The Alignment Agenda: Examining the Movement to Bridge the Early Childhood and K–12 Sectors

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There is a movement to improve alignment between the early childhood and K–12 education sectors, which I term The Alignment Agenda. This qualitative study provides an in-depth description of this agenda through analysis of data from interviews with 25 elites (e.g., state director of early learning) associated with the agenda and associated documents. The analysis focuses on (1) the problems with the status quo that necessitate alignment reform, (2) the nature of proposed alignment reforms, and (3) the challenges and facilitators of advancing the alignment reforms. Understanding how elites associated with the alignment agenda think about the movement, including key features of alignment reforms, has relevance for policy and practice because these individuals are closely—if not directly—involved in the process of policy development and implementation at the local, state, and federal levels. Further, attention to the topic of aligning the early childhood and K–12 education sectors is likely to increase in coming years as proposals for expansion of the early childhood education sector are adopted and implemented.

THERE is a movement to improve alignment between the early childhood and K–12 education sectors, which I term *The Alignment Agenda*[1] for the purposes of this paper. Different terms exist for this concept, including pre-K through third-grade (P-3) alignment, birth-to-eight (B-8) alignment, vertical alignment, and cross-sector alignment (Kauerz, 2019). Despite some definitional differences, the underlying goal of the movement is to better align children's educational experiences as they transition from the early childhood education sector[2] (e.g., pre-K, Head Start) to the K–12 education sector (Little, 2020; Little & Gragson, 2023; National Research Council, 2015; Takanishi & Kauerz, 2008).

There has been a considerable amount of research, policy, and practice attention to the alignment agenda in recent years. From a research perspective, the federal Institute of Education Sciences invested $26 million in the ongoing Early Learning Network, which seeks to study the causes and consequences of "poor alignment between preschool programs and elementary schools" (Institute of Education Sciences, 2016). Governance reforms to improve alignment are also underway, such as in North Carolina, where the Birth-Through-Third-Grade Interagency Council was created to bridge the divide between the Department of Health and Human Services (which oversees most early childhood programs) and the Department of Public Instruction (which

oversees K–12 education) (Education Commission of the States, 2020; Griffard et al., 2022). Last, teachers and school leaders are working to improve alignment by implementing practices that smooth the transition into kindergarten, such as staggering school entry (Little & Cohen-Vogel, 2017; Little et al., 2016).

The significance of this alignment movement is likely to only increase in the coming years as policy proposals to dramatically expand the early childhood education sector are adopted and implemented. The federal Build Back Better framework, for example, would provide universal access to pre-K for all 3- and 4-year-olds in the United States (Build Back Better, n.d.). As pre-K and other early childhood education opportunities are expanded, attention to improving alignment between the early childhood and K–12 education sectors is likely to increase.

The purpose of this paper is to describe this alignment agenda through analysis of the perspectives of 25 elites[3] associated with the movement—including researchers, government officials, funders, and think tank and advocacy organization leaders. I also draw on a corpus of documents associated with each elite participant and the organizations they represent. The analysis focuses on (1) the problems with the status quo that necessitate alignment reform, (2) the ideal form of alignment reforms, and (3) the challenges and facilitators of advancing alignment reforms.

This study reveals that elites often conceive of the key problem underlying the alignment agenda as a combination of structural and normative divisions between the early childhood and K–12 education sectors. Fundamentally, agenda elites seek to pursue reform strategies that increase relationships and communication between the early childhood and K–12 sectors. Moreover, rather than pursue alignment of discrete educational supports (e.g., curricula), some advocates articulate alignment as a systematic school reform strategy, facilitated by visionary and sustained leadership. Agenda elites cited multiple impediments to advancing alignment reform, including power differentials between the early childhood and K–12 education sectors and dangerous unintended risks of linking the two sectors, including pushdown of developmentally inappropriate practices in early childhood.

While a limited amount of literature has described past alignment reform efforts (e.g., Bornfreund & Lieberman, 2019), this study is the first to draw on primary interview data to provide a holistic description of the movement today. By illuminating the voices of a variety of different actors associated with the alignment agenda, the study reveals how different elements of reform movements conceptualize and focus their work. Given the importance of different elite actors in the policy process (e.g., Reckhow et al., 2021), gaining an understanding of their views provides critical information for scholars, advocates, and policymakers hoping to make sense of efforts to align the early childhood and K–12 education sectors. This work is also timely given the Biden administration's centering of early childhood education as one of its core policy priorities.

In the following section, I provide an overview of the alignment agenda, tracing the movement from its historical roots through today. Next, I present the conceptual framework for this study, which outlines the importance of understanding the perspectives of elites involved in policy movements, for they are closely—if not directly—involved in the process of policy development and implementation. I then detail the methodological approach I used in the study and present the findings. I conclude by discussing the implications of this study's description of the alignment agenda, including what it may mean for the design and success of future policy changes aimed at improving alignment between the early childhood and K–12 education sectors.

Background

Foundations of the Movement

Efforts to align early childhood education and K–12 education are not new. Some of the earliest alignment initiatives coincided with the initial development of publicly funded early childhood programs in the United States, such as Head Start (Bornfreund & Lieberman, 2019). In fact, two years after the creation of Head Start, President Johnson initiated "Project Follow Through," which was an effort to identify practices in early elementary school that sustained the academic gains children made in Head Start (Reynolds et al., 2010). In 1967, the Chicago Child-Parent Center Education Program (CPC) was launched, which provided high-quality, center-based early education that was linked directly to local elementary schools where alignment with the early elementary grades was deliberate and foundational to the mission. These programs, among others (see Reynolds et al., 2011, for a comprehensive review), were grounded in child development theories that suggest learning and development are optimized when children experience *continuity* in high-quality learning environments (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005; Stipek, 2019)

While numerous alignment initiatives occurred in the second half of the 20th century, such as those just described, they were often ad hoc and transitory. The CPC program is one of the only early initiatives to remain operational today (Reynolds et al., 2011). This stands in contrast to the present movement, where there is a robust ecosystem of researchers, government officials, funders, and think tank and advocacy organization leaders focused on promoting alignment reforms.

The Alignment Agenda Today

The contemporary alignment agenda remains focused on the goal of ensuring young children experience a coherent and aligned progression of educational experiences as they transition from the pre-K to K–12 education sector (Little, 2020; National Research Council, 2015; Takanishi & Kauerz, 2008). There is a constellation of different actors associated with this agenda, including researchers, government officials, funders, and think tank and advocacy organization leaders. Note that while I provide an overview of each of these agenda elements separately, they do not operate in silos. Funders, for example, support research projects that scholars produce and are then promoted by advocacy organizations. After providing a snapshot of each alignment agenda element, I then show how this movement has achieved significant impacts in terms of policy and practice.

Researchers. Scholarly research focused on alignment has grown rapidly in recent years. From 1950 to 2000, there were 1,690 results for the term "Pre-K to Third Grade Alignment" on Google Scholar. Since 2000, there have been nearly 18,000 results for the same term. The alignment literature can be segmented into three broad categories: (1) conceptual work that describes the motivations for alignment, (2) empirical research examining how to optimize alignment and sustain early learning gains, and (3) critical views of the consequences of tying the pre-K and K–12 sectors closer together.

One of the most prominent voices promoting the conceptual understanding of alignment is the late Ruby Takanishi, who authored a book in 2016 entitled *First Things First! Creating the New American Primary School*, where she wrote, "A new framework that seeks to integrate coexisting, separate early education and primary education is required to strengthen learning during the first critical decade of life and beyond" (p. 4). Other field-defining conceptual pieces include a Social Policy Report from the Society for Research in Child Development by Bogard and Takanishi (2005) and highly cited book chapters and journal articles from Kagan and Kauerz (2007) and Kauerz (2006, 2018, 2019).

In addition to conceptual work, there is a vast body of empirical literature that examines ways to optimize alignment in order to sustain early learning gains. In general, this literature focuses on the issue of so-called "pre-K fadeout,"[4] wherein early learning gains on cognitive outcomes rapidly diminish when children enter elementary school (Bailey et al., 2017). Researchers have examined how elementary school experiences can sustain or constrain early learning gains (e.g., Bailey et al., 2020; Carr et al., 2021), the ways that interventions like transition practices can smooth transitions to kindergarten (e.g., Cook & Coley, 2017; Little, 2017; Little et al., 2016) and the misalignment of instruction and related supports between sectors (e.g., Cohen-Vogel et al., 2020, 2021; Engel et al., 2013). Signifying the prominence of this research area, a recent special issue of *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* was published on "Understanding Alignment in Children's Early Learning Experiences: Policies and Practices from across the United States" (Harding et al., 2020).

A third category of scholarship on alignment takes a critical view of the potential consequences of tying the early childhood and K–12 education sectors closer together—for example, a paper from McCabe and Sipple (2011) entitled, "Colliding Worlds: Practical and Political Tensions of Prekindergarten Implementation in Public Schools." Papers like this one and others (e.g., Brown, 2009; Graue et al., 2017; Halpern, 2013) explore the implications of aligning two distinct "worlds" that have starkly different norms regarding curricula, pedagogy, and assessments. These studies often find that the power and influence of the K–12 sector exceeds that of the ECE sector, and undesirable changes occur, such as a "push down" of developmentally inappropriate practices in early childhood. However, there are some examples of the alternative happening in the context of alignment reform efforts. In Boston, for example, pre-K reforms served as the starting point to then "push up" developmentally appropriate practices into the early elementary grades (Bornfreund & Loewenberg, 2018).

Funders. While there have been a number of foundations to support alignment research and initiatives, the Foundation for Child Development (FCD) has arguably played the most prominent role (Takanishi, 2016). In 2003, FCD launched a ten-year initiative called "pre-K–3rd" with the goal to "support approaches that aimed to build on children's gains produced by quality pre-K programs but that were not being sustained during the early primary school years" (Takanishi, 2016; p. 10). Other large-scale foundations that have supported alignment work include the Alliance for Early Success, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Heising-Simons Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Additional smaller foundations, in terms of dollars invested, have also supported alignment work, including the W. Clement & Jessie V. Stone Foundation and the Nicholson Foundation.

In addition to funding from foundations, the federal government has invested significant resources to advance research on alignment through a range of departments and mechanisms. From the Department of Education (ED), for example, the Institute for Education Sciences has invested $26 million in the Early Learning Network, which is intently focused on the alignment of early education experiences from pre-K through early elementary school. The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within the Department of Health and Human Services recently completed a large-scale commissioned report on "Understanding Cross-Systems Transitions from Head Start to Kindergarten" (Ehrlich et al., 2021). Last, one of the 22 Department of Education–funded comprehensive centers, the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes, included a focus on "P-3 Alignment Projects".

Advocacy and Think Tank Organizations. The advocacy/think tank organizations involved in the alignment agenda include a combination of smaller organizations where alignment is a core focus and larger organizations where alignment is one of many initiatives. Most prominent among the former group is the National P-3 Center, which is currently housed at the University of Colorado Denver and led by Dr. Kristie Kauerz. The National P-3 Center has an explicit mission to "bridge divides between early care and education (ECE) and pre-K-12 organizations and systems". The Center works toward its mission by "providing leadership and professional learning opportunities, offering support and resources to guide effective implementation of policy and practice, and engaging in innovative research and evaluation efforts".

Another prominent organization in the alignment agenda is the New America Foundation. While the overall scope of the foundation is vast, ranging from housing to international security, the Early and Elementary Education initiative within the Education Policy Program focuses extensively on alignment. Describing the focus of the initiative, the website reads, "We need a new system of public education institutions and policies capable of delivering coherent, aligned, and high-quality early education to all

children from pre-K through third grade, preceded by high-quality programs for infants and toddlers and better support for families". There are additional large-scale national organizations, similar to New America, that have engaged in work related to the alignment agenda, including the Build Initiative, the National Governors Association, the Center for American Progress, the Education Commission of the States, and the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Additionally, practice-based organizations, like the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), have played a prominent role in the alignment agenda. NAESP has a "Pre-K-3 Leadership" initiative, which includes pre-K-3 professional standards to guide practice, as well as a leadership academy training program that aims to "provide principals and other leaders with a job-embedded, sustained, and ongoing professional learning experience focused on mastering effective instructional leadership practices that are developmentally-appropriate".

Government Officials. The last category of actors associated with the alignment agenda is government officials, primarily operating at the state and local levels. Increasingly, state governments are creating interagency councils or merging governance structures to tie the early childhood and K–12 education sectors closer together (e.g., Griffard et al., 2022). For example, in North Carolina, the legislature created the Birth-Through-Third-Grade Interagency Council that brings together agencies delivering early childhood and K–12 education in order to improve "transitions and continuity," among other goals. At the local level, school districts are working to advance alignment in a number of ways, including providing universal pre-K through the local school district, as is the case in Boston Public Schools. The Boston program is often heralded as an exemplar in advancing effective, developmentally appropriate, and aligned early education (e.g., McCormick et al., 2019). Initiatives such as these are developing a cadre of leaders working in states to advance the alignment agenda. A report on "Building State P-3 Systems" from CEELO provides a useful overview of additional state and local activities regarding alignment (Jacobson, 2016).

Impacts of the Alignment Agenda

Together, these elements associated with the alignment agenda have achieved substantial results. Notable shifts in both policy and governance have occurred in recent years. At the federal level, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the 2015 revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, requires school districts that receive Title I funds to develop written agreements with Head Start and other early childhood providers to increase coordination.

Across the states, a recent report from the Education Commission of the States found that 23 states and DC have specific policies aimed at smoothing the transition from pre-K into kindergarten (Bornfreund et al., 2020). From a practice perspective, there have been similar shifts toward recognizing and seeking to improve alignment. Research from Little and colleagues (2016) compared national survey data from 1998 and 2010 and found an increase in the proportion of elementary schools engaging in practices that seek to improve school transitions from early childhood into kindergarten.

Yet, despite the tangible progress of the alignment agenda in both policy and practice, there remains a severe disconnect between the early childhood and K–12 education sectors. For example, recent research from the IES-funded Early Learning Network found that kindergarteners receive significant amounts of instruction that is redundant to what they experienced the prior year in pre-K (Cohen-Vogel et al., 2021). Another study from the same research network found that such a disconnect in experiences can have harmful consequences for children's early educational outcomes (Vitiello et al., 2022). This reality, coupled with the ever-increasing attention to expanding and improving the quality of early education programs in the United States, suggests the work of the alignment agenda will continue to play a prominent role.

Present Study

As this review of the literature has revealed, there is a growing movement to increase alignment between the ECE and K–12 education sectors, and this movement has achieved tangible results in terms of policy and practice reforms. Given the momentum of this movement, it is critical to take stock of the alignment agenda in a comprehensive fashion, gathering the perspectives from the key players in this movement—namely, researchers, funders, think tank/advocacy leaders, and government officials. In doing so, I pursue three aims, as first introduced in the introduction. Specifically, I aim to identify (1) the problems with the status quo that necessitate alignment reform, (2) the ideal form of alignment reforms, and (3) the challenges and facilitators of advancing alignment reforms. This analysis builds on prior work and provides the field with two key contributions. First, no study has comprehensively studied these categories of participants, looking for areas of agreement or disagreement between the constituent elements. Second, by interviewing these elites directly, we are able to learn their more candid reflections on the alignment agenda—perspectives that may not be represented in their official research papers or policy documents. Next, I present the study's conceptual framework, which highlights the importance of taking a holistic assessment of the alignment agenda.
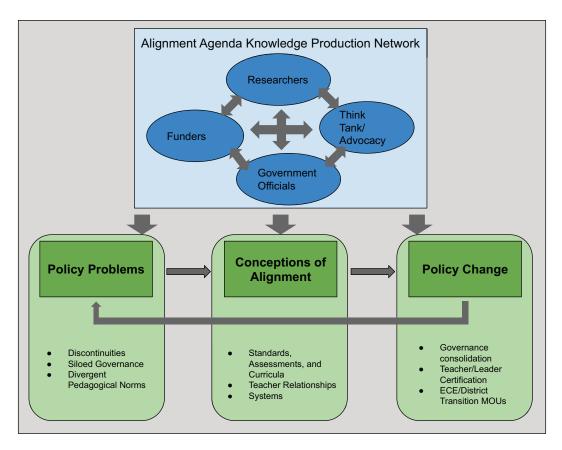
Alignment Agenda Knowledge Production Network

Researchers

Funders

Think Tank/ Advocacy

Government Officials

Policy Problems

- Discontinuities
- Siloed Governance
- Divergent Pedagogical Norms

Conceptions of Alignment

- Standards, Assessments, and Curricula
- Teacher Relationships
- Systems

Policy Change

- Governance consolidation
- Teacher/Leader Certification
- ECE/District Transition MOUs

FIGURE 1.   *Study conceptual framework.*

Conceptual Framework

In this study, I conceptualize the alignment agenda as a critical knowledge-production network that exerts its influence at multiple phases of the policy process. I present this framework graphically in Figure 1. This framework is informed by a diverse conceptual literature on advocacy and policymaking that explores the role of elite interest group influence on policy outcomes (e.g., DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Reckhow et al., 2021; Scott & Jabbar, 2014).

Alignment Agenda Knowledge-Production Network

A recent paper published in this journal by Reckhow and colleagues (2021) examined federal teacher evaluation policy change and provided a conceptual framework, which they call the Political Economy of Knowledge Production. This framework posits that "external organizations—which may include think tanks, universities, research institutes, and advocacy organizations—play varying roles in producing, packaging, and promoting research" (p. 3). This network of knowledge producers is often supported and coordinated via investments from private philanthropy and other funders (e.g., Henig, 2008; Scott & Jabbar, 2014). The influence of this network of elite interest groups on policy outcomes is made possible, the authors explain, because of two key features of American government: (1) the relative openness of the political process to external influence and (2) the limited internal capacity of government institutions to product ideas and generate research on specific topics (Reckhow et al., 2021).

I draw on a simplified version of the political economy of knowledge production framework to inform my inclusion of different entities in the alignment agenda in the study, as represented in the blue box in Figure 1. While the Reckhow et al. (2021) study was interested in exploring the *connections and interactions* among the constituent elements in the network, I draw on this literature simply to recognize the importance of including these members in my study and recognizing their importance in multiple phases of the policy process, which is the second element of my conceptual framework.

Influences of the Network on the Policy Process

As shown in the green boxes in the lower half of Figure 1, the Alignment Agenda Knowledge-Production Network exerts its influence on the alignment policy process at multiple phases, including the definition of policy problems, the conceptions of alignment (e.g., solutions), and policy change.

The three research aims pursued herein align with each of these three phases of the policy process.

Policy Problems. The first stage of this simplified rendering of the policy process is concerned with the definition of problems. Problem definition has long been recognized as a foundational part of the policy process (e.g., Kingdon, 1995; Stone, 2012). Determining how a policy problem is defined sets the guardrails for the subsequent policy process steps—it outlines what is and is not possible. While research and data-defining problems are often accepted as objective truths, in the words of Kingdon, "there is a perceptual interpretative element" in problem definition (1995, p. 110). That is, what data are selected to be highlighted, how they are analyzed, and what factors are cited as causes of the problem are all manipulable. In addition to the presentation of research and data to define policy problems, actors also often draw upon core values, such as equality and liberty, to shape definitions (Stone, 2012). Applied to the case of the alignment agenda, examples of problems include the discontinuities children experience in terms of instruction between preschool and elementary school, governance divisions between the early education and K–12 sectors, and divergent pedagogical norms between the two sectors. The first aim of this study, therefore, is to describe how elites in the alignment agenda define the core problems that motivate their work.

Conceptions of Alignment (Solutions). Stemming directly from the definition of policy problems is the presentation of what the levers are that can be manipulated to address alignment problems. Rather than progressing directly from policy problems to policy changes via legislative or regulatory action, I consider an interim step to understand how agenda advocates *conceive of alignment*. That is, what are the active ingredients that need to be modified (e.g., standards, curricula, and assessment) in order to improve alignment? Understanding this step of the process—the one that defines the range of potential alternatives and avenues for action—is critical because it defines what policy changes may actually occur in practice rather than just discourse. In addition to generating a list of potential reform avenues, agenda advocates can also engage in a process during this stage of presenting some alternatives as superior to others, which Kingdon refers to as the "winnowing of ideas" (Kingdon, 1984). It is in this context that the second research aim in this study is to understand how elites in the alignment agenda conceive of various alignment reforms and what their ideal form is.

Policy Change and Feedback. Ultimately, policy changes are enacted that are based on the policy problems and related alternative solutions (Sabatier & Weible, 2014). My interest in this study is less on understanding why and how certain policies are adopted and more on how elites in the alignment agenda react to policy reforms and what they portend for future reform efforts. Policy feedback theory provides a useful lens to inform this goal (Mettler & SoRelle, 2018). Enacted policies (e.g., consolidating governance of ECE and K–12 education) provide an opportunity to examine how the reform works in practice, what new problems the change generates, and how thinking about new policy solutions may shift. The final research aim stemming from this phase of the policy process, therefore, is to understand what elites in the alignment agenda have learned about the facilitators and challenges of advancing alignment reforms.

Method

I used a qualitative interpretive approach in this study to describe the alignment agenda through analysis of in-depth interviews with elites involved in the agenda and associated documents (Yanow, 2017). An interpretivist approach seeks to understand how others make sense of their world. This approach is appropriate for the aims of this research study because my goal is to understand how elites in the alignment agenda make sense of their work. Data collection and analysis for this study took place from spring 2020 through summer 2021.

Sample

Interview Sample. I interviewed a total of 25 elites associated with the alignment agenda. Of the 25 elites, 11 were researchers, 4 were government officials, 5 were funders, and 5 were think tank/advocacy organization representatives. I pursued interviews with 43 individuals in total for an overall interview response rate of 58 percent. The researchers were employed by seven different research-focused universities and four different large-scale research firms. The government officials represented four different states and held high-ranking positions, such as "state director of early learning." The five funders were either executive directors, presidents, or senior program officers of five separate foundations that currently support or have supported efforts to improve early childhood/K–12 alignment in the past. Two of the foundations had assets over $100 million, and the other three had assets ranging between $25 and $75 million. The think tank/advocacy organization participants represented a combination of large-scale policy organizations and smaller organizations focused explicitly on issues related to early childhood/K–12 alignment. Four of the participants held director/president roles, and one was a senior policy analyst. All participants were asked to provide recommendations for other individuals or organizations to include in the study, and this snowball sampling approach was used until no novel recommendations were offered. Four respondents were identified through

TABLE 1
Interview/Document Sample Overview

Participant Category	Number of Participants	Documents
Researchers	11	18
Government officials	4	3
Funders	5	8
Think tank/advocacy organizations	5	13
Total	25	42

this process. Participants were recruited via email. Two follow-up emails were sent if there was no response to the initial interview request. Response rates were consistent across the different participant types. A summary of participants representing each category is provided in Table 1.

Supplementary Documents. In addition to the elite interviews, I compiled a database of 42 documents associated with the participants, their organizations, and other prominent documents in the alignment space. For example, I reviewed a Society for Research in Child Development Social Policy Report entitled "PK-3: What Does it Mean for Instruction?" as well as the "Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating P-3 Approaches" published by the National P-3 Center. Because the majority of supplementary documents were authored by interview participants, I do not provide the full list of documents to protect participant confidentiality. A breakdown of the number of documents associated with each participant group is provided in the last column of Table 1.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection and analysis occurred in tandem from the fall of 2020 through the summer of 2021 (Lareau, 2021). I completed individual video interviews on Zoom, which lasted an average of 42 minutes each (minimum: 24 minutes, maximum: 88 minutes). Interviews were guided by a semistructured interview protocol. The questions followed the core research aims. I asked participants what they saw as the underlying problems that motivated the alignment agenda, what they saw as the ideal form for alignment reforms, and the facilitators and challenges therein. The protocol evolved over time, with specific probes added that sought clarification on emerging themes. At the conclusion of each interview, I completed a memo where I recorded notable statements from the participant, areas for further inquiry or protocol revision, and emergent themes. This process helped me to refine research questions, assess emerging themes, consider competing explanations, and deepen my focus (Lareau, 2021).

Once interviews were completed, I reviewed all reflection notes and developed an analysis table that included columns to summarize participant reports for each of the three research aims (problems that necessitate alignment reform, nature of alignment reforms, challenges and facilitators of alignment reforms) as well as emergent themes or subthemes (e.g., leadership, structural governance barriers) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I then listened to each interview recording again and summarized findings for each table column, transcribing supporting quotations, where applicable. I also reviewed associated documents and added supporting data alongside information shared directly in the interviews. This included noting areas of consistency or inconsistency between participant interview comments and those reflected in their professional publications. I also explored consistency in responses by participant type (e.g., researchers versus funders). Once the analysis table was populated, I reviewed the summary findings across all participants and by participant type to identify areas of commonality and discordance. Additional columns were added that captured and summarized these areas of nuance, including numerical counts. One example of this is a column that indicated if the participant saw pre-K fadeout as a primary concern motivating the alignment agenda. This allowed me to readily examine if this perspective varied by participant type.

I engaged in a number of strategies to increase the trustworthiness of this analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). First, I engaged in peer debriefing meetings with two separate scholars familiar with issues of early childhood/K–12 alignment, where we discussed research questions, sample design, data collection methods, and emerging findings. Second, I used data source triangulation by including both a combination of interview and document data sources as well as multiple interview participants within multiple participant categories (e.g., researcher, funder). Third, I engaged in member checking with a subset of interview participants to clarify and confirm that my interpretation of certain phenomena they shared was consistent with their own.

Researcher Positionality

I am a faculty member at a large R-1 university in the United States. My research focuses on early childhood and early grade education, and I have studied, specifically, issues related to early childhood/K–12 education alignment. My positionality within the community I am studying raises some important considerations. My connections with elites in this field facilitated my ability to recruit and interview the sample included herein. However, my own understanding of who the key players in the alignment agenda are may have been limited by my positionality. To address this, I asked all participants who they would recommend I interview and what other organizations are actively involved in the agenda. I did this until no novel participants were recommended. Of the 25 participants, 4 were identified through this procedure. In addition to this snowball sampling

TABLE 2
Summary of Themes and Descriptions

Name of Primary Theme, by Research Aim

Aim 1: The Alignment Agenda: Working to Solve What Problems?
   "We Aren't Child-Centered Enough"
   "If a Child Is Not on Track by Grade Three, They Are Unlikely to Get Back on Track"
   "I Don't Worry Much About Fadeout"
Aim 2: Defining the Agenda: What Should Alignment Reform Aim to Do and Look Like?
   "It's All About Relationships and Communication"
   "There Are These Elements That Need to Be Aligned"
   "A Comprehensive School Reform Strategy"
Aim 3: Facilitators and Challenges of Advancing Alignment Reform
   "Leadership Is Key"
   "K-12 Has the Power"
   "There Are Definitely Risks With This Work"

Description of Theme

While optimal child development requires continuity, governance, systems, and norms in the United States are discontinuous between the early childhood and K–12 education sectors.

Given the predictive power of third-grade achievement for later success, third grade is a focusing point in motivating the alignment agenda. Addressing inequalities prior to third grade is critical.

The phenomenon of fadeout—where early learning gains fade away in elementary school—was generally isolated to researchers as a motivating factor.

Fundamentally, alignment reform strives to improve relationships and communication across the divide between the early childhood education and K–12 education sectors.

Specifically, there are supports that need to be aligned, including instructional supports (standards, curricula, assessments), transition practices, and governance.

Beyond aligning disparate elements like standards and assessments, a comprehensive set of elements needs to be aligned at once in a coordinated and comprehensive way for alignment reform to be successful.

The comprehensive nature of effective alignment reform requires visionary leadership that is stable. Leadership turnover is a key challenge of alignment reform.

A challenge of alignment reform is the reality that K–12 education often has more power relative to early childhood education. Consequently, K–12 sometimes does not come to the table, and when they do, they can wield too much power.

By tying the early childhood education and K–12 education sectors closer, there are unintended risks, including the pushdown of developmentally inappropriate practices and increased tensions between the B-3 and P-3 sectors.

approach, my own views on the value of early childhood/K–12 alignment may have impacted my interpretations of the data. I began this project with the view that the early childhood and K–12 education spheres were disconnected, which is harmful for child development, and that alignment reforms should be enacted to smooth this division and provide coherent and sequenced educational experiences for students. To mitigate potential personal biases on the topic at hand, I intentionally recruited individuals who have been skeptical of alignment efforts and warned about the potential pitfalls of tying the sectors more closely together.

Findings

I organize the findings from this study around the three research aims. First, I detail how elites in the alignment agenda describe the problems with the status quo that necessitate alignment reform. Second, I reveal how these elites conceptualize alignment reforms and what their ideal form is. Third, I explore what these elites see as the key facilitators and challenges of advancing alignment reforms. In addition to detailing the thematic findings in the pages that follow, I summarize the key findings with a brief theme description in Table 2.

Aim 1: The Alignment Agenda: Working to Solve What Problems?

There were three primary themes identified related to what elites saw as the problems with the status quo. First, participants noted that while child development requires continuity, our early childhood systems are rife with discontinuities. Second, participants frequently cited the

importance of third-grade achievement and how inequalities at that key "threshold" often ossified and persisted throughout students' educational careers. Third, the issue of pre-K fadeout as a motivation for alignment reforms was unexpectedly limited and confined primarily to the researcher participants. I elaborate on the findings for each of these three themes.

"We Aren't Child-Centered Enough." The most consistently cited problem underpinning the alignment agenda is a system of early care and education that is rife with *discontinuities* when optimal child development requires *continuity*. As the executive director of a large child development–focused foundation noted, "We aren't child-centered enough; we have these drastically different systems with different funding streams and educational experiences." They went on to share how this approach is wholly inconsistent with what we know about how children develop. They said, "If we think about it from the child's perspective, they really don't change much from pre-K to kindergarten or from kindergarten to first grade. That is why we need to try to smooth things." This sentiment was expressed in some way by nearly all participants in each participant group. When probed for specifics about these discontinuities, participants focused on two specific areas: discontinuities in terms of governance and systems and discontinuities in terms of norms.

Discontinuities in Governance and Systems. For some participants, references to the problem of discontinuities focused on governance and systems. In many states, early childhood programs are housed in entirely different departments than K–12 education (e.g., Department of Health and Human Services versus Department of Education). Due to these governance divisions, the systems therein (e.g., pre-K and K–3 education) are often separated and inconsistent. Summarizing this concern, the executive director of a think tank/advocacy organization focused on alignment said:

> [The problem] is that our public policy structures were not designed with child development in mind. The problem is we have this B-5 system and pre-K-12 system that have separate histories, separate value streams, separate accountability processes, separate PD policies. We have systems that have grown up separate from each other. It's these separate systems.

The latter part of this participant's quote alludes to what some participants provided as the *reasons* for these structural discontinuities, which can be broadly considered discontinuities in norms.

Discontinuities in norms. Participants often cited how the early childhood and K–12 education sectors were characterized by different norms that were often in conflict with one another. Early childhood education was often framed as

developmental in nature, child-focused, and "less focused on academics." Conversely, K–12 education was framed as focused on academic success and teacher-directed pedagogical practices. Note that these participants often rejected that these divisions were necessary but nonetheless acknowledged that they exist. Due to these competing ideas about education, reforming the systems to improve alignment can be challenging. As one leader of a think tank/advocacy organization put it, "There is also this mindset shift in trying to get leaders involved to also align what they value and what they prioritize and how they understand child development." They added, "It's not just structural divisions. There is also a psychological and cognitive sensemaking side to all of it." Another participant, a funder, shared this sentiment, suggesting that reforming the governance and systems problem will only go so far without attending to the different norms that characterize the systems. They noted, "There is a case to be made that this alignment work is made more possible if there is one agency that oversees pre-K to third or B-8. I think that is probably helpful but not sufficient." This participant went on to share how reforming systems is only effective if it impacts what people think education should look like in these different sectors. Returning to the overarching problem of discontinuities—whether it be through divisions in governance, systems, or norms, the problem remains that children are not receiving consistent educational experiences as they transition between the early childhood and K–12 education sectors. A researcher remarked that, at present, we do not have a system where a child "can go from a high-quality pre-K program and then move on to kindergarten and first grade without a lot of disruption in terms of how they learn and how they experience teaching."

"If A Child Is Not on Track by Grade Three, They Are Unlikely to Get Back on Track." In addition to discontinuities, both structural and in terms of norms, in the current early care and education system, participants also commonly cited the importance of third grade as a focusing point in motivating the alignment agenda. Participants discussed how predictive early academic success was for later academic success and that trajectories were often cemented by the time children were in third grade. A report from the Anne E. Casey Foundation, entitled "Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters," was referenced by multiple participants as a prominent resource that buttressed this concern. It is in light of the importance of third-grade achievement and the stark inequalities that existed at that time that alignment is presented as a potential solution to the problem. As a Professor Emeritus shared with me, "As soon as we start having those conversations [about the importance of third grade], we start recognizing that the P-3 window is perhaps the highest leverage we will have to improve those outcomes and address inequalities." Another participant from a think tank/advocacy organization noted that, "you

can't fix third-grade outcomes without a coherent and aligned P-3 system." In sum, there was a common sentiment that third grade was a critical juncture in students' educational careers, and improved alignment leading up to that juncture should ameliorate inequalities and set students up for later success.

"I Don't Worry Much About Fadeout." The last problem cited by participants that underpins the alignment agenda is related to fadeout—the phenomenon where the initial positive impacts of early childhood programs often diminish once children enter elementary school (Bailey et al., 2017). Unlike the previous two themes, which were derived from responses that spanned a holistic variety of participant types, references to fadeout were primarily concentrated among researchers. As one senior scholar who has studied P3 programs for over three decades noted, "Gains from early childhood education programs like pre-K can dissipate over time. P-3 alignment helps sustain those gains." This individual went on to suggest that some pre-K advocates are naïve to think that a single year of pre-K will close achievement gaps. They argued that "there is no theory of child development that suggests one year of pre-K will solve our problems. In fact, the programs that have had the longest lasting impacts have been those that feature a lot of comprehensive and aligned services." For this respondent, pre-K fadeout was a key problem, and effective alignment was a solution to sustain early learning gains longitudinally.

While it was primarily the research-focused participants that offered pre-K fadeout as a primary problem, I also probed other participant groups about the extent to which they saw fadeout as a motivating problem for the alignment agenda. Among these participants, some acknowledged fadeout was a problem, while others rejected the premise of fadeout entirely. Those who acknowledged fadeout often had heard of the phenomenon and knew it was a problem but did not see it as critical for motivating their interest in advancing the alignment agenda. As a director of an alignment-focused organization noted, "I think it [fadeout] is secondary. . . . It is just a symptom of the overall problem." For this participant, fadeout would not be a problem if there was a coherent and aligned system of early education, and the current disconnected system is the ultimate problem. Another participant, a think tank/advocacy organization representative, also acknowledging fadeout as a problem but not focusing on it, shared with me how focusing on fadeout is not a very useful frame for advancing change. They noted that pre-K fadeout "is not really something we talk about. It is not because it isn't important; it's because we find more power in talking about what could and should be done instead of talking about what we are losing."

There was another group of participants that rejected the idea of pre-K fadeout entirely. For these participants, pre-K fadeout was rejected for a couple of reasons. First, these participants raised concerns that the measures on which fadeout research is based are invalid. Fadeout often occurs on discrete assessments of cognitive ability, such as academic achievement. Yet, even with fadeout on these assessments, long-term benefits of pre-K often emerge, suggesting that measures post pre-K are missing many of the underlying benefits. As one participant remarked, "I think it [pre-K fadeout] is based on false premises in the measures we use." They go on to note that "we are not looking at all of the things that kids get out of pre-K," referring to the long-term benefits of pre-K on nonacademic outcomes. Another reason advanced for dismissing pre-K fadeout was that, in the absence of an aligned system of early education, we can't expect fadeout not to occur. In other words, the problem isn't fadeout; it's the lack of an aligned system of early education. As another research-focused participant remarked:

> I think that [pre-K fadeout] is just garbage. It's an absurdity. We have never succeeded in having smooth developmental transitions for children . . . a smooth system. It's apples and oranges. There is no way we are looking at a smooth continuum so we can even consider if there is fadeout. It's a copout and it is unsophisticated.

As this quote demonstrates, this participant was adamant that discussions of fadeout distract from the ultimate problem of a misaligned system of early education—the overarching problem that opened this section and was cited in some form by all participants.

Aim 2: Defining the Agenda: What Should Alignment Reform Aim to Do and Look Like?

Transitioning from problems to solutions, I identified three themes related to what elites in the alignment agenda saw as the ideal nature of an aligned early education system. First, participants revealed that alignment is fundamentally about increasing relationships and communication between the early childhood and K–12 education sectors. Second, and more concretely, participants cited a range of specific reform elements, such as aligning standards and curricula, that are necessary to advance alignment. Last, participants revealed that alignment should be a systematic reform strategy that requires coordinating various reform elements to work synchronously to advance the goal of aligned early education.

"It's All About Relationships and Communication." When asked what alignment reform should focus on and look like in its ideal form, one senior scholar said, "Relationships and communication. That will be my answer to everything because, without those things, it's a total waste of time." A similar sentiment was shared by a range of individuals, in some form, from each participant category. While not concrete in terms of actionable policy changes, participants consistently stressed the need

to pursue reforms that get people talking to one another across sectors and building relationships—even in the context of a single school building. As another researcher put it, "It is an epidemic that you can have principals who don't even know there is a pre-K in their school. How can you expect to improve alignment when folks aren't even talking to one another?" A funder said, "You have these disparate systems that have grown up separate from one another. We need to pursue reforms that break down those barriers and increase relationships and coordination." While not tangible in terms of policy changes, statements such as these demonstrate the underlying goals that elites in the alignment agenda sought. I now turn to detail what the most prominent proposed reforms were.

"There Are These Elements That Need to Be Aligned." Participants offered a series of different concrete reform elements that could help realize improved relationships and communication between sectors and align educational experiences for students. The most commonly cited reforms included (1) aligning instructional supports (i.e., standards, curricula, and assessment), (2) increasing the use of transition practices between pre-K and kindergarten, and (3) consolidating governance of early childhood and K–12 education. As a senior policy analyst at a large think tank/advocacy organization noted, "There are these elements that need to be aligned . . . things like standards, curricula, and assessments." They went on to share that their thinking on the "elements" that need to be aligned was informed by an influential framework of P-3 alignment developed by the National P-3 Center, which multiple participants referenced (Kauerz & Coffman, 2019). As another think tank/advocacy organization participant said, "I often think about the alignment framework that Kauerz developed. It has all of the things that you need to work on aligning, like standards, data systems, etc."

When referring to different elements that need to be aligned, respondents also engaged in discussion about the dimensionality of alignment. That is, what exactly do we mean by different directions or types of alignment? Participants used a variety of different modifiers before alignment, including *vertical*, *horizontal*, and *structural*. While not universal, most participants used the terms in a consistent manner. Vertical alignment referred to the alignment of individual educational supports (e.g., curricula) across grade levels, horizontal alignment referred to the alignment of multiple educational supports within grades (e.g., aligned assessments and standards), and structural alignment referred to the alignment of governance and systems at the macro level. In sum, there was a sense that the alignment agenda has a clear set of elements that need to be aligned, informed by the National P-3 Center framework, and the agenda has a set of definitions to think about the different ways alignment can be achieved.

"A Comprehensive School Reform Strategy.". While many participants proposed definitions of alignment reforms that listed various elements that needed to be aligned, such as curricula and standards, a subset pushed further to suggest that all of these things had to be pursued in a coordinated and systematic way. As one senior researcher put it, "P-3 alignment is a comprehensive school reform strategy." Another senior researcher shared that different alignment activities are like gears in a tightly coupled system—they are mutually reinforcing and all necessary. They said:

> You aren't going to achieve your goals by doing one thing like adopting a common literacy curriculum across the early grades. You need to have the professional development. You need to have the data systems in place to help the teachers learn where students are at year after year. You need to have a leader to set the vision and help keep people working toward the common goal.

This focus on the comprehensive nature of alignment reform extended beyond aligning different educational *elements* to aligning entire *systems* of support.

To some, aligning all elements within a system was still insufficient for achieving the goals of the agenda. In fact, by focusing so much on aligning elements, there is a risk of losing sight of simply providing the robust supports within the early education continuum that are essential for success, such as family engagement or small class sizes. As one senior scholar who studies comprehensive P-3 systems put it, "When you talk about alignment, you really don't think about reducing class sizes, right? But in the end, the most recognized benefit of P-3 is the benefit of being in small class sizes." For participants like this, alignment reform is more than the act of *aligning* supports; it also includes ensuring that all of the rich ecological supports that we know are essential for healthy development are provided within the continuum. Adding to this concern is the risk that, in practice, working on aligning elements is easier to achieve than securing rich P-3 supports, like small class sizes. This participant noted, "Getting people to use the same curriculum in pre-K and kindergarten or having some people do some professional development, that's great, but it is really incremental change. You aren't going to see big changes with that." Concluding this concern and succinctly summarizing this theme, they said, "You have to have the whole system." This participant and others who shared their perspective actually felt that the term alignment was used too often. They preferred referring to the concept as "P-3" reform, where aligning supports is but one aspect of the reform agenda.

Consonant with respondents proposing the systemic nature of alignment reform was a focus on the critical role that leadership plays in advancing this work. Leadership stood out as the most prominent facilitator of advancing alignment reform and brings us to the final section of findings on facilitators and challenges.

The final research aim sought to understand what elites in the alignment agenda saw as key facilitators and challenges of advancing alignment reform. In terms of facilitators, the importance of leadership was salient across nearly all interviews. Challenges included power differentials between the early childhood and K-12 education sectors and the unintended risks of tying the two sectors more closely together. I detail these findings in turn.

"Leadership Is Key." Given the need for *comprehensive alignment reform* as outlined in the previous section, leadership was viewed by participants as critical for coordinating and sustaining reform. One senior scholar who focuses on educational leadership provided a framework for understanding how leaders can advance alignment reform. They said that leaders are necessary to coordinate "the vision, the systems, and the people." Elaborating on these three elements, the participant explained that, first, a vision for change has to be set by a leader. Next, the leader must put in place the systems that will achieve the vision. Finally, the people working in the system need to be hired and trained to effectively work toward the overall vision. Each of these framework elements was echoed by other participants, if not all referenced together. For example, a director of an alignment-focused think tank/advocacy organization stressed the importance of vision-setting and buy-in. They said, "I never say that P-3 alignment is a single project or initiative. It is more of a mindset and approach to the work than an end goal." Another participant, a researcher stressing the importance of systems, said that leaders play a key role in "setting the policies and procedures that make alignment come alive—things like vertical professional learning community meetings that bring together teachers from across the early grades." While effective leadership was often cited as a key facilitator of comprehensive alignment reform, in its absence, it can also be the greatest challenge.

Numerous participants discussed the importance of leadership by highlighting what happens when it is lost—that is, when a champion for alignment reform leaves. Participants often cited that enacting systemic alignment reforms can take years and that work can quickly fall apart when a leader turns over. As a senior researcher noted, talking about their work on a school-based alignment initiative:

> We can affect change. You put us in schools for three or four or five years, we can make a difference. But systemically? And you get a new superintendent? You get a new principal? You're done. It's a sad thing and it's why education doesn't change very much. It's just this constant cycle.

Another researcher participant shared a similar perspective based on their work engaging in comprehensive alignment reform in a large urban school district. They noted that systematic alignment reform "can take as much as ten years" and that "you need a champion for these things. If you don't have that, it is really difficult to make alignment happen. The leader needs to stay. Turnover is really hard."

Participants also noted that finding leaders who are champions for advancing the alignment agenda is difficult. As one think tank/advocacy participant noted, "There are very few outstanding leaders out there in my opinion and there are very few who can work across those differences [between the ECE and K–12 sectors]. Typically, they are people who come from the field . . . who have worked in the field. They get what it's like." This respondent was referring to district-level leadership, but leadership at the school level was also cited as lacking. Multiple participants noted that school principals, in particular, often lack a focus on advancing alignment work. As one senior researcher who led a school-based alignment initiative noted, "In many elementary schools, the principal could care less about the pre-K program located in their building." As I will elaborate on more in the next section, the dearth of leadership, particularly in the K-12 space, can be traced to the power differentials and incentives the two sectors have.

In sum, leadership was seen as a key facilitator for advancing comprehensive alignment reform, but due to rapid turnover in leadership across different levels of the educational system and an overall dearth of champions for alignment reform, a lack of leadership was also a key challenge. While leadership was the most clearly and consistently cited dual facilitator/challenge of reform, participants also shared additional challenges to advancing the alignment agenda, including power differentials between ECE and K–12 and the unintended risks of tying the two sectors closer together.

"K-12 Has the Power." Participants frequently noted that there is a power differential between the K–12 and the early childhood sectors. As one participant, the director of a large child development foundation, succinctly put it, "K-12 has the power and early childhood does not." This power differential presents a number of challenges for alignment work when representatives from these two sectors ideally should be working together at the table as co-equal partners.

Participants suggested that the alignment agenda has been taken up much more in the early childhood sector than in the K–12 sector and that there is a lot of apathy on the K–12 side of the spectrum. As a funder put it, "I sometimes think of it as early education, pre-K to third grade, being a little brother or sister to the broader K-12 system. The image I have is like the little brother or sister tugging at the sleeve of the older kid saying 'pay attention to me!'" When probing participants about why they think this apathy exists, they focused on two different factors: (1) lack of awareness of the importance of early childhood and (2) incentives that distract their focus

from alignment work. In terms of the former, some K–12 leaders do not see the value in early childhood education for advancing their agenda. As one participant put it, "There is this persistent idea [on the part of K–12 leaders] that early childhood is just daycare with kids playing." Beyond a lack of awareness of the importance of early education and its connection to success in K–12 education, participants suggested that K–12 leaders are also commonly apathetic toward early childhood due to distracting incentives. Providing an example of such an incentive structure, one state director of early childhood education noted: "District leaders need fast results. They need to boost test scores in a year or two. Investing in a robust early childhood strategy will take years to show up on the third-grade test scores. It just takes too much time for them to focus on it."

Even if the challenge of apathy common in the K–12 sector is overcome and there is recognition of the importance of early childhood and alignment work, participants also revealed that the K–12 leaders can act in performative ways. For example, early childhood leaders may be hired in district offices but not integrated into decision-making in a meaningful way. As one senior scholar said: "Governance helps but it isn't sufficient. We might have a leader who says nice things about early childhood but when you look at their agency, you see this little unit of two to three people who are siloed from the rest of the agency. They are not tightly connected to the core curriculum and instruction units in the agency. So, when decisions get made, early childhood is not at the table."

Last, moving beyond total apathy and performative support, there are also cases of K–12 leaders being too heavy-handed in decision-making and influence, as revealed by participants. Because the K–12 sector has more power, according to participants, they can drive the agenda when it comes to key decisions about curricula and instruction. As I will detail in the following sections, such decisions can be problematic when the ECE and K–12 sectors have such different approaches to education (recall the first set of findings related to discontinuities in norms). As one think tank/advocacy organization participant said, "It can't just be K–12 telling everyone what to do. Alignment work is a partnership. People have to come together, and there is give and take from both ends."

"There Are Definitely Risks With This Work." In addition to the challenges associated with power differentials between the early childhood and K–12 education sectors, a set of two themes emerged related to the risks of bringing the ECE and K–12 sectors closer together. When asked about potential risks, one participant replied, "There are definitely risks with this work." These risks, identified by participants, include (1) the potential for "pushdown" of developmentally inappropriate practices in the early grades and (2) amplifying divisions between the sectors birth through age three and pre-K to third grade.

Pushdown of developmentally inappropriate practice. When asking about potential risks of tying the early childhood and K–12 education sectors more closely together, a common response is related to what has been termed the *academic-developmental debate* (e.g., Little & Cohen-Vogel, 2016). The essence of this debate is that early childhood education is characterized by developmentally focused practices, including child-centered activities, for example. The K–12 space, on the other hand, is focused on academic content and often uses practices such as didactic whole-group instruction that is deemed developmentally inappropriate in early childhood. Respondents raised concerns that, due to the aforementioned power differentials, developmentally inappropriate practices that often characterize the K–12 sector may be pushed down into early childhood education if the two are closely linked. As one government official put it, "It [pushdown] is a big risk. There are such different norms regarding pedagogies between the two worlds. The problem is K-12 has the power and puts pressures on these [early childhood] teachers to do things they know are not appropriate." Another participant, a researcher, recounted interviewing a pre-K teacher: "This teacher told me about how the principal would push them to align their work with the expectations of kindergarten, even when she knew the practices were not developmentally appropriate in pre-K."

Probing participants about these pressures that encourage pushdown, a number of different factors were cited. Most prominent was accountability systems that put a focus on third-grade assessments, which push schools to change practices in the early grades that align with the high-stakes assessments. As one funder remarked:

> In the K-12 system there are a lot of policies that work against more developmentally appropriate practices. I am thinking of the focus on standardized test scores, for example, starting in third grade. There are incentives and pressures to focus on a narrower slice of the curriculum—of child development. So, I think a negative consequence of doing the alignment work is creating more tensions between supporting teachers to do something but then they aren't able to do it because of these other pressures.

This participant went on to suggest that elementary school principals, in particular, play a critical role in enacting such changes. They said, "We've heard stories about principals who might not have an ECE background and ask what is going on in the kindergarten classroom." Another participant shared a similar sentiment, saying that "sometimes principals will go into pre-K classrooms and see kids playing in centers and wonder why they aren't sitting down learning." This lack of understanding of developmentally appropriate practices among some principals results in them asking teachers in the early grades to engage in developmentally inappropriate practices to meet third-grade accountability metrics.

Last, a minority of participants raised less dire concerns about pushdown. Some acknowledged that pushdown has

definitely been a problem, but they "don't really think it is as big of a deal anymore" because so much attention has been made to demonstrate the value of developmentally appropriate early childhood practice. Another remarked, "Sure, it is a risk, but you just need to manage that risk. The benefits of pursuing alignment are worth the risk." Others cited examples of where pushdown was not occurring, but rather there was a concerted effort to "push up" developmentally appropriate early childhood practice in the early grades. Alignment reform efforts in Boston, for example, were cited by multiple participants. One respondent said, "Look at Boston. They started with pre-K and worked their way up from there. It can be done right."

Divisions between the B-3 and P-3 sectors. Throughout this study, I referred to the alignment between the "early childhood and K-12 education sectors." However, for most participants, they conceptualized alignment in terms of pre-K-to-third-grade (P-3) alignment. Early childhood education prior to pre-K was referred to as the birth-to-age-three (B-3) space. In one of my earliest interviews, a funder noted that "interest has really shifted, at least from a funding perspective, from the P-3 space to the B-3 space. In some ways, the P-3 movement can stand on its own feet now." This led me to subsequently ask participants about how they see these two different movements in early childhood education and the implications of the alignment movement on them. Two key themes emerged from participants when asked about these questions. The first is the potential harm that putting pre-K into the K–12 system would have on the B-3 childcare sector, and the second is the implications of in-fighting between the B-3 and P-3 movements on enabling actionable change.

In terms of risks, multiple participants worried about what making pre-K a part of the K–12 education system would have on the childcare sector, which would be left to serve children from birth to age three. One think tank respondent said, "Some people think alignment means putting pre-K into the K-12 education, but that would be catastrophic for the childcare sector. We have to have a mixed delivery system where pre-K is still in childcare centers." Another participant cited the debate about President Biden's dual pre-K and childcare proposals. They said, "Some people want to do pre-K only, but you have to do both. The childcare sector won't survive." In addition to this risk of supporting the pre-K sector at the expense of the childcare sector, participants also reflected on tensions between the P-3 and B-3 sectors generally.

For some participants, they acknowledged the divisions between the B-3 and P-3 movements, but they rejected that such segmentation was problematic. Participants wanted a seamless system of support from birth through school, to be sure, but they recognized that there were legitimate reasons for segmenting the movements. As one director of an alignment-focused organization noted:

> This is one of the problems of our silly early childhood field. There is this idea that everyone has to be involved or it's not worthwhile and it drives me crazy that we can't have a P-3 movement that everyone can cheer for without us explicitly bringing along babies and toddlers and family childcare. And I don't want to diminish those things. But as I think about learning and development and wanting to get our K-12 colleagues deeply on board, I just think laying on them that they now have to take on and be responsible for every infant and toddler. It just frustrates the heck out of me that we can't sort of hold both of them as valuable. Yes, we need to have a really robust B-3 as well as a strong P-3 that complement one another.

This quote shows the frustration this participant has with an "all or nothing" approach. They noted that their thinking is grounded in learning and development and that different developmental stages need different movements and systems of support. This sentiment was shared by others, including one funder who said, "There is some resentment. And I get it. But that doesn't mean we can't have two movements that work together."

Participants also described how these tensions between the B-3 and P-3 movements could hinder their ability to advance change. Multiple participants talked about how you have to focus on a piece of the puzzle that is attainable. Encapsulating this sentiment, one participant said: "The work can't be about all things to all people all the time. Let's just focus on those learning environments, the classrooms. P-3 can't be so big and comprehensive that it ends up being nothing where you can't take any action on it. It is a major systems change. But it needs to be actionable and doable change."

Discussion

While scholarly work focused on alignment between the early childhood and K–12 sectors is robust (e.g., Cohen-Vogel et al., 2020; Justice et al., 2021; Kauerz, 2019; Little, 2020), this is the first study to take a holistic view of alignment as a broader movement. Through analysis of interview data from a range of alignment agenda elites and associated documents, I have shed light on the problems that this agenda seeks to address, what reforms should be pursued to improve alignment, and the facilitators and challenges associated with advancing the agenda. Further, this novel approach of including the voices of elites reveals more candid reflections on the alignment agenda—perspectives that may not be represented in their official research papers or policy documents. In this concluding section, I begin by briefly summarizing these findings. I then draw connections between the findings and implications for research, policy, and practice. I conclude by discussing limitations and directions for future research.

To briefly summarize key findings, the key problems that animate the alignment agenda include discontinuities between the ECE and K-12 sectors in terms of systems and norms, inequalities in student outcomes at the critical threshold of third grade, and pre-K fadeout (which was limited primarily to research-focused participants). Participants reported that the ultimate goal of alignment reform should be to improve relationships and communication between the two sectors. Participants identified a range of different specific reform elements (e.g., transition practices) but stressed the importance of pursuing more comprehensive than discrete alignment reforms. Key to the success of comprehensive alignment reform was visionary and sustained leadership, while challenges included power differentials between the two sectors and the unintended risks of tying the sectors more closely together (e.g., pushdown of developmentally inappropriate practice).

As mentioned previously, a key contribution of this study in terms of research is providing a novel description of the alignment agenda by drawing directly on the voices of individuals associated with the agenda. While other scholarly work has traced the history of this movement and described the nature of the movement today (e.g., Bornfreund & Lieberman, 2019), none have drawn on primary data collected via interviews to describe the work. When reviewing the existing literature focused on connecting the early childhood and K–12 spheres, numerous themes reported here corroborate past findings. For example, the potential challenges of differential power dynamics and pushdown have been highlighted extensively (e.g., Brown, 2009; Graue et al., 2017). Others have also illuminated the facilitative role of leadership (e.g., Little, 2020; Little et al., 2022). There are also multiple novel findings that have not been revealed through previous research, such as the finding of an isolated focus on fadeout as a primary concern to research-focused participants. This finding related to fadeout is notable because none of the participants grappled with inequities in the education system that may be a key mechanism driving fadeout (e.g., students who attend programs like Head Start often go on to attend schools of systematically lower quality [Lee & Loeb, 1995]).

Implications for Policy and Practice

Transitioning to implications for policy and practice, the clearest takeaway from this study is the importance of leadership—ranging from state and district leaders to school principals—in promoting or detracting from alignment work. Leadership intersects with nearly every other finding reported in this study. Leaders help coordinate all of the complex pieces of a comprehensive alignment reform effort. They set the vision to motivate individuals to work toward a common goal. They (can) guard against push down of developmentally inappropriate practice. Given the centrality of

leadership, policymakers and practitioners should attend to the development and support of alignment-focused leaders. In fact, numerous efforts are already afoot that could be built on to support this work.

The National Association for Elementary School Principals is among the organizations working to build leadership capacity around alignment. With their "Pre-K-3 Leadership" initiative, the organization is working to establish standards for effective practice and train a new generation of leaders equipped to lead aligned systems of early education. The National P-3 Center has similar training initiatives underway that also include opportunities for district and state leaders in addition to principals. This attention by professional and policy organizations is also making its way into policy reforms. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)—the 2015 revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—revised language related to Title II, making it clear that funds can be used for early childhood educators, including to "provide programs and activities to increase the knowledge base of teachers and principals on instruction in the early grades [including pre-K]" (Bornfreund, 2015). From a state perspective, Illinois reformed its principal preparation policies in 2010 to require all programs to incorporate early learning into their curricula and provide candidates with internships across the pre-K to 12th-grade continuum (Lieberman, 2019).

Another key takeaway that is related to the issue of leadership is the finding that K–12 education has the power and the early childhood education sector does not. This inequality in power presents a number of challenges for alignment work when representatives from these two sectors ideally should be working together at the table as co-equal partners. As the participants revealed, K–12 education can use their power in both passive (i.e., not engaging ECE) or active (i.e., facilitating pushdown) ways. Leaders in states and districts aiming to engage in alignment work should enact changes that mitigate this power differential. A limited body of research presents some potential avenues for action. For example, Koppich and Stipek (2020) studied alignment reforms in California school districts and found that when the pre-K or early education director was placed in the superintendent's cabinet, authentic collaboration and respect for early education increased.

Future Research and Limitations

While numerous initiatives and policy reforms are already underway, there is additional scholarship needed to build evidence in this area and inform these reform efforts. Expanding public investments in early childhood education is a central policy goal for the Biden administration and such expansion provides opportunities to improve cross-sectoral alignment. Most importantly, while the critical role

of leadership has been identified, a limited literature exists on the *specific practices* that leaders can engage in that have direct and measurable impacts on student outcomes (Little et al., 2022). The literature on the impacts of different governance approaches to early education is also underdeveloped (e.g., Griffard et al., 2022). As states continue to experiment with different organizational approaches, research should interrogate the implications for enabling effective alignment practices.

In addition to additional scholarship on this topic being needed, there are also limitations specific to this study that should be noted and addressed in future research. While my positionality within the community I studied enabled me to gain elite access, it is possible this influenced some of my interpretations. I also did not gain access to all intended interview participants. Others should pursue similar lines of inquiry with new and potentially more diverse samples of stakeholders, including non-elites. Another limitation is that my focus was on understanding the views of individuals within the alignment agenda. I focused less on how these individuals and organizations *operated with one another* to achieve policy goals (e.g., Reckhow et al., 2021). Future research should move from understanding the perspectives of members of the agenda to understanding how the agenda works to enact change.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. The "Alignment Agenda" is not a formalized policy agenda network. Rather, I use the term to represent different groups of individuals (e.g., researchers, funders) who are focused on the common topic of improving alignment between the early childhood and K–12 education sectors.

2. Note that, unlike the K–12 education sector, the early childhood education sector is characterized as a "mixed delivery system" wherein students may attend a wide variety of different programs (e.g., home-based care, Head Start, private child care), which further complicates cross-sectoral alignment initiatives.

3. The term "elite" is often used to describe qualitative interviews with participants of a high professional status, such as those included in this study (Hochschild, 2009). Additionally, the term "elites" is often used in the policy agendas literature and, specifically, research from which this study's conceptual framework stems (Reckhow et al., 2021).

4. The term "fadeout" is most prominent in discussions of pre-K effectiveness, so I adopt that term throughout this paper. However, others have argued that the use of "convergence" or "catch up" are more accurate terms to describe the phenomenon (e.g., Weiland et al, 2018). This is because it is often the case that students who did not attend a pre-K program catch up to their peers that did once they enter elementary school.

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