Iowa's system is also a hybrid system which uses Steps or Levels along with a point system to allow programs to earn points to move up in levels by participating in a variety of professional development or growth activities. Iowa includes an incentive system as a part of its QRIS program, however the incentives do not appear to be tied to reimbursements at this time (Child Care Quality Rating System Act, 2010)

The Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) used in Washington state is also a hybrid system that uses standards and points to monitor growth through the steps or levels in the rating system. Washington's QRIS is similar to Nebraska's in that it is also voluntary but tied to licensing, with programs already demonstrating high levels of quality through current licensing or accreditation requirements entering the program at a higher level or step. Washington's QRIS also uses coaching, feedback, and technical assistance to assist childcare providers with advancing up levels in the QRIS program. The biggest similarity between Nebraska's and Washington's QRIS is the use of subsidy increases as a financial incentive.

When initially investigating the use of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) across the country, the development team began with an overview of the systems currently in place. Highlights of what was found included that 10 QRIS systems were implemented between 1998-2001, with an additional four implemented between 2002-2005 and another 12 implemented since 2006. With just over half of the states in the United States having implemented a QRIS system, the developers in Nebraska had a good source of information on programs and their successes from which to build their own system.

When considering implementing a QRIS in Nebraska, the developers had to consider if the program would be statewide and voluntary. When reviewing the national trends, the developers found that of the 26 being implemented, only 19 were statewide. Considering the state of Nebraska, and the wide spread population densities, having a statewide program would be considered necessary in order to effectively impact all children in the state. When considering if the program would be voluntary, review of other policies found that programs with mandatory participation at lower levels in the rating scale had higher levels of participation, however most of the QRIS reviewed had voluntary participation, with some having pieces of the program be compulsory. In Nebraska the QRIS system is voluntary to some programs, but required for programs receiving set levels of child care subsidies from the state. Paired with this requirement of participation, key components of LB507 include incentives for those programs receiving levels of subsidy support as well as updates to how the child care subsidy amount is calculated and at what income levels a family must be in order to qualify for child care subsidy.

The design of QRIS systems across the country generally used one of three styles: building blocks, points, or a combination of the two. Nebraska's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) can be considered to be a hybrid system of using point values along with steps of quality to determine the rating level of a program. The building block design requires that all standards in one level be met before moving up to a new level. The points system is designed for programs to earn points for each standard, which are then added together to determine if the required number of points to move up have been met. The combination, or hybrid, approach uses both steps of skill

requirements as well as a point system to determine if a program has completed enough requirements for each step. Of the QRIS systems already in place at the time of the review and development of LB507, 13 used building blocks, five used levels or points, and six were combination or hybrid programs.

While the Nebraska Quality Rating System is very similar to the program already implemented and in use in Iowa, it is also of note that Iowa is now taking steps to recalibrate their rating system. They are currently in the process of making changes to the system to improve the measured areas and standards of quality. The two big areas Iowa is focusing on for improvement include the area of Nutrition and Physical Activity and the one that includes Teaching and Learning in home based childcare centers.

While the legislative committee that developed Step Up to Quality utilized other state's quality rating systems as a guideline for Nebraska's system, the success of such systems appears to be based primarily on the outcomes of the pilot study completed in Nebraska. As Dr. Helen Raikes of the University of Nebraska noted during her testimony at the February 20th 2013 Health and Human Services Committee meeting, following a study of child care providers in Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska, the Midwest Child Care Research Consortium conducted pilot studies in 2005. In those pilot studies, quality rating systems were implemented and evaluated in both rural and urban areas in the state of Nebraska. The pilot study noted significant improvement in the child care providers pre and post scores, when feedback, training, and focus groups were used (LB507: Step Up to Quality, 2013). Following the pilot study additional focus groups were conducted to gain information about the acceptance of a quality rating system in the state, to identify concerns with the implementation of such a system, and to gain feedback

from providers and early childhood advocates regarding component and aspects of a quality rating system members of the focus groups thought should be included.

Senator Conrad, in his statements in the floor debate on April 30th, 2013, stated that “based upon the experience and models in over half of the states that have developed a quality rating program, we have seen how these quality improvements have made a difference for not only quality of life and student achievement and closing the achievement gap, but also in terms of the state’s bottom line.” This statement induces the listener to accept that other states, who have already implemented quality rating systems, have completed follow up research and studies to identify the impact such rating systems have had on student outcomes, child care program quality levels, and on the fiscal issues relating to state budgets, and that the research and studies have shown improvements and impact in all of those areas.

Washington state advises other states considering implementing a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), based on their own experiences with implementing and measuring the outcomes of their own rating system. First, they recommend building a data system to track the outcomes and progress, or lack of, of childcare providers participating in the program. They also recommend revisiting the standards set out in the program, as Washington discovered that they had standards that overlapped and that measured some elements more than one time, while they found that other key components and elements of quality were not being measured. Overall, they recommend that states define clear goals for the quality system being used, and then set standards that clearly measure those goals in order to track the success of the project. By setting up the analysis of the program from the start, states can ensure careful monitoring of the project

to provide feedback and data regarding the true impact the program has on the children in the state.

Family Perspectives on a Quality Rating and Improvement System

Beyond just measuring the outcomes of the childcare providers participating in the program, families also need to see the outcomes to realize the success of the program. Through the advertisement of the rating levels programs, Nebraska hopes to allow families to have a concrete way to analyze the level of quality offered by a prospective childcare provider. However, the family in the warm house is concerned that the rating system is one small piece of the puzzle in finding childcare for their daughter, and that the impact of the other variables will outweigh the rating scale. This family explained that the influence of finances, location of the provider, and the hours of availability of the provider are more important than a number. The family also appeared to be unsure of the purpose of the number, as they continued to ask questions about how high the levels went. This family was also concerned that they would be judged for selecting a childcare provider with a low number, because that provider offered the location, cost, and hours needed.

The continued questions and lack of clarity of this family regarding the rating system and use of the rating system to make decisions further highlights the need for families to be educated on how to seek out high quality childcare experiences, but also how to balance the needs of the family with the levels of quality available to that family. The concerns brought by the family also demonstrates the need to ensure that families are not judged by others, including school district personnel, other childcare providers, and

other families, for selecting a childcare provider that has a lower rating level, or does not participate in the program at all.

Voluntary Participation

During a conversation with a team member of Voices for Children, an early childhood advocacy agency, it was interesting to find that this team member purposefully sought out childcare in Iowa versus Nebraska, both because it was convenient for her family, but more importantly, she noted that it was due to Iowa's use of a rating system. She also noted that while a program might be "voluntary," the benefit to families to have an objective rating that can allow them to see a program's level of quality before even going to visit the program was immensely helpful to a parent making the difficult choice of where to leave a child during the work day.

The issue of a voluntary versus required program also came up frequently in legislative debate among the senators both in opposition and in support of LB507, or Step Up To Quality Act. Those senators in opposition to the bill frequently expressed concerns that the bill would provide too much oversight over child care providers in the state, and expressed worry that trying to oversee and control very small, in-home child care providers, what they commonly referred to as "grandma's child care," would create more issues and cause anger among those smaller, current unregulated child care providers. For example, Senator Cook stated in his testimony during the May 22, 2013 legislative debate that in the past these smaller, "grandma day care providers" felt that oversight was a conspiracy to force them out of business. Senator Kintner, during the same debate, further elaborated on this idea by voicing concerns that child care businesses that did not want to participate in government programs, such as licensing, do

so because they want to avoid oversight, and forcing them into participating in Step Up to Quality is taking away from their right to turn down government oversight and funds (LB507: Step Up to Quality, 2013).

As a counter argument to the debate issue of providing too much oversight, to programs who do not want government interference, Senator Campbell, and other proponents of the bill, restated that the focus of Step Up to Quality is those child care providers who are both currently licensed in the state and meet specific limits of child care subsidy funding received. By initiating the program with a set target of providers, the state can begin to create the “buy in” necessary to motivate those programs who do not meet the requirements to participate, while providing oversight and accountability to those programs receiving substantial amounts of funding from the state.

A childcare provider, who is licensed, nationally accredited, and is participating in Step Up to Quality, as a voluntary program, brought up concerns with the program being voluntary. Her thoughts were that by making a program such as Step Up to Quality voluntary, those programs who are already striving to present themselves to parents as high achievers in early childhood will automatically register to participate, as those programs are eager to demonstrate their abilities to the community. It is the programs who are struggling, who are having difficulty just meeting licensing requirements that will avoid Step Up to Quality, and those programs, in this provider’s opinion, are the ones that could most benefit from the coaching, feedback, and training available to program participants. At the same time, she recognized that these are the programs that are not going to seek out the help; they are going to continue to provide less than standard services in a community that accepts that level of service, as that may be all that is

available. More clearly, she was striving to point out that regardless of the use of Step Up to Quality, there are going to continue to be programs operating and providing childcare that are low quality and not overseen, and questioned how to involve those programs in quality initiatives, as financial incentives are often not enough.

Summary

The second research question this paper attempts to answer focuses on how Step Up to Quality compares to other quality rating system policies in neighboring states, including what levels of success other states have experienced with the implementation of quality rating systems. In reviewing the history of quality rating systems across the country and the development process for Step Up to Quality, it was determined that LB507 was based on hybrid systems of accountability in place in states across the nation. Specifically, both Iowa's and Washington's quality rating systems.

While Step Up to Quality is a hybrid system, using quality measurements to ensure child care programs meet criteria before being assigned a level of quality, just as the systems in Iowa and Washington are, determining which system Step Up to Quality most closely resembles is difficult. Especially as policy developers did not always appear certain of the basis for Step Up to Quality.

Throughout the development process for Step Up to Quality, policy makers were faced with developing and implementing a policy that fit the needs across the entire state of Nebraska. The needs in the different communities across the state are diverse, as the communities range from urban to rural, from farming to industrial, and from high to low socio-economic states. By utilizing current quality rating and improvement systems already in place in the nation, policy makers were able to craft a policy that met

Nebraska's unique needs, while also selecting components of other rating systems with which other states had experienced success.

The level of success that could be expected from the implementation of Step Up to Quality can be difficult to predict, as Nebraska is a diverse state with very diverse families and family needs. When reviewing both Iowa and Washington's current policies for success, one highlight was the need for revision and adaptation of the policy dependent on the effectiveness of the policy following implementation. Iowa is currently in the process of revising their quality rating system. Washington's policy developers realized, after implementation, that many of their standards overlapped and needed to be revised. Whether Step Up to Quality is called successful or not, it is apparent that the policy makers will need to return to the quality rating system and revise the system based on the outcomes of implementation.

Chapter 5: Educating Families on the Results

Once a policy has been implemented, examining the impact of those policy changes is crucial to determining the success of that policy. For Step Up to Quality, the success of the policy hinges not just on the changes child care providers could make, but also on how families utilize the information that is shared through the policy and rating system. Families may not be aware of the rating system, nor understand the meaning behind the ratings. Educating those families on how to examine an early childhood provider to determine that provider's level of quality is a key component to the success of Step Up to Quality. Beyond educating families accessing early childhood care and experiences, is also the need to educate the community at large on the policy and its implementation and effects, as Nebraska as a community has recognized the importance of early childhood experiences.

The Buffett Early Childhood Institute, a local agency working towards improving early childhood education and care across the state of Nebraska, conducted two surveys in the state focusing on early childhood care and education and on the early care and education workforce. The findings from the study on the early care and education workforce were released in October of 2016, following the March 2016 release of the findings from the early childhood care and education survey. While the October release demonstrated that the workforce in area of early childhood is well valued, and takes great pride in their work and careers, financial compensation is lacking. The results provided in March of 2016 showed that across Nebraska, only 6% of those surveyed strongly agreed that high-quality care and education is affordable for every family, 11% agreed

that high-quality care and education is available, and 15% surveyed were very satisfied with the quality of education in their hometown, while 80% of children in Nebraska are in some sort of early care program (Koeller, 2016). Further, only 10% of respondents strongly agreed that most kindergarteners are prepared to succeed in school (Kleckner, 2016).

With large percentages of children experiencing early childhood care and education in programs across the state, but with a small percentage of people thinking that those programs are preparing children for later success, continued need for improvements to quality in the state are demonstrated. Step Up to Quality aims to drive and change early childhood programs across the state to high levels of quality. Through the use of rating scales and observations, along with coaching and professional development, Step Up to Quality allows early childhood providers to take steps towards improvement. By providing a baseline rating score and room to grow and improve that score, child care providers across the state will be moving towards becoming known as high quality programs.

Releasing the Rating Scores

With the program being implemented in 2013, and rating scores not available to the public until July 2017, policy makers intended for programs to be given a grace period before scores are announced to make changes and improve those scores. The rating system was designed to “provide the information to help parents make childcare and early childhood education decisions that meet family needs and support the school readiness of children” (LB507, 2013). The Health and Human Services Committee went further with the Committee Statement from February 20th, 2013, stating that

“the Legislature finds that parents need better information when choosing childcare and early childhood education programs and that childcare and early childhood education providers need adequate support, training, and incentives to improve the quality of child care and early childhood education programs they offer. The Legislature further finds that the State of Nebraska needs a common understanding of what elements make up high-quality childcare and early childhood education programs;”

The use of rating scales to quantify the level of quality present in a program serves to both create a common language across the state that addresses quality, as well as provide families with a clear, unbiased way to assess if a program is high quality. Step Up to Quality allows programs to constantly work towards bettering their rating and quality through coaching and professional development opportunities. Programs participating in the quality rating system can request to be evaluated for step advancement once a year.

The delay in the release of quality rating scores to July 2017 was included in the legislation for two reasons. First, as noted above, the delay is to allow providers the time to make improvements to their initial scores. Second, the time was given to allow for providers to become their own advocates in regard to the use of the score to determine quality. While the state cannot share an early childhood provider’s score publicly, a provider can share their score early at their discretion. By creating “buy in” from the providers that the quality rating score has meaning and will function as a way for families to assess or judge their program, providers can become not just advocates, but also to become marketing partners. Providers, who can voice to families the importance of

finding a childcare experience that presents a high rating, serve to then drive that family to consider the ratings of other providers.

Step Up to Quality Public Awareness Plan

A conversation with a representative from the Nebraska Department of Education, revealed that the plan in place to educate the public about Step Up to Quality is minimal, with heavy reliance on current partners, including school districts and child care providers, as funding for a public awareness campaign is minimal. Ms. Melody Hobson, representative of the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) shared that there is currently a three pronged focus for the marketing of Step Up to Quality. The first prong is the website, which was designed for ease of use for early childhood providers, but does contain information and resources for families. The website provides information on what Step Up to Quality is, along with information on how to apply and supports that may be given. Information for families is also included on the website, with details about the steps in the rating system and what aspects of quality should be considered. Links to other resources for families, including the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Department of Health and Human Services, and information about the Child Care Subsidy are available.

The second prong of the marketing focus is for the Nebraska Department of Education, along with the Department of Health and Human Services to have an online, social media presence that focuses on Step Up to Quality. Through the use of social media, including Facebook and Twitter, the departments that oversee Step Up to Quality hope to create public interest and awareness. The social media presence can also then be

shared by local early childhood providers who are participating in Step Up to Quality and who want to advance public knowledge of the program.

The third prong of the marketing strategy includes three short videos that will be produced that focus on the quality rating system and what it means for families and early childhood providers. The videos will be targeted to both the general public and for families. It was unclear if these videos would be shared via social media, television, or other means. Overall, Ms. Hobson shared that the focus is on spreading awareness of the quality rating system and increasing public awareness of both early childhood and the steps being taken to improve the current levels of quality across the state.

In addition to the three pronged marketing strategy noted, the use of the already in place partnerships in early childhood across the state as agents of advocacy is a key component to the success of families using the quality rating scales as a tool to assess the early childhood programs they are exploring as options for childcare. Ms. Hobson shared that early childhood programs who are participating in Step Up to Quality receive “swag” items that help to promote Step Up to Quality. These “swag” items include bags and signs for display. Providers are also coached on how to talk to families about the ratings and what quality means in their centers or programs. Encouraging providers to embrace the use of the rating system as a tool to help families make good decisions in regard to early childhood program placements for their children also recognizes that providers visualize Step Up to Quality as a long term investment, not a “one and done” training or professional development opportunity.

A final step in ensuring the longevity of the program and the use of the rating system by both families and providers is the follow up study that is to be completed on

Step Up to Quality to determine the level of success for the program. According to Ms. Hobson, a private source provided funding for First Five of Nebraska to complete a study that focuses on the success of Step Up to Quality, which will include interviews of providers who participated in Step Up to Quality.

Family Thoughts

Returning again to the young child in the warm house, having a rating system in place for that family to use to assess if the early childhood programs they were investigating are considered to be high quality could impact decisions they make on where to place their child. The family also expressed that such a tool could also become frustrating and defeating. They recognized that their focus on a program that offers lower cost, longer hours, and convenient location could lead them to programs with low ratings of quality. They expressed fear that seeing that the program they chose was on the lower steps of quality would make them feel “bad” as a parent for choosing someplace less than excellent for their child’s growth.

A family that has made sacrifices to keep their child home during the day recognized that the use of a quality rating tool may make them more open to using a childcare program for social experiences and school type experiences for their child. Specifically, this mother shared that seeing a rating provided holds more weight than just having the program tell her they are high quality. This mother felt that professionals, those that would assess the quality from the state, would be able to provide more accurate information about the level of quality in a center, as those professionals were highly trained and educated.

Concerns about how families would perceive the rating system and concerns about families understanding the rating system were raised by the focus group that was used when developing the legislative bill that became Step Up to Quality. Specific concerns focused on why the wait until 2017 to release the ratings and concerns with starting a public campaign early so that parents can become better educated on what quality means in early childhood and how to use the rating system to assess the level of quality in different programs. In addition to those concerns, the legislative bill itself stated, in Section 10, Number 4 the need for “support that expands family engagement in and understanding of high-quality early childhood education...” Furthermore, the detailed purpose of the Step Up to Quality Act itself is to “provide parents a tool by which to evaluate the quality of child care and early childhood education programs (Statutes Relating to Child Care Licensure, 2014).

Further concerns about increasing family understanding of not just the rating scale, but how to evaluate the quality of early childhood programs and services across the community were also raised during a conversation with a community child care provider. This individual is the director of a large, nationally based child care center that is also nationally accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). She explained her current struggles with trying to educate families on the requirements to be licensed and accredited, and how to compare her center with a different center located less than five miles away. She was concerned that without the proper tools, families can be convinced that centers are more alike than they really are, and that any center can promote themselves as being “high quality,” if the information isn’t shared with consistency and fidelity across the community.

In the course of the conversation, this provider also expressed concerns with the idea that the Nebraska Department of Education is going to rely heavily on the child care providers participating in the programs for publicity and family education. Her main concern was that she had not been provided with any materials or support as of the date of the conversation, to provide to families, who often are making decisions three to six months in advance of a need for a placement. Given her experience with her coach and the rating system, she felt that the department should not “put out a policy unless they are ready to support it.” Specially, she thought there should be financial support for having to educate families and promote a system that she had not completely bought into. She also shared that if the policy is designed to help families to identify and find high quality early childhood services for their children, but yet the policy does not include specific supports to provide education to families to accomplish those things, then she feels that the policy is faulty, or in other words “what’s the point?”

Currently, families are provided supports and resources to find and select childcare providers through a state website, information shared by community partners including school districts, and most commonly through word of mouth. Families often select childcare providers based on the experiences and relationships that other families and friends have had. By relying on childcare providers and other community partners to educate families on Step Up to Quality, the ripple effect may be seen. In other words, one family is educated on what Step Up to Quality means for their child, and experiences success with finding a childcare provider that is participating in the program. That family in turn tells other families about the program and childcare provider. This in turns leads those families to tell other families, causing the information to spread through the

community in ripples. A concern with this practice is that information can become diluted and misunderstood as it ripples. The reliance on the childcare providers to ensure continued provision of accurate information to families is crucial to families truly understanding and embracing the system.

Summary

The final research question for this paper focuses on the use of Step Up to Quality to inform families and the state about changes to quality in early childhood, along with how the state plans to educate families on the quality rating system and its requirements. Without a clear plan on how to use the information that the quality rating system will provide, families and the state could face difficulties with determining the level of success Step Up to Quality has on quality improvement initiatives in early childhood.

While the policy itself did not include requirements for follow up on the impact the quality rating system has on early childhood programs across the state, a private source has provided funding for First Five of Nebraska to complete a follow up study that focuses on the success of Step Up to Quality. While details about such a study are not known at this time, it was clear that the study would include interviews of providers that participated in Step Up to Quality. The interviews will allow insight into the “buy in” and perspectives of the success of LB507 from the viewpoint of those actively participating in the program requirements.

With the implementation of Step Up to Quality, and the roll out of the first round of quality ratings becoming available in July of 2017, educating families and the public on the meaning behind the ratings and how to use the ratings in a search for early education opportunities becomes the focus of Step Up to Quality. With the use of social

media being a focus point, Step Up to Quality plans to implement a three part publicity system. This plan, which includes a social media campaign and videos, relies heavily on the “word of mouth” publicity provided by the child care providers participating in Step Up to Quality. With no funds directly set aside for a more targeted, or intensive publicity campaign, the success of the policy is riding on the ability of child care providers to share information with families regarding Step Up to Quality, and families’ ability to utilize the information provided in the rating system.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Quality in early childhood education is not a new concept, and early childhood is fast becoming more than just a “hot topic” in education. As the focus on early childhood shifts to recognize the true impact that quality experiences can have on long term success for children, the need to ensure that all children can access quality early childhood experiences becomes crucial. As our society fluctuates and changes, morphing from patriarchal, single income families comprised of two parents and multiple children into dual income, and dual led families, in turn even changing the definition of what a “family” is, the outcomes from early childhood experiences for children has changed. Increasing amounts of children spend substantial portions of their day outside of the home in child care centers, be those centers in homes or buildings, run by churches, grandparents, neighbors, or certified teachers and administrators. The ever changing, and increasing demands placed on children upon entering school requires society to look carefully at the types of experiences the youngest learners can access, and determine how to ensure those experiences are of the highest quality.

In Nebraska, Legislative Bill 507 (LB507), also known as the Step Up to Quality Act serves to ensure that not only can families access early childhood care, but that those services they are accessing are high quality. Through the use of a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), paired with a reward system that both requires and encourages participation from early childhood providers across the state, LB507 strives to provide oversight to funding that allows children of all economic classes to experience quality early childhood education services. Furthering the drive towards access for all

children to quality early childhood experiences, is the inclusion of increases to the child care subsidy rate and the lowering of the income level required to obtain child care subsidy. LB507 strives to be an all-encompassing piece of legislation that both gives access to and monitors the quality of early childhood experiences.

Considerations for the Success of Step Up to Quality

Reflect back on the three legged stool of early childhood policy, and consider the three legs of health and nutrition, early childhood care and education, and family support, the Step Up to Quality Act attempts to cover all three legs. As noted by the National Center for Children in Poverty, a policy that does not include all three aspects will not be able to stand alone. LB507 considers the “health and nutrition” leg by incorporating the Nutrition and Physical Activity Self Assessment for Child Care into Steps 3-5. This recognition of child health and nutrition is an important nod towards the realization that the whole child must be considered when considering quality early childhood experiences. A child care provider cannot dismiss food and wellness as an important component to a successful early childhood education.

The main focus of LB507, the quality rating steps and quality indicators, encompasses the second leg of early childhood policy, early childhood care and education. By including a variety of quality standards and indicators that encompass all domains of child development, the policy has an effective handle on the realm of child development, and the need to provide quality experiences in all areas of that realm.

The final leg, family support, is also included in LB507. Through the use of public rating scales that allow families to better understand what “quality” in early childhood might appear as, and through the inclusion of family directed practices as

quality standards and indicators, especially Quality Standard 4, Family Engagement and Partnerships, LB507 attempts to include families throughout the policy and implementation. While encouraging families to use the ratings, to be made public in July 2017, to make decisions regarding which child care providers to access for care, the policy has also included minimal funding to be used to create publicity regarding the ratings, including providing families ways to access information about the meaning of the ratings and enhanced “look for’s” when visiting child care providers. The website dedicated to Step Up to Quality also provides tools and resources for families. The inclusion of a family engagement standard, while an important component to the policy, is given the lowest point value of all of the quality standards and indicators, falling behind even program administration. Upon inspection of what is included in the family engagement standard, indicators include basic family engagement steps, including ensuring families are provided with communication regarding changes in programming and encouraging home language.

In addition to addressing the issue of family involvement being a key piece to success of the policy, and a key piece to children accessing early childhood education, as noted by Olson, the responsibility of accessing and paying for early childhood education also falls upon the family (Olson, 2002). By including changes to the childcare subsidy reimbursement rates as well as the income limits to quality for reimbursement, some of the responsibility of paying for early childhood experiences is lifted from families. This is another way in which LB507 meets the “family support” requirement of the third leg of the stool.

Another way to analyze the potential success of LB507 is to consider the policies focus on both structural and process quality. As noted by Jenkins in 2014, considering both the structural and the process aspects of quality in early childhood allows for consideration of the environment itself along with the people and processes in that environment. While structural quality, as defined by Jenkins, is more concrete and easily measurable, process quality are those aspects that are dynamic and that can be difficult to measure. LB507 includes requirements for child care providers to meet in both areas, and clear ways in which success in both process and structural quality can be measured. When developing an early childhood policy, both types of quality must be addressed, as without either piece, a high quality early childhood experience cannot be obtained.

Structural quality, those clearly seen and defined aspects of the environment are to be measured through documentation provided by the child care provider to the state. Through documentation of policies and procedures, including environmental concerns, such as staff ratio, LB507 ensures that child care providers meet defined standards to be considered to be high quality.

Process quality, the less clear aspect of quality, is to be measured through observations and rating forms. Observations done by an unbiased observer provides the state with information regarding teacher-child interactions and child-child interactions. The use of the Environmental Rating Scale and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System allow the observer to rate the child care providers' environment and interactions that occur in that environment. They are tools that allow observers to quantify previously unclear aspects of quality.

Irvine and Price noted that a policy's success is contingent upon shared understanding and the shared vision of working towards the policy outcomes, specifically using new knowledge and skills to embrace changes in current practices (Irvine & Price, 2014). LB507 builds shared understanding and capacity through the use of coaches to aid child care providers in both discovering areas of need and with identifying areas of strength and continuing to build upon those strengths while improving in the areas of need. Through the use of training and support programs, early childhood providers can continue to build their own efficacy in the world of quality early childhood education. And with the continued support, often financially, of both NDE and DHHS, those trainings and opportunities are supported, with finance not being a hindrance to accessing those opportunities. Financial help, as outlined in Step Up to Quality includes access to Teacher Education and Compensation Helps Early Childhood scholarships, which can help those working toward degrees and certifications. Funds are also available to help individuals who are applying for a Child Development Associate (CDA), which is a nationally recognized credential for early childhood professionals. For child care programs who are working to improve the quality of care for children, there are a limited number of Quality Grants available through NDE and DHHS. Finally, there are limited supports for programs working towards national accreditation.

A final component of policy success to be considered is that noted by McLaughlin in 1987, which is that without consideration of local issues that could impact the policy, the policy could fail. A statewide blanket policy that covers a variety of communities with a variety of individual issues and concerns, could have difficulty being successful, as each individual community would face different issues with implementing the policy.

LB507 allows for some individualization of the policy as it allows child care providers to select areas within the quality standards on which to focus. If a locality has more issues with program administration, the provider may choose to focus on that area rather than on family engagement.

Family Involvement in Step Up to Quality

The Step Up to Quality Act came into being in 2013 after years of pilot studies, focus groups, and debates among senators. Throughout the lengthy process that brought Step Up to Quality into being, family involvement was frequently cited as being extremely important to the success of the legislation. The education and involvement of families in the use of Step Up to Quality as a tool for obtaining high quality early childhood experiences for children was the key point to the development of the bill. Frequently, early childhood advocates stressed the importance of family involvement in early childhood. This importance of family involvement led to the first research question, whether families were involved in the development of Step Up to Quality.

When reviewing the participants in the focus groups and pilot studies, families were not included. While many of the advocates and senators brought the family perspective to the table by relaying personal experiences with selecting and procuring early childhood experiences for their own children or grandchildren, families were not directly targeted to be included in the development of the policy. Family perspective and needs were addressed by the bill developers while speaking about families in the abstract.

Interestingly Legislative Bill 507 itself contains references to the importance of family engagement and involvement in understanding high quality early childhood education. In Section 10, Subset 4 of LB507 it states a need for “support that expands

family engagement in and understanding of high-quality early childhood education...”

The bill does not clarify the current levels of understanding or the current resources available for families to increase their understanding of high quality early childhood education. Further, in past reports family engagement was also referenced. In the State of Nebraska Statutes Relating to Child Care Licensure statute 43-2603 Section 1 states “...parents are encouraged to participate fully in the effort to improve such programs.” If parents and families are going to be relied upon to use a tool created to improve the quality in early childhood across the state, those families ideas should have been included in the development of the tool. A key to the success of any policy or change is shared “buy in” for that policy. If families were not able to voice opinions and concerns in the creation of the tool, those same families may not feel comfortable using that tool, and that tool may not be designed in a way that encourages family use or understanding.

By not including families more directly in the development of Step Up to Quality, policy makers ignored key stakeholders in the success of the policy. By leaving out the family perspective, important nuances to the issues surrounding both finding and paying for early childhood experiences were not heard by policy makers. Families provide unique perspectives to the issues surrounding early childhood education, and assuring that clear voices from a families with varied histories, for example income level, education level, family makeup, and community type, are heard by policy makers could better ensure a policy that accurately reflects the needs across a diverse community.

Comparing Step Up to Quality to Programs in Other States

The second research question focused on if LB507, Step Up to Quality, was based on policies currently in place in other states and if those states had experienced success

with a quality rating system. In the development of Step Up to Quality, legislative developers used not just pilot studies and focus groups to fine tune the bill and its requirements, but also current practices in neighboring states and states across the country to shape Step Up to Quality. Both Iowa and Washington currently use hybrid rating systems that are similar to Step Up to Quality. Both are referenced by bill proponents as important stepping stones used to develop Step Up to Quality. The three states share components of their quality rating systems, and each also individualizes the rating systems in slight ways. All three are voluntary programs that use a stepped or level based program to assess the quality in community childcare providers. The voluntary program in Nebraska focuses on child care providers receiving high levels of child care subsidy. All three programs also use coaching and feedback, along with professional development practices to facilitate the growth in child care providers. Financial incentives for reaching certain levels and continuing to grow are also included in each program, with Nebraska also tying the rate of reimbursement for the childcare subsidy to the levels of quality.

Iowa has also had a quality rating system in place long enough that the state is now going back and revising the standards and the system to better meet the needs of the state. The constant need for revision as the economy and society continues to shift and grow is instrumental to the quality rating system continuing to benefit early childhood.

By utilizing what is already in place, and in selecting a state that has had a quality rating system in place long enough to now go back and review the program, Nebraska policy developers were able to craft a system that is based upon shown areas of success, while also individualizing the system to meet Nebraska's unique needs. With many

quality rating and improvement systems already in place across the country, policy makers in Nebraska had a wealth of resources to pull from when developing Step Up to Quality. By focusing on both a neighboring state and also states from other regions, policy makers were able to sample policies from a variety of communities with varied needs.

Using Step Up to Quality to Inform Family Practices

Once the quality rating system is in place, the use of the rating system by families and child care providers will determine the true success of the program. By creating a voluntary program, with some components of requirement based on the level of child care subsidy received, the state hopes to create a business model that drives change from within. When a neighboring provider is able to advertise a high level of quality through the rating system, the hope is that a different provider will see that rating level and rise to the competition. This healthy competition will result in high levels of quality across the state of Nebraska as families seek out those providers who are demonstrating higher levels of quality.

One key to making a rating system such as Step Up to Quality work is aiding families in realizing both the importance of quality in early childhood and how to use the rating system to access quality early childhood providers in the state, the focus of the third research question. While no set requirement for educating families was included in the bill, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) has taken steps to ensure that families become educated on Step Up to Quality. Using a three pronged approach, NDE is planning to bombard families with the information needed to use Step Up to Quality in an effective way. The first prong to the approach is to use a website, designed for ease of

use for early childhood providers, to provide families with information about Step Up to Quality, current rating levels, along with resources regarding childcare licensing and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The website noted is not designed for family access, but rather for early childhood provider access, as it includes information for both sides of early childhood. This is important to note as NDE is relying heavily on early childhood providers to aid in prompting Step Up to Quality.

The second prong of the marketing plan is to create a social media presence for Step Up to Quality. Social media is a current way for families to access and be exposed to information through Facebook, Instagram, and other media platforms. Social media also provides an easy way for providers to share information by linking to social media pages through their own. The final, third prong includes three short videos that focus on the quality rating system. At this time it is unclear how these videos will be shared with families, but the use of the videos with social media was considered.

The underlying theme with the Nebraska Department of Education marketing plan is the use of childcare providers to help with the advertisement of Step Up to Quality. The reliance on providers to educate families on the rating system also helps to reinforce or potentially create more “buy in” to the rating system from the providers. By asking providers to be information sources for families, providers are almost forced to become advocates for the rating system. This can have benefits and drawbacks to the system and its publicity.

As referenced by a local child care provider, her lack of “buy in” to Step Up to Quality could prevent her from fully investing in sharing information about the program to families. This provider, who is already nationally accredited, was concerned with the

level of fidelity information about the rating system would be shared. Two neighboring child care providers could provide the information to families in two different ways, as each provider wants to make their child care program the most enticing.

Without clear requirements for publicity and public awareness, and with no clear funding source for such a campaign, Step Up to Quality is counting on child care providers and families to educate each other and themselves on the quality rating system and how it can be utilized to find quality early childhood experiences. Placing child care providers on the front lines of the public awareness campaign requires those providers to buy into the rating system, while also possessing a complete understanding of the rating system and how it can be used by families.

Chapter 7: Recommendations and Concerns

Step Up to Quality, Nebraska's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) places Nebraska in competition with other states' current use of QRIS. Nebraska has been making strides towards the implementation of such a system since 1999, and has carefully crafted a QRIS system to attempt to meet the needs of the families across a diverse state. The development and implementation of a QRIS system also highlights Nebraska's commitment to early childhood education and cements their position in relation to the demonstrated need for quality early childhood experiences for all children, regardless of resources. With the implementation of Step Up to Quality, questions about the impact such a policy will have on state practices, along with potential future implications for funding and childcare subsidy rates are raised.

Future Research Implications

As Step Up to Quality is implemented and ratings are released to the public, several areas for future research are brought to mind. Research should be done looking at the impact Step Up to Quality has on quality in early childhood across the state. As noted by a representative from the Nebraska Department of Education, a private source has provided funding for First Five of Nebraska to conduct a study to examine the success of Step Up to Quality. To accurately analyze the success of such a program the demonstrated growth of programs, as shown through improvements in rating scores should be used, along with qualitative investigations into both childcare provider and family perspective on the rating system.

Further investigation into the success of Step Up to Quality could also include investigation into the fidelity with which coaching and feedback is used and implemented in the program. If coaches are not shown to be effective or are not coaching using evidence based practices, this may be a component of the program needing to be revisited and adapted. A community child care provider expressed concerns that her assigned coach has not returned to her building or provided any additional information or feedback beyond the initial meetings and observations. This lack of feedback is discouraging to a provider who has chosen to participate in Step Up to Quality voluntarily, as it did not increase “buy in” from her program or staff in responding to a coach as a useful tool.

The ability of the coach to be an educator to providers should also be considered. If a coach is not able to support child care providers in accessing Step Up to Quality resources efficiently and as designed by the policy, this may be another component of the program to be revised. Specially, the child care provider who already expressed concerns regarding Step Up to Quality, shared that the coach assigned to her child care program did not fully explain the options for observation tools to be used to assess quality in the child care program. This program would potentially have benefited from using the Classroom Assessment and Scoring System (CLASS), which is a tool that measures adult-child and child-child interactions rather than an environmental rating system. The child care provider did not know that choice was available, and stated that she would have rather used a tool that could have provided more useful feedback, feedback for changes that would be more beneficial to her staff.

Further research into the use of the two different observational tools should also be considered. As each tool analyzes different components to quality in early childhood

with the Environmental Rating Scale measuring structural quality and the Classroom Assessment and Scoring System measuring process quality, the two tools complement each other, while also providing early childhood providers with different views on quality in their programs. By comparing the levels of growth and change between programs who used each tool, researchers could identify the tool that provides the type of feedback that induces greater change, or greater impact on the quality rating of a program.

Finally, research into the impact the increase in child care subsidy rates, and the decrease in the family income levels required to access child care subsidy should be explored. The tie in of the child care subsidy rates to the implementation of a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), was a way for policy makers to demonstrate the importance of the use of a QRIS in overseeing the use of the funds being distributed by the child care subsidy, while also piggy packing on the recognition state legislatures were giving to the importance of accessing quality early childhood experiences on long term outcomes for children. Increasing the rate of subsidy while subsequently increasing family access to the subsidy allows more families to reach quality early childhood experiences. Follow up information regarding the true impact the changes to the subsidy rate and requirements made would be crucial to understanding the future need of possible increases or decreases to both the rate for providers and the income levels for families.

Investigating Family Use of the Tool

Beyond looking at researching the perspectives of families and provider regarding Step Up to Quality, looking into the success of the policy in relation to changes in quality rating scores and levels, and the changes with child care subsidy rates and income requirements, further research should also focus on the impact that Step Up to Quality

has on family use of the tool in accessing early childhood experiences. Currently in Nebraska families rely on state licensing requirements along with word of mouth and self-education tactics to find early childhood programs for their children. Many families are not aware of licensing requirements, or how to find out if a program is licensed through the state. The implementation of Step Up to Quality is designed to help families navigate the muddy waters of assessing the quality of an early childhood program. Searching into the impact a rating scale has on the ability of families to seek out quality early childhood experiences should be considered as a way to measure the success of the program and policy.

As the family of the girl in the warm house noted, while such a program will be helpful in identifying programs that should provide a higher level of care for their daughter, the importance of the impact that location, hours, and cost has on the family will outweigh the rating given to the provider. As another family suggested, relying on the rating scale could provide some relief in finding a provider that can support their child's development through both challenging activities and providing a safe environment. The differing opinions on the rating scale and the impact it could have on a family seeking out early childhood experiences highlights the difficulty Step Up to Quality could have with finding success. The implementation of the rating system could impact some families, but not all, and in trying to create a policy that is statewide and all encompassing, that policy could fall short in some areas, while trying to over-reach in others.

Including Families in Developing Future Legislation

This study set out to determine if families were involved in the development of Step Up to Quality. It found that while family perspectives were considered, and many participants in committee testimony, debates, and focus groups brought family perspectives to the table, families were not an active voice in the development process. The success of Step Up to Quality hinges on family use of the rating system as a tool for accessing quality early childhood experiences for young learners. With families not being involved in the development of the tool, questions about the true impact of the policy are raised. For future legislative developments, especially when considering revising Step up to Quality, family representatives should be key players in the conversations. For legislators and policy developers to hear directly from families what they need and concerns they have is potentially more powerful than for others to speak for families.

Families are the key to accessing early childhood experiences. As shown through the family perspectives shared in this study the reasons for choosing to access, or not access, early childhood programs, and for choosing specific programs varies from family to family. In order for policy makers to create systems and supports that impact families, the voices of those families should be heard.

Suggestions and Concerns

The education of families on the importance of seeking out quality early childhood experiences is a component of early childhood education that is missing from this policy. While the rating system allows families to objectively identify child care providers that Step Up to Quality as identified as higher quality, the rating system does

not allow those families to learn about how that rating is assigned, or what symbols of quality to look for when they enter a child care program. By taking the education out of the plan, families are reliant on Step Up to Quality to assess quality. When a program is not evaluated by Step Up to Quality, families are the ones to determine the level of quality, and without education on what quality should be, those families will continue to be left in the dark to make decisions about placement for their children.

In addition to lacking a family education component, the marketing strategy that relies on child care providers to educate families on Step Up to Quality is also concerning. Providers are currently engaging families in conversations about their programs, and the type and level of care and experiences they can expect from their programs. By bringing the rating scale into the conversation, providers can relay a concrete number that allows them to showcase their level of quality as compared to other providers. How that rating is shared with families is what is concerning. Without a formal education plan or system that allows all early childhood providers to share the information in the same way, with fidelity, each provider could show case their rating scale in a different way or different light. This could skew a family's perception of what the rating system actually means. A provider, who is ranked at Step 2, could present that rating in a manner that demonstrates to families that a level 2 is an excellent rating, while a different provider is trying to explain while their rating of Step 4 is an excellent rating. Families could be confused by the different approaches to explaining the rating system.

It should also be noted that the delay in releasing the child care provider rating scales is also concerning. While the rating scales were delayed in order to give child care providers the opportunity to improve their rating, families are often seeking out early

childhood experiences months to years in advance, and with the delay in releasing rating scores until July of 2017, the impact the rating has on families accessing early childhood experiences may not be seen until the summer of 2018. Furthermore, it was not clear if the initial rating for the child care providers would be shared, as families may want to know what types or levels of change providers engaged in.

The long term impact of this policy is also concerning, as no clear plans were made upon implementation regarding follow up. While the Nebraska Department of Education shared that a follow up study is planned and supported through First Five of Nebraska, it was not clear when that study would take place, or what aspects of success that study would analyze. There are also no clear indications that the policy makers intend to revise the policy requirements, including standards of quality or the requirements for participation in the future. Knowing that the state of Iowa has seen the need to revise their quality rating system, and knowing that society and it's needs continues to shift, including its need for quality in early childhood , it is clear that revising of the Nebraska system will be needed, however inclusion of that need was not made in the current policy.

A final concern is that no clear information on the number of providers currently participating in Step Up to Quality is available. The Nebraska Department of Education, who is providing oversight to Step Up to Quality shared that as of March 9th, 2017, 129 child care providers are participating in the program. However, in their publication *Investing in Possibilities: The 2016 Nebraska Children's Budget*, the Holland Children's Institute stated that "as of August 2016, 301 early childhood care and education programs were participating across Nebraska." A third agency, Voices for Children in Nebraska,

stated that 176 programs were participating, as of August of 2015, per the 2015 Kids Count in Nebraska Report. These differing numbers could be attributed to the constant flux of programs opening and closing, as well as the changes in the amount of child care subsidy received, impacting the requirements of a program to participate, but is concerning that the numbers would change that significantly in short amounts of time. It brings up concerns regarding the true impact such a policy will have on Nebraska children.

Personal Impact

Throughout this research and study, the impact such a policy as Step Up to Quality can have on both early childhood providers and families has been demonstrated. Families have shared personal stories regarding their own needs for early childhood experiences, and how a rating system could impact both their ability to find quality in early childhood and their willingness to access experiences outside of the home. The family of the girl in the warm house continues to work towards finding quality early childhood providers who meet all of the needs of their family, as the financial impact that early childhood care has on them is tremendous and outweighs many other considerations. The family that chooses to sacrifice to enable their child to be at home during the day, for reasons that stem from a fear of the negative experiences that could occur in a child care center, is hopeful that the use of a rating system will allow them to feel at ease about selecting experiences that will both keep their child safe, but also provide him with invaluable learning and social opportunities before kindergarten.

For myself, this research, most especially the conversations with families regarding Step Up to Quality, has changed how I approach early childhood experiences

with families. Rather than immediately jumping to helping families find what I see as quality early childhood providers and experiences, this research has taught me to step back and consider all of the minute aspects of what early childhood experiences means for that family specifically. This research has focused my attention on the smaller pieces of early childhood education and experiences that are often overlooked.

The family that chooses to keep their child home during the day is not preventing him from developing socially, instead we find creative ways to help that family engage in community activities and events, which has led me to discover new and unique opportunities for learning and engagement the community has to offer. For the family in the warm house, I now learn to focus on the family unit as a whole and the sum of all of the needs when aiding that family in finding early childhood experiences and supports. Recognizing that quality can mean different things to different families is crucial when helping families both learn about what it means to have quality early childhood experiences, while also recognizing that family needs influence the meaning of quality.

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