

# Early Childhood Educators' Perspectives on Early Childhood Settings and Collaborations to Promote Kindergarten Transition

Lois A. Yamauchi  
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

E. Brook Chapman de Sousa  
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

Previous research indicates that many children have difficulty transitioning from preschool to kindergarten, which may be attributed to differences between the two settings. The purpose of this study was to investigate preschool and elementary school educators' perceptions of the similarities of and differences between the two types of settings and their perceptions of how preschool-elementary collaborations could facilitate young children's transition to kindergarten. Sixteen early childhood educators from elementary and preschool settings were interviewed. All educators saw more differences compared to similarities between the two settings. For example, they viewed elementary school as more focused on academic domains. Educators noted that the elementary school curriculum and flow of day was generally more structured and that preschools tended to promote greater family engagement. Participants suggested that by engaging in joint activity together, these two groups of educators could learn about each other's institutions and find ways to facilitate kindergarten transition.

## Introduction

The world's largest organization of educators of young children, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, defines early childhood as the period from birth through age 8 (Bredecamp, 2014). As such, schooling in early childhood crosses a number of settings, including preschools serving children ages 3- to 5-years-old and elementary schools that include kindergarten and Grades 1-3. Preschools and elementary educators often have different goals and expectations (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Compared to preschool educators, elementary school teachers often have more explicit, skills-driven goals and instruct children as a whole group (Seppanen et al. 1993). Interactions between elementary school teachers and families also tend to be more formalized and less frequent (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 1999). Preparation for

these two types of teachers differ, as pre-service coursework for preschool educators tends to focus on child development, while that of kindergarten teachers emphasizes curricula, assessment and learning expectations (Corter et al., 2012).

Other differences exist regarding educators' work environments. For example, preschool teachers often work with partners or are assisted by instructional aides, while kindergarten educators usually have their own classrooms. Such differences in professional histories may contribute to problems encountered when preschool and kindergarten educators are expected to work together (Corter et al., 2012; Rose, 2011). The purpose of this study was to investigate educators' perspectives on the similarities and differences between preschool and early childhood elementary environments and to explore their ideas about how collaborations between these groups of educators may facilitate children moving into kindergarten settings.

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Lois A. Yamauchi, PhD, Professor, Dept. of Educational Psychology, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. E. Brook Chapman de Sousa, University of Hawai'i.

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Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Lois A. Yamauchi, PhD, Professor, Dept. of Educational Psychology, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Email: yamauchi@hawaii.edu

## Participation in Preschool and Kindergarten Education

Schooling before Grade 1 is sometimes referred to as "preprimary" (Kena et al., 2015) or preschool education. In 2014, most states in the U.S. did not mandate that children attend kindergarten, and it was mandatory in only 15 states and Washington D.C. (Workman, 2014). In 2013, 42% of all U.S. 3-year-olds, 68% of 4-year-olds, and 84% of 5-year-olds were enrolled in preschool and kindergarten. Across racial groups, 31% of

Hispanic 3- to 5-year-olds enrolled in preschool, compared to 37% of Black, 41% of White, 41% of Asian, and 44% of children who were two or more races. This differed somewhat for kindergarten, as 23% of Asian, 25% of White, 27% of children who were two or more races, 27% of Hispanic, and 33% of Black children enrolled.

Kena et al. (2015) found that participation in preschool and kindergarten varied by parents' highest educational levels, and that generally, participation was greatest for children whose parents had attained higher levels of education themselves. These differences were primarily in regards to preschool participation, as 49% of children whose parents had a graduate or professional degree went to preschool, compared to 45% of those with a bachelor's degree, 36% with an associate's degree, 35% with a vocational degree or some college, 28% with a high school credential and 28% with less than a high school credential.

### **Sociocultural Theory**

For the current study, we applied a sociocultural theoretical framework (Vygotsky, 1978) to explain how preschool and elementary school teachers developed different views of young children and of their roles as educators. We also applied this framework to help us understand why collaborations between these two groups could lead to shared understandings. Vygotsky (1978) maintained that all of our thoughts, beliefs and ways of thinking develop through interactions with others. Thus, the sociocultural communities in which individuals participate determine the values and ways of thinking that novice members eventually appropriate. As new members interact with more proficient members of their communities, using language and other symbolic means, they eventually appropriate what others around them say and do. For example, novice preschool educators might hear their supervisors telling them to "kneel down to physically be at the children's level." Over time, those voices become the novices' own thoughts as they automatically go to their knees to talk to children and believe that this is an appropriate way to approach youngsters.

We suggest that as novice preschool teachers interact with veteran educators in their field, they begin to adopt shared views of education and young children that are expressed by more experienced members of their school communities. Similarly, as novice elementary educators interact with veteran teachers, they also begin to act and talk in ways that are similar to their colleagues and mentors. Individuals who interact often

with one another develop what Vygotsky (1978) called intersubjectivity, or shared understandings. When certain groups of people do not have the opportunity to interact with others, there are less possibilities for the development of intersubjectivity between them (Tharp et al., 2000). Preschool and elementary school teachers tend to differ in terms of how they are prepared for their careers (Corter et al., 2012). Such varied and separate interactions may lead the two groups to develop different beliefs about young children and the nature of their roles as teachers.

### **Kindergarten Transition**

Research indicates that children's kindergarten transition, their movement to this setting from their previous placement, affects academic, social, and other developmental outcomes (Corter & Pelletier, 2010; Entwisle & Alexander, 1999; Pelletier & Corter, 2005; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2012). Entwisle and Alexander's longitudinal research of 800 Baltimore youths' progression through school, as well as the researchers' meta-analysis of prior research, showed a convincing link between children's early childhood experiences and improved long-term academic outcomes, such as middle school placement in advanced courses and higher grade point averages in high school. The authors concluded that their findings underscored the need for more research to focus on early schooling experiences. Wildenger and McIntyre (2012) found that children who participated in preprimary programs displayed smoother transitions to kindergarten, in that compared to peers who did not attend, these children had fewer behavior problems and more positive student-teacher relationships.

Although the importance of kindergarten transition has been documented, a nationwide survey of 3,595 kindergarten public school teachers indicated that 48% of children had difficulty adjusting to kindergarten (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). The teachers observed that children had trouble following directions, difficulty working independently, and lacked academic skills. The authors suggested that "these findings call attention to the need to better align children's competencies, their home environments, and their kindergarten teachers' expectations during this period of school entry" (p. 163). Simultaneously, children need to prepare for schools, while schools prepare for them.

Such preparation is important because kindergarten transition may be a child's first change of school level, and the transition often creates uncertainty for them and their families (Harrison & Murray, 2015; Hatcher et al.,

2012). Harrison and Murray (2015) studied the perceptions of 96 kindergarteners during their first year of school. Areas of personal challenge for children included higher expectations for more self-regulation, making friends, resolving conflicts with other children, and engagement in specific school tasks. Up to 29 percent of children's perceptions about some school events changed from positive at the beginning to negative by the end of the school year.

Successful efforts to ease children's transition to kindergarten are related to the cognitive and social-emotional skills of at-risk children (Ritchie & Gutmann, 2014). Kindergarten transition programs tend to lead to higher on-time enrollment, increased parent engagement, and improved community and school relationships (Smythe-Leistico, et al., 2012). Children who participated in pre-kindergarten transition activities in which families, preschool and kindergarten educators collaborated, were judged by kindergarten teachers as having fewer behavior problems and more social skills than children who did not participate in such activities (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). A positive kindergarten experience is important because children's performance and behavior in early elementary school tends to remain stable across many years (Alexander et al., 1993).

Typical kindergarten transition practices include handouts for families and "open houses" when families can visit the school (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). These are insufficient to adequately prepare children and family members, especially for learners who are considered economically or socially at-risk. Educators, particularly those who serve culturally diverse children, may lack adequate resources to assist children's transitions. Stuhlman and Pianta (2009) found that it is more likely for children who are non-White and from low income families to be placed in early childhood classrooms that are "low-quality." Compared to those serving White and more affluent families, these classrooms tend to lack enriching adult-child interactions and socio-emotional and instructional support.

Preschool educators often perceive that compared to kindergarten teachers, they give children more time to practice social skills (Hatcher et al., 2012). Preschool educators also believe that they assist children to develop verbal problem-solving abilities and strategies to interact with peers. They view kindergarten teachers as having other priorities, such that structured social-emotional goals are not valued as much as they are in preschools.

It may be that preschool educators have misconceptions about kindergarten settings that contribute to disjointed transition to kindergarten. Firlik (2003) reported that preschool directors perceived kindergarten to be like "boot camp," focused on phonics, sight-word drills, and prescribed curricula (p. 73). Preschool educators reported feelings of anxiety regarding expectations that children entering preschool needed mastery of reading and other demands of kindergarten (Hatcher et al., 2012). Such comments are often based on assumptions that may not have been accurate. Until recently, there have not been many opportunities for preschool and early elementary educators to interact with one another, and their unfamiliarity about curricular expectations in the two settings could be contributing to misconceptions.

In response to the need for coherent transitions, educators have developed programs that work to unite early childhood educators and community members around the goal of improving kindergarten transition. Early childhood initiatives that promote collaboration among educational leaders, practitioners and parents are related to positive outcomes such as children's social-emotional, cognitive and language development (Corter & Pelletier, 2010; Ritchie & Gutmann, 2014; Simons & Curtis, 2007). Positive outcomes are associated with a shared goal of improved outcomes for transitioning kindergarteners and opportunities for collaboration such as professional development (PD) sessions held for both preschool and kindergarten teachers together (Corter & Pelletier, 2010; Ritchie & Gutmann, 2014; Smolkin, 1999).

## Research Questions

There were two research questions for this exploratory study. First, in what ways do preschool and kindergarten educators perceive their two settings to be similar and different? Second, how do these educators think that collaborations between these two groups of teachers promote positive kindergarten transition?

## Method

### Participants

Participants included 16 early childhood educators in Hawai'i: five preschool teachers, four early elementary school teachers, two preschool administrators, and five teacher educators. We recruited most of the educators through the College of Education at a large public university. As described in more detail in the section on

participants' settings, some of the educators were colleagues at the same schools. Except for three teacher educators, all participants were involved in one of two projects at the University that provided PD for teachers who work with culturally and linguistically diverse young learners. In both of these projects, preschool and elementary teachers met together for the PD. Participa-

tion was voluntary. The university human studies committee approved the research, and each educator provided written informed consent.

All of the participants were female. See Table 1 for participants' other demographic information. In the following section, we provide additional information on the settings in which participants worked.

Table 1  
*Participants' Demographic Information*

Participant <sup>1</sup>	Setting	Age	Years in education	Highest degree	Ethnicity	Previous collaborations			
						Type	years	With whom	
Preschool teachers	Anna	Preschool special education in a rural public elementary school	40	12	MS	Part Hawaiian	PD	1	Brook
	Hannah	University preschool	37	9	BA	Japanese Am	Research	5	Lois
	Jennifer	Urban public school	37	14	MEd	Asian Am	PD	1	Brook
	Marsha	University preschool	36	15	MEd	European Am	PD	1	Brook
	Patty	University preschool	61	15	BA	European Am	Research	5	Lois
Elementary school teachers	Cynthia	2nd grade in an urban public school	64	30	MEd	European Am	PD	1	Lois
	Donna	Kindergarten in a rural public charter school	58	7	BA	Japanese Am	PD	2	Lois
	June	Kindergarten in a rural public school	41	18	BS	Part Hawaiian Asian and European Am	PD	1	Brook
	Karen	1st Grade in a rural public school	28	11	MA	European Am	PD	1	Brook
Preschool Administrators	Lisa	University preschool	48	26	MA	European Am	Research	5	Lois
	Kehau	Private church-based preschool on a neighbor island	32	12	MA	Part Hawaiian	Research	3	Lois
Teacher Educator	Allison	Public university	37	13	PhD	European Am	Research	9	Lois
	Renee	Public university	45	21	MEd	Japanese Am	Research	5	Lois
	Sharon	Early childhood consultancy on a neighbor island	65	46	MA	European Am	Research	3	Lois
	Tammy	Public university	60	36	PhD	European Am and Native Am	Research	8	Lois
	Vera	Community non-profit organization	60	16	MEd	Part Hawaiian	None		

## Settings

**University Preschool.** Three of the preschool educators and one of the administrators, worked at a preschool that served approximately 160 2- to 5-year-old children of students, faculty, and staff at a large public university on the island of O'ahu. The preschool was comprised of a main university site and three satellite classrooms that were located on public elementary

school campuses, and the participating teachers taught at both the main and satellite sites. The preschool was culturally and linguistically diverse, with 32% of children speaking a language other than English, and 42% of families identified as Asian or Asian American, 40% European or European American, and 15% Pacific Islander, with the remainder from African-American and Latino backgrounds (Gauci, 2016).

**Private Preschool.** Kehau was the director of a private church-based preschool on a neighbor island. The

<sup>1</sup>All names are pseudonyms

preschool served approximately 30 children, aged 2-6. Approximately 90% of children at this preschool were of Hawaiian ancestry and all of the learners spoke English as their first language.

**Public Elementary Schools.** Four elementary educators and two preschool teachers taught at five different public schools on the island of O'ahu. Two schools were in urban Honolulu, and three were in rural areas. All of the schools included a preschool special education classroom.

Jennifer taught at an urban elementary school that served 630 children in kindergarten through Grade 5. Fifty-nine percent of children at the school received free or reduced-price lunch, 3% were enrolled in special education, and 13% were multilingual learners. The majority (62%) of children were of Filipino descent, and 13% were Native Hawaiian.

Cynthia's school was also in an urban area. Her school enrolled 550 students, kindergarten through Grade 5. Approximately 28% of students received free or reduced-price lunch, 5% were enrolled in special education, and 14% were multilingual learners. The largest ethnic groups were Japanese American (30%), European American (27%), and Chinese American (14%).

Karen worked at a rural elementary school that served 480 children, kindergarten through Grade 6. Thirty-five percent of children at the school received free or reduced-price lunch, 8% were enrolled in special education, and 3% were multilingual learners. The largest ethnic groups were European American (63%), Native Hawaiian (15%), and Filipino (5%).

Anna and June taught at the same rural elementary school that served 690 children, kindergarten to Grade 6. Fifty-eight percent of students received free or reduced-price lunch, 6% were enrolled in special education, and 5% were multilingual learners. The largest ethnic groups were European American (33%), Samoan (24%), and Native Hawaiian (21%).

Donna was the only participant at a public charter school. At the time of her interview, her school was the largest public charter school in the State, serving 750 children in kindergarten through Grade 10 in a rural area. The majority of students were Native Hawaiian (59%) and qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. In addition, 60% of the families struggled with housing or were homeless.

**College Settings.** All but one of the teacher educators were affiliated with a public university or college campus. Allison, Renee, and Tammy worked in the College of Education at the large flagship public university that prepared most of the teachers in the State.

Sharon was a lecturer at a community college on a neighbor island.

**Non-Profit Organization.** Vera worked for a local non-profit organization whose mission was to support three public charter schools with high enrollments of high-need, Native Hawaiian students. The organization hired Vera to manage a grant-funded program to promote children's transition to kindergarten.

## Procedures

The first author, Lois, and a research assistant interviewed the preschool educators, teacher educators and two of the elementary school teachers. The second author, Brook, interviewed two of the elementary teacher participants and two preschool teachers. The 45-60 minute individual interviews focused on participants' views on (a) how they thought education for preschool and elementary children were similar and different, (b) the goals and expectations they had for the settings in which they worked, and (c) what facilitated and impeded collaborations among educators from these groups, as it related to kindergarten transition. See the Appendix for the interview questions. We conducted six of the interviews with college-based educators in person at a university. The remainder of the interviews were conducted by phone. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

## Data Analysis

We used Corbin and Strauss's (2015) grounded theory method of analysis to determine themes in the data, applying open and axial coding. We used open coding to determine themes that emerged from the data. We first read through the transcripts, identifying themes. Starting with the research questions, we developed initial codes. For example, we established codes for the differences between elementary and preschool settings and similarities between them. We further refined the coding by becoming more specific (e.g., philosophy, state mandates) and also found themes that were not anticipated (e.g., differences in lesson planning). After open coding was completed, we used axial coding, organizing the codes to determine how they were related to one another (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

## Methods of Validation

Consistent with Creswell and Poth's (2018), approach to validation of qualitative research, we viewed validation as our efforts to achieve accuracy of

our results. Creswell and Poth noted that validation is a process, rather than verification, and suggested that researchers use at least two of eight possible validation strategies. We examined our own biases as researchers and clarified our researchers' positions with regard to those biases and our former relationships with the participants (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; Mosselson, 2010). See the following section for details on these reflections. Second, whenever possible we provided rich, thick descriptions of the settings and contexts in which participants discussed so that readers could determine the extent which findings generalized to other settings (Erlandson et al., 1993). Lastly, we look for negative cases of the themes that could be related to potential biases.

### Role of the Researchers

Lois is an educational psychologist who directed one of the projects from which nine of the participants were recruited. (See Table 1 for a list of the authors' previous collaborations with participants.) For five years, Lois collaborated with early childhood educators at the university preschool to create a developmentally appropriate adaptation of the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) model (Yamauchi et al., 2012). Lois's children had also attended the university preschool in which some of the participants worked.

The second author, Brook, was an assistant professor of education. Her research focused on preparing educators to work with multilingual children and language development from a sociocultural perspective. Brook worked as an elementary school teacher for 10 years prior to pursuing doctoral studies and eventually becoming a university instructor teaching classes and providing instructional coaching to prepare early childhood educators. Brook interviewed four of the elementary educators who were her former students and one of the preschool teachers. Brook's daughter also attended the university-based preschool.

**Potential Biases.** Lois and Brook recognized that their relationships with various participants may have affected their interview responses. Although the interview questions were not related to the topic of the PD in which these educators were involved, the authors realized that the participants may have responded in ways that were socially desirable and reflected what they thought the interviewers wanted to hear. To guard against this, a research assistant interviewed all of the participants who were involved in the PD for which Lois was responsible and the teacher educators who

Lois supervised. Brook also interviewed the teachers she knew after they completed the course, she was teaching for them.

Because Lois interacted with more of the preschool participants than the elementary school teachers, she realized that she may have had a bias toward the preschool educators' points of view. Brook also recognized that her friendship with one of the teacher educators may have biased her toward that person's perspectives. To guard against this, both authors specifically looked for negative cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of themes that emerged from those transcripts.

## Results

### Similarities

All of the educators reported more differences between preschool and elementary education, than there were similarities. However, all identified some similarities, and the elementary teachers and preschool administrators noted more similarities than did other participants. Karen, an elementary school teacher said she thought that the two settings were similar in that both focused on "milestones" or standards for children. Another elementary teacher, June, noted that preschool educators and kindergarten teachers both tended to be kind, caring, and nurturing. Vera, a teacher educator, said that preschool had become more like elementary school, with increasing emphases on learning outcomes and "more intentional teaching." She and Kehau, a preschool administrator, noted that many of the assessments used at the two institutions were similar. Three teacher educators mentioned that preschool and elementary educators were united in wanting the children in their classes to succeed. As Sharon, a teacher educator who worked with both elementary and preschool teachers suggested, both "[preschool] and kindergarten teachers really want the kids to do well. They really have full intention of helping their kids learn. It's just how they go about it is a wee bit different." Beyond these similarities, the participants saw the two school systems as very different.

### Differences

**Developmental Versus Academic Goals.** Participants suggested that preschools tended to focus more on children's overall development; whereas, elementary schools emphasized academic skills. Renee, a preschool teacher, noted that "preschool educators look at the whole child and try to develop all aspects of their

development.” She explained that preschool teachers think about various domains of child development including physical development, creativity, and cognitive development, under which academic goals would be placed. Tammy, a teacher educator, concurred that because preschool educators’ preparation emphasized child development, they tend to focus more on developmental aspects of children’s growth; whereas elementary teachers placed importance on specific content to be taught. Anna, a preschool special education teacher whose classroom was on an elementary school campus, noted that the biggest difference between preschool and elementary school was the former’s focus on the development of social, rather than academic skills. She felt that preschool teachers made “sure that the kids learn the essential norms and the things that will help them . . . be part of a group, when most of their early childhood life is focused on being an individual.” Donna, a kindergarten teacher, concurred that preschools prioritize social-emotional development; whereas, in elementary school, “we focus on academics.”

Other participants also characterized elementary schools as more academic. Sharon, a teacher educator, mentioned that there were increasing expectations of elementary school.

There is so much pressure in the [elementary] system to teach . . . the Common Core, that the curriculum has been pushed down. So, things that used to be second grade are now first grade and things that were first grade are being pushed down into kindergarten.

The two preschool administrators noted that elementary educators would like preschools to prepare children for kindergarten by teaching specific academic skills, such as reading and writing. Lisa said that her school covered these skills, but did not emphasize them:

In elementary school, the standards, the expectations of the parents, the administration, even the teachers themselves [are] much more . . . single-mindedly on academic, measurable skills and success. I think preschool does those things, but we definitely do not document it, and we definitely do not have the same level of . . . pressure and expectation.

**Curricular Differences.** Participants explained that because elementary education emphasized academic standards and preschool focused on developmental goals, the two groups tended to approach curricula differently. Marsha, a preschool teacher, and Allison and Vera, two teacher educators, pointed out that preschool

curricula came from children’s interests; whereas elementary education was based on a set of knowledge and skills that teachers needed to cover. Marsha felt that as there was less standardization in preschool, teachers in this setting had more freedom to follow children’s interests. Vera noted that preschool education “is more child-initiated work with teachers . . . observing the child, following the child’s lead, and providing opportunities for the child to explore;” thus, emphasizing children’s interests and choices. Preschool teachers Patty and Jennifer agreed. Although elementary educators had to follow mandated expectations and curricula, Patty explained that in preschools, educators created their own curriculum, “so we really follow the child and their interest, and in elementary public school . . . you don’t have that much latitude to actually tap into the child’s interests.” Teacher educator Allison felt that this resulted in preschool educators focusing on the process of learning and elementary teachers emphasizing the products. Karen, an elementary teacher, suggested that preschool education tended to put more emphasis on play as a means to learn; however, in elementary school, she often heard teachers telling children “You’re in school. You’re here to work, and it’s not play.” This differed from Julia’s response that one way that preschools and elementary schools were similar was in their emphasis on play. Unlike the other elementary school teachers, Julia felt that at her school emphasized learning through play.

Vera suggested that the different emphases placed in preschools and elementary schools also translated to the amount of time that educators spent with children outside the classroom, and the purposes they intended for these moments. In preschools, there is outdoor learning:

So, the curriculum is taking place outdoors. It is not thought of as just recess or play. It is play, but it is not thought of as just a break from the curriculum . . . I think in elementary education . . . outdoor exposure is seen more as kind of a break from the real curriculum.

She felt that young children also needed opportunities to physically release their energy, and this could come from playing outside. She attributed many behavioral problems in elementary school to not enough time outdoors and being forced to sit still for long periods of time.

**Structure of the Day.** Having more outdoor play and learning in preschool also reflected the different ways that educators structured their time. Five participants mentioned that curricular differences reflected

the ways that elementary and preschool teachers structured the school day. Lisa, a preschool administrator, pointed out that elementary schools appeared more structured and compartmentalized. She noted that when her teachers taught science, they did not necessarily teach it at the same time of the day; however, elementary educators typically had a specific time. Activities were also structured differently. Tammy an elementary teacher, suggested that there was more whole group instruction in elementary classrooms than in preschools, where they spent more time in small groups. Vera, a teacher educator, observed that there was less choice in elementary school, and children often worked on the same individual assignment simultaneously.

**Emphasis on Conversation.** Perhaps because there was more small-group activity in preschool, two preschool and one elementary teacher mentioned that there was more conversation in those classes. The preschool teachers said that they promoted children talking and interacting with peers and adults. Hannah said she tried to promote children's questioning. When a child asked a question, she often repeated the question, so that it was a model for other children. Donna, an elementary school teacher, thought that although they used to emphasize oral expression in kindergarten, currently, there is more emphasis on reading and writing.

**Documented Lesson Plans.** Three preschool educators talked about differences in lesson planning. Those facilitating a PD workshop in which they participated asked teachers to turn in lesson plans to document the curricula they were developing. The template for the lesson plans was based on what the teacher educators had previously used with elementary school educators. The preschool educators found the template to be more detailed and structured than what they typically used. They said that they usually brainstormed the general topic and activity, but not exactly when everything would happen. While preschool teacher Patty said that the lesson plan helped her to think about her expectations for children, she often abandoned her plan, suggesting that "when young children are interested in something you want to go . . . where their interests are." Lisa, a preschool administrator, said that the lesson planning template was not meaningful for teachers. After the preschool teachers expressed that they were not happy with the template's format, they created something different that was more meaningful and helpful.

**Pressure in Elementary School to Cover Content.** Participants said that the external mandates applied to elementary school created stress for teachers to help children acquire academic skills and knowledge,

such as reading and writing, by a deadline. Julia, a second-grade teacher concurred, "so many of our children coming to us . . . not ready to jump into the Common Core of kindergarten . . . in my opinion, it's not necessarily that the kids aren't ready as much as the Standards are not really appropriate to them." June, a kindergarten teacher, suggested that she sometimes felt overwhelmed by the national standards, which did not allow for much flexibility. This pressure sometimes made her angry so that she would say, "I'm tired of being a kindergarten teacher. I want to be a preschool teacher!" Preschool administrator Kehau described the difference between what they did at her preschool and her experiences with elementary school. She suggested that in preschool:

We are willing to take the time for them to master [academic skills]. I think that by the time they get into [elementary school], it is just like shoved down their throat, you know, either you get it, or you do not. And if you do not get it, you get kicked out of the class.

Sharon, a teacher educator, pointed out that most preschools have nap time; whereas, in elementary school they have cut out those rest breaks to increase time for content coverage.

**Partnerships with Families.** Five participants mentioned that different from elementary education, preschool educators promoted the development of partnerships with families. Patty, a preschool teacher, explained that she and her colleagues had a lot of contact with families, so that in school, educators could more easily make connections to children's home lives. She observed problems when families transitioned to elementary school, and there was typically less communication between families and the school. She said that family members sometimes felt "like they're cut off" when they did not get enough information, or that they were "not getting the whole picture when they do get the information."

Vera, a teacher educator said that cultivating relationships with families was an expectation of preschool education. Although, elementary teachers might want this, they often had little preparation in how to do it. She said that preschool educators

realize that they really are partners with parents in the caregiving role . . . and make very deliberate attempts to engage parents in the learning environment, as well as doing outreach to parents . . . Whereas, in the [elementary] school environment, I think there is a real strong desire for family engagement, but there is not as much training.



**Professional Development and Status Differential.** Finally, participants mentioned the segregation of PD for the two groups. The major PD convention for the local early childhood organization focused mainly on preschool education, while workshops for early childhood public school teachers, at the time data for this study were collected, did not include preschool educators. Renee, a preschool educator explained, “We live in two separate worlds. So, our professional conferences are separated . . . There is very minimal cross over.”

Lisa, a preschool administrator and Sharon, a teacher educator, mentioned the lower status of preschool education, compared to elementary schooling. Lisa explained that “people think of preschool as childcare, babysitting . . . before the real education. And it is not even just the elementary or other people who think that I think some preschool teachers’ kind of think that, too.” Sharon and Renee suggested that this lower status of preschool teachers sometimes got in the way of the preschool and elementary educators collaborating, as elementary teachers were often put in a position of more authority over preschool educators. They both noted that if the status could be equalized, the two groups could learn much from each other.

### **Collaborations between Preschool and Elementary Educators.**

All participants recognized the importance of preschool and elementary educators collaborating to assist children in their transition to kindergarten. Six stated that it would be helpful if educators from each of the two types of schools could exchange information about their institutions. The two preschool administrators said that they tried reaching out to the elementary schools in their areas to start conversations about children’s transitions. Lisa said that she suggested that the preschool and kindergarten teachers meet to plan for the transition. Because only a few schools were willing and most were not enthusiastic, Lisa said that the teachers at her preschool perceived that elementary school educators did not value these interactions. Kehau also tried reaching out to elementary schools to which the children at her preschool would be transitioning and found that the elementary educators were not interested. Both Lisa and Vera felt that this ambivalence on the part of elementary schools might stem from the fact that children from any one preschool in Hawai’i transitioned into many elementary schools, such that it was not clear to elementary educators which relationships with particular preschools would really make a difference.

On the other hand, when children attended preschool on the same campus as the elementary school that they would move to, Jennifer felt that the transition was much smoother. Jennifer taught preschool special education at a public elementary school. She worked with the kindergarten teachers on her campus to promote her children transitioning to their classrooms. The children visited the kindergarten classrooms for short periods of time, to get used to the new environment and routines, “I think it’s because we’ve had that relationship and because we are there on that campus, it makes it a lot easier for me.”

**Learning About the Two Settings.** Jennifer and Anna, the two preschool educators whose classrooms were on elementary school campuses, suggested that they benefited from “vertical articulation” meetings with kindergarten teachers at their schools who shared about expectations at the next level. Jennifer said she asked the kindergarten teachers, “What do you think the children are lacking?” and adjusted her preschool activities to address those issues. Likewise, teachers of the older children often described particular children who had been in Jennifer’s class, and she explained strategies that had worked for her while working with them. Jennifer stated that other kindergarten teachers, who visited her classroom, often exclaimed that they had not realized that children in preschool were capable of doing so much.

Teacher educators Vera and Sharon were both involved in programs that brought preschool and kindergarten teachers together. In these programs, teachers visited each other’s classroom and met to discuss what they observed. The two felt that the classroom visits helped teachers understand the worlds in which the others worked. Both felt it was important for educators to have time to discuss with and question each other. Allison, another teacher educator, agreed that teachers needed a way to gain the perspective of the other group’s work environment. In addition to classroom visits, she thought teachers might benefit from watching video recordings of each other’s classrooms.

Marsha, a preschool teacher whose master’s program included both preschool and elementary teachers in Grades K-3, stated that she appreciated what she learned from her elementary peers. Prior to being involved in this program, she did not realize what it was like to be an elementary school teacher. As she listened to their experiences, she said she gained empathy for them. Marsha said that the collaboration was positive and helped to eliminate stereotypes that people had about the other group.

**Learning About the Children Who Would Transition.** Participants suggested that preschool and elementary collaborations could result in elementary school teachers learning more about the children who would be transitioning. Preschool educator Patty noted that preschool teachers could help their elementary counterparts understand how to work with children who were having difficulty transitioning, something that Jennifer said occurred for her and the kindergarten teachers at her school. Teacher educator Sharon said that some of the elementary school teachers with whom she worked learned about which children could benefit from being placed in junior kindergarten as opposed to kindergarten, and that this information came from collaborations with preschool educators who worked with those children. Sharon, preschool teacher Jennifer, and elementary school teacher Donna noticed that when the two types of teachers visited each other's classrooms, they learned about what children were able to do in those settings and this informed practice.

Vera and Sharon said that through collaborations with preschool educators, elementary teachers learned about the kinds of assessments that were conducted in preschools. In both of their programs, the preschool teachers shared assessment data with the kindergarten teachers, and vice versa. According to Vera, the preschool teachers saw how well and in what areas the children did in kindergarten and adjusted their curriculum to promote a smoother transition.

### **Facilitating Collaboration Between Preschool and Elementary Educators**

**Developing Relationships Between the Two Groups.** Cynthia, a second-grade teacher who had previously taught preschool, reported that the major barrier to elementary school and preschool educators collaborating was the fact that they were typically located at different sites. She and other participants felt that teachers needed to build relationships and interact with one another, in order to understand each other's settings. Jennifer, a preschool special education teacher whose classroom was on an elementary campus, noted that her proximity to elementary school colleagues facilitated collaborative efforts that could be longer and more frequent than what she observed of preschool educators whose schools were elsewhere. Anna, another preschool special education teacher on an elementary school campus, said that her relationships with colleagues who taught older children developed when they enrolled in a PD program together, and it required hour-long car rides to the university. Carpooling back and

forth created a collaborative setting that led to friendships and better understandings of each other's circumstances.

**Visitations and Co-Teaching.** Participants suggested ways that elementary school and preschool educators could collaborate to facilitate kindergarten education. One strategy was for teachers to visit each other's classrooms and discuss what they saw. Three participants mentioned preschool and elementary teachers co-teaching, often during the summer before children moved to kindergarten. Sharon said that co-teaching could work well because the two teachers began to learn strategies from each other. As described previously, difficulties sometimes arose when there was a status differential, with the preschool teacher taking a more subservient role. Renee noted that preschool educators were not used to working with elementary school teachers, and elementary teachers typically worked alone. Sharon felt that with more equally shared roles, the two groups of educators could learn much from each other through co-teaching.

**Articulation of Goals.** Teacher educator Renee, preschool teacher Anna, and elementary school teachers Cynthia and Karen felt that there was a need for better articulation between preschool and elementary school goals. Anna said that all teachers could benefit from understanding what was expected of children at the next level. Similarly, Sharon described how she asked kindergarten teachers to create their "wish list" of what they wanted incoming children to be able to do. At the same time, she asked preschool educators to write down what they meant by children being ready for kindergarten. Sharon created two lists of these goals, shared them with the two groups, and facilitated a discussion among all participants about what appeared on the lists.

Anna said she benefited from learning about the goals of teachers of older children so that she could consider alignment across their age- and grade-levels, "I'm always curious as to what . . . they're hoping that [children] can come in to kindergarten knowing" She noted that such discussions were a nice way for teachers to collaborate "up and down," in the sense of bringing goals and expectations into alignment.

**Joint Professional Development.** Five participants mentioned providing PD for preschool and elementary school educators together as a strategy for encouraging collaboration across the levels. Tammy, a teacher educator who developed a program that included teachers in preschool and Grades K-3, noted that when preschool and elementary teachers took courses together, they learned about each other's contexts. She said that

otherwise, the two groups of educators rarely had opportunities to interact. It worked particularly well to have preschool and elementary teachers from the same geographic regions in courses together, so they could talk about issues that affected children across the two levels and the groups learned about each other's settings and goals. As discussed earlier, preschool teacher Marsha had experienced this as a master's student and gained a better understanding of what her elementary counterparts experienced.

#### **School Culture and Administrative Support.**

Anna, a preschool special education teacher with an elementary school credential, said that teacher preparation did not focus on collaboration, so when educators arrived at their first classrooms, it could be very isolating. Anna felt that some schools had a more collaborative school culture, whereas others did not, so the school culture influenced whether educators worked with one another and across grade levels. Five participants emphasized the importance of school administrators being supportive of the collaborations between preschool and elementary teachers. Sharon noted that administrators have to value collaboration enough to put it in their budgets, "I think it's hard to underestimate the importance of administrator support because it's expensive. If you are going to do visitations for example, somebody has to be watching the kids. So, you got to have a substitute. That's an expense." Vera agreed that "administrators have to buy in, and they have to be the ones [who think that] this is important. You can't just do it with teachers." In her program, preschool and elementary administrators met monthly to build trust and plan for collaboration.

### **Discussion**

The preschool and elementary educators in this study perceived that their worlds were different from each other, in ways that are consistent with previous research. The teachers remarked on differences between philosophies and approaches to education--that preschool tended to emphasize broader areas of development and learner-focused approaches, while kindergarten focused on academic skills and content standards. Corter et al. (2012) reported that coursework preparing the two types of educators differed in these ways, with preschool educators receiving more classes on child development and kindergarten teachers learning about content, curricula, and assessment. These orientations

may explain other differences mentioned by participants, such as different goals, curricula, and ways to structure activities.

The academic emphasis of kindergarten discussed by participants is consistent with the literature that describes how American kindergarten is now more like upper grades, rather than being a bridge to elementary school (Goldstein, 2009). U.S. federal policies such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top pressured kindergarten educators to abandon play-based curricula in favor of activities that prepare children for high stakes testing. Although such policies might not include formal assessment in Grades K-2, there was increased pressure for teachers to prepare children for testing. Hatch (2002) described this "accountability shove down" as putting pressure on children and teachers and restricting experiences in early childhood that threaten the integrity of the field.

This study was framed by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which suggests that individuals' ideas, expectations, and ways of being originate from social interactions with others in their communities. For example, through interactions with more experienced educators, novice teachers develop intersubjectivity, or shared understanding, and begin to think like their peers. Because the teacher preparation for preschool and elementary school educators differ and these two groups rarely interact with one another, sociocultural theory explains that the two types of educators would tend to lack intersubjectivity, resulting in disparate expectations for their roles and approaches to education.

Participants in our study reported that it was rare for preschool and elementary school educators to collaborate. However, when they did, for example, participating in PD together or working on programs designed to facilitate children's transition to kindergarten, such interactions could lead to learning about each other's settings, about the children who were transitioning, and what they could do to facilitate successful transitions. The results of the current study suggest that collaborations between preschool and elementary educators have the potential to benefit children by creating smoother transitions and improved outcomes for learners. Participants felt that creating opportunities for preschool and elementary educators to work together increased their knowledge about expectations and strategies in both settings. The literature suggests that when early childhood environments integrate educational aspects traditionally found in both preschool and kindergarten, such as addressing children's social-emotional and academic needs, a higher percentage of students meet aca-

ademic standards and demonstrate behavioral improvement (Perry et al., 2007; Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). Children also perceive their academic abilities to be higher (Perry et al., 2007).

The kinds of activities that our participants suggested for possible collaborations between the two groups were similar to those found in the literature on preschool-elementary collaborations. Participants mentioned visitations to each other's classrooms (Smolkin, 1999), discussions across the two groups, and participating in PD opportunities together (Pelletier & Corter, 2005). One of the preschool teachers in our study, who had enrolled in a master's program that included both preschool and elementary teachers, commented that she gained a perspective of elementary school by interacting with her elementary-level peers. A teacher educator also remarked that when these interactions worked, both groups learned about each other and built common understandings of the young children they served.

These collaborations are not without challenges. Consistent with prior research, the participants in this study noted that there were barriers to preschool-elementary collaborations, including status differentials between preschool and elementary teachers, time and other resource constraints, and an unwillingness to collaborate. Such challenges are similar to Rose's (2011) findings that barriers to collaboration arose when inter-professional teams worked together to provide child services. Participants overcame these challenges when they defined and pursued joint goals. Corter and Pelletier (2010) cited similar difficulties faced by child service providers and kindergarten teachers that included problems related to "professional turf," as well as finding space and time for collaboration. Barriers were overcome with strong leadership and by prioritizing time for collaboration.

### Implications for Practice

The results of this study indicate that there is much that preschool and elementary teachers can learn from each other, as their contexts differ considerably and learning about these differences can assist in easing the transition for young children. It is important to develop opportunities for preschool and elementary educators to visit each other's classrooms. A number of the educators in our study took university courses together and found that these classes afforded time and space to learn from peers about their settings. As more elementary schools include preschool classrooms on their

campuses, there may be increased opportunities for such collaborations at their sites.

Educators can benefit from learning about the broader contexts in which their peers are situated, for example, the ways in which policies and other social, historical, and cultural contexts influence educational settings. These insights can help teachers to foster greater empathy and new perspectives on their own work. Educators benefit from seeing the strategies that are used in different settings. Of particular value are opportunities for teachers to work together with children who are transitioning to kindergarten, as is the case with a summer bridge experience. This joint activity lends itself well to educators modeling different practices and fosters conversation about their expectations and strategies. This is related to a Vygotskian notion of Joint Productive Activity, that advocates for individuals working together to develop new conceptual understandings (Tharp et al., 2000). Conversations and shared experiences among those with different perspectives often require articulation of views and negotiation. This negotiation can result in a shared, new perspective and a more holistic vision of young children and the contexts in which they participate.

### Limitations and Future Research

One of the limitations of this study was the small sample size. We recruited participants from university projects that brought preschool and elementary educators together for PD, so those who participated may have already been in favor of such collaborations. Data for the study consisted of interviews, and these data could have been susceptible to social desirability, such that the educators may have reported practices that they thought reflected positively on them, rather than what they actually did. Future research could include more educators and observations of educators at each type of site.

Research has shown that family engagement can facilitate kindergarten transition (Simons & Curtis, 2007; Smythe-Leistico, et al., 2012); however, we did not include families in our study. Future research could include family perspectives on how preschool and elementary settings differ and investigate coordinated interactions between families and educators from the two types of schools, related to children's transitions.

Finally, video reflexive interviewing (e.g., Tobin et al., 1989; 2009) might also add insight into the two contexts. Tobin and his colleagues showed video recordings of typical days in classrooms in Japan, China, and the U.S. to educators in each of these countries. The

comments that were elicited about the recordings revealed differences in philosophical beliefs about child rearing and education. In a similar way, showing video recordings of typical elementary and preschool classrooms to educators from these two types of settings might uncover beliefs about children and education more readily than would be revealed in a standard interview.

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#### Appendix: Interview Questions

1. In what ways do you think preschool education is different from elementary education?
2. Are there philosophical differences between preschool and elementary school teachers? If so, please explain.
3. In what ways are preschools and elementary schools similar?
4. What kinds of experiences have you had collaborating with preschool (elementary school) educators?
5. What have those experiences been like?
6. What has facilitated your working with preschool (elementary school) teachers?
7. Are there any barriers to collaborations between preschool and elementary educators?
8. What kinds of experiences have you had working with preschool educators to facilitate children's transition to kindergarten?
9. In what ways do you think preschool and elementary school teachers could collaborate to facilitate children's transition to kindergarten?