Parents' Perceptions of School Transitions for Children with Exceptionalities: Four
Mothers' Stories

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to explore the perceptions of parents of children with exceptionalities, transitioning from the community to formal school environments, learn more about current transition practices in Canada, and begin exploring potential areas for improvement. The present study employed a basic qualitative, interpretative research design using semi-structured interviews to discover parent perspectives of the barriers to effective transitions, and important factors that contribute to the success of transitions. The Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) supported the analyses of the data generated from the interviews. There were four major themes that emerged from the interview data. The first theme, Same Parent, New Role: Processing Emotional Responses and Balancing Increased Expectations During Transitions described the stress, frustration, isolation and barriers experienced by the parents during the transition process. This theme also highlighted the new and often daily challenges for the parents' at home, school and in the community. Theme two, Unmet Needs, Ability To Thrive: Supporting Children with Exceptionalities focused on the child-specific experiences and how the parents' supported their children in managing the difficulties of meeting the expectations of the formal school environment. The third theme, New Relationships, Limited Resources: Navigating The Formal School Environment centralized on the parents' perceptions of schools, teachers and support teams. In this theme parents commented on the complexities of establishing new relationships with school staff that are collaborative, supportive and communicative. Finally, theme four, Financial Burdens Emotional Toll: Transitioning From Early Childhood Settings to Formal School, focused on both the challenges of accessing and the benefits of securing professional resources and services external to the school. The parents discussed the limitations of school resources and the unexpected need to locate and pay for or attain funding for additional supports. However, despite the many challenges that the participants within the current study faced, they all reported instances in which they were able to move forward, continue pursuing the needs of their child, adapt and adjust when faced with setbacks, and still reported benefits they would expect to see if change were made to current transition practices.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I began working with, and supporting, children with exceptionalities and their families over seven years ago when I started working for a medical daycare and early learning center for children who are medically fragile. During this time I have had the privilege to be part of many triumphs, milestones, and special moments in these children's lives. I have also seen the variety of hardships these children and their families face on a daily basis, including when the systems established to provide them support have let them down. Specifically, I have witnessed the barriers and inefficiencies that exist in the transition processes between resources, settings, and school and wondered why the difficulties exist and how to improve them. This led to my interest in better understanding the transition process for children and families as they move into the formal school system.

The importance of a successful transition to kindergarten cannot be overstated (Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005) since kindergarten marks a child's entry to formal education and paves the way for their academic future. Transitions are often closely related to, and described in terms of, the concept of *readiness* (Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, & Cox, 1999). The readiness of children with and without exceptionalities for kindergarten can be considered based on their age, social and developmental abilities (Pianta, et al., 1999). Regardless of the particular focus of an individual transition, it should be understood in terms of the context, influence, and connections for that individual at the time of the transition and across time (Pianta, et al., 1999). Transitions are often a process of movement or a shift from one environment to another. This movement or shift requires change, brings new opportunities and challenges, and often is regarded as stressful (Hanson et al., 2000; Jewett, Tertell, King-Taylor, Parker, Tertell, & Orr, 1998; Ramey & Ramey, 1999; Rosenkoetter, Hains, & Fowler, 1994). This stress is often intensified for families of children with exceptionalities (e.g. Cohen Podvey, Hinojosa & Koenig, 2010; McIntyre et al, 2007; Villeneauvue et al., 2013).

Transition practices are often quite varied in their approach in terms of targets and frequency when it comes to children's needs when transitioning to kindergarten (Janus, Lefort, Cameron, & Kopenchanski, 2014). Policies (i.e., provincial ministries of education documents, definitions of disabilities, conflicting intra-agency polices) and timing (i.e., administrative processing of documents, multiple agencies sending and receiving information, professional collaboration and identification of multiple roles) can affect the type, delivery, and available resources to children with exceptionalities transitioning to kindergarten (Wolery, 1999). However, there are a few commonalities that have arisen in current research studies (e.g., Pianta & Cox, 2000; Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999). Timing is the first commonality in current research. Most often transition practices occur before the school year begins (Pianta & Cox, 2000). Second, specific transition practices are often designed to support the all of the children transitioning to kindergarten each year, versus individualizing the transition for each child's needs. This support typically involves classroom visits or informational flyers sent home that are the same for everyone. In contrast, while teachers who will be working with children with exceptionalities in their classrooms more often use individualized

plans, approximately only 47 per cent of kindergarten teachers in the U.S. actually meet with the child and family before school begins (Pianta et al., 1999). Educators need to consider how they can better help families and children with exceptionalities prepare and plan for entering kindergarten.

In Canada, the Ministry of Education in each province and territory is responsible for the development, design, and implementation of its own policies related to special education (Ministry of Education, 2015). While the federal government provides funding and support for specific programs, each province or territory has their own policies and determines how and when they will be used. Typically, a department or ministry of education covers provincial government services for individuals of school age, while departments or ministries of health typically cover services for individuals who are not school-aged (i.e., infants, preschoolers, adults, and seniors). One reason transitions to kindergarten may be challenging for families of children with exceptionalities could be due to early intervention and child-care services being located under a separate jurisdiction (i.e., health) from kindergarten and schools (i.e., education; Cleveland, Colley, Friendly, & Lero, 2003). This separation of services results in multi-faceted transitions involving many facilitators collaborating effectively in order for the transition process to be successful (Janus, 2004). For parents working with multiple service providers (e.g., school professionals, speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, psychologists, etc.), the transition can be complex and difficult. For example, in the province of Saskatchewan children with exceptionalities often utilize professional services through a variety of health and education based agencies (e.g., psychologists, speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, dieticians etc.) and attend structured daycares and /or access community or specialized intervention services (e.g., autism intervention services, child and youth services, child development centers, Early Childhood Intervention Programs, etc.) to support the wide variety of needs. There is no primary group or centralized program that helps families to organize, communicate, and manage the often multiple agencies and professionals involved in supporting the development of their children with exceptionalities. This means a variety of individuals with varying levels of training may be assisting the family with transitioning their children from family, home, or center based services to the school system when beginning kindergarten. In Canada, there is currently no single point of facilitation for transition to school practices that provides information to schools, parents, and other services (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004). Without a centralization of services families may experience delays in services, role conflicts between multiple agencies, confidentiality issues with information sharing, disagreement among professionals, lack of established channels of communication between individuals and groups, repeated assessments at various administrative levels, difficulty organizing funding, and an increased burden on parents to organize, facilitate and manage multiple people and services for their child (Janus et al., 2007).

In elementary school, the transition to kindergarten is often more difficult than transitions between grades. When transitioning to kindergarten, children need to be able to transfer their skills from their pre-school or early intervention setting to their new formal education setting (Fowler, Atwater, & Schwartz, 1991). However, the two settings

are often designed and implemented completely differently. For example, prior to kindergarten children receive more one-on-one or small group instruction whereas school instruction is often whole class or large group focused (Fowler, et al., 1991). Other common issues for families of children transitioning to elementary school include: (1) parents feel that there isn't enough information sharing or school meetings occurring prior to school, leaving them feeling prepared; (2) parents do not always feel they know what they should be doing to prepare their child for formal schooling in the year or summer prior; (3) uncertainty of the new parent-teacher association, connections to resources in the school, and ways to be involved in the new setting; and (4) parents often report feeling unsure of who to go to seek information, encouragement, and support for themselves or their child in this new process (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004). The results of this study make it apparent that both children with and without exceptionalities can experience difficulties in transitioning to mainstream elementary education.

An example of a model developed to help support the planning of the transition to mainstream education for children is Project TEEM (Transitioning into Elementary Education Mainstream; Conn-Powers, et al., 1990). This model was designed to allow involvement from parents, external and community resources (i.e. interventionists, therapists, pathologists, physicians), and elementary school programs with a focus on collaboration to determine and implement procedures for planning transitions. The model centers on three core areas: (1) identifying the individual strengths, needs, and characteristics of all children, families, and school programs involved; (2) promoting the implementation of best practices; and (3) creating successful transitions for children and families into the elementary school mainstream (Conn-Powers et al., 1990). Beyond this the creators suggested four steps to follow during the planning process. First, establish a planning team (e.g., parents, kindergarten teachers, direct service personnel, administrators) with specific responsibilities for each member involved (e.g. each member of planning team has responsibility to participate in developing and implementing specific aspects of agreed upon transition plan). Second, identify problems and develop goals over a series of drafts (if necessary) that can be worked on and realistically achieved (e.g., address barriers and expectations of team throughout drafts of the transition plan) by capitalizing on the diverse expertise of the team members moving in shared direction. Third, create written procedures for the transition including all strategies, responsibilities, timelines, and procedures. This step involves seven goals that are often apart of successful transitions. The goals include: (1) promoting successful and speedy adjustments to the new educational setting for both the child and family; (2) enhancing the child's independence; (3) ensuring all appropriate services are utilized; (4) empowering the family as an equal contributor; (5) supporting collaboration among professionals; (6) reviewing outcomes, participation and the transition process itself to determine satisfaction; and (7) taking all necessary steps to increase the chances of the child with an exceptionality is placed in a mainstream elementary school classroom (Conn-Powers et al., 1990). The fourth and final step of the planning process is to gain commitment and support from the community and related systems to help promote the transition to mainstream elementary. Understanding these core concepts connected to transitions to school, especially for children with exceptionalities and the important role

that family's play, helps shape this study and guide its process (Conn-Powers et al., 1990). Although research recognizes the importance of life transitions, currently there is a lack of extensive literature exploring transitions for individuals living with exceptionalities, particularly children (Villeneuve et al., 2013). Therefore, there is an opportunity for novel research on parent perspectives and experiences of the transition to school for their child with exceptionalities related to the factors contributing to the success or failure of these transitions.

Four theories provide possible frameworks for understanding parent perceptions of important factors and potential barriers to school transitions for children with exceptionalities. First, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Stremmel, 1993; Jaramillo, 1996) can be considered as it explored the influences that biological, environmental, social, and cultural factors play in childhood development and transitions to school. Second, the Bio-Ecological Systems Theory can be considered since it described the environment as five layers, each with specific factors, groups, and individuals within them that impact a child's adjustment to school (Brofenbrenner, 1990). Third, the Contextual Systems Model hypothesized that the home-school relationship is the most crucial aspect of a child's transition to school and therefore examined the association between family involvement and academic success (Pianta and Walsh, 1996). The final theory that can be considered is the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition (Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000), based on Brofenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Paquette & Ryan, 2001) and the Contextual Systems Model (Pianta and Walsh's, 1996). This theory acknowledged that transitions are a shared responsibility between many individuals and groups, highlighted the complex interplay between the environment and relationships, and noted the biological, cultural, social and political factors involved in a child's transition to school. This final theory was selected to provide the framework for the current study. The Ecological and Dynamic Model included both the groups and people involved with transitions but also examined the relationships and social systems that impact them. Therefore, this theory was deemed the most relevant of the four to the research question. It was also the most all-encompassing in terms of child specific, family based, school related and community and social factors and affecting transitions to school.

Many studies have examined kindergarten transitions for children with and without exceptionalities (e.g., Daley, Munk & Carlson, 2011; McIntyre, Eckert, Arbolino, Digennaro, & Fiese, 2014). In the United States (U.S.) a variety of studies have been completed related to both children without exceptionalities (Atwater, Fowler, & Schwartz, 1991; Hemmeter & Schuster, 1994; McIntyre, Eckert, Arbolino, Digennaro, & Fiese, 2014; Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005) and children with exceptionalities transitioning to kindergarten (Daley, Munk & Carlson, 2011; Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron & Hughes, 2008; McIntyre, Blacher, & Baker, 2002). However, far fewer Canadian studies have been conducted related to parents' perspectives on community to school transitions (e.g., Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011), especially in terms of children with exceptionalities (e.g., Villeneauve et al., 2013). For example, the Health, Education and Learning Partnerships for Social Inclusion (HELPS) project in Ontario used case study findings to examine parent experiences of the transition to school for their children

living with disabilities (Villeneavue, 2013). However, the project focused primarily on the way the children's inclusion needs were met in relation to transitioning, professional services, and parental involvement. These researchers defined successful transitions according to the child's inclusion at school and not the general factors contributing to its success or failure. In Wildenger and McIntyre's (2011) study, parent experiences were examined using the Family Experiences and Involvement in Transition (FEIT) self-report measure to determine family needs, concerns, and involvement in relation to the child's transition to school. They found that parents of children who are typically developing have relatively few concerns about the transition. The small portion of parents that did have *many* concerns were very specific to certain aspects of the transition such as separation issues or child behavioural problems. The results also suggested that the transition practices most often utilized by parents and schools were considered generic and low intensity and included classroom visits, orientation, registration, open houses and written information sent home. However, this study only considered the experiences of parents of children who were developing and reaching milestones at a typical or expected rate and not children with difficulties and/or exceptionalities (Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011). In a final example, McIntyre et al. (2007) explored parent perspectives of the transition to kindergarten. These researchers utilized surveys to identify family specific transition activities, child-related family concerns, and issues as described by parents. They also explored potential variables related to family involvement in transition planning and service (McIntyre et al., 2007). These researchers found that about half of parents had monthly contact with their child's pre-school teacher and annual meetings with the pre-school staff. However, only about a quarter of parents reported having a kindergarten transition meeting and even fewer reported being a part of transition team supporting their child. Additionally, many parents reported that they would have liked written communication from their child's kindergarten teacher, having a classroom visit, and being a part of transition meetings. Finally, many parents also reported wanting more information about the academic expectations, class placement choices, and what the kindergarten teacher is doing to support successful transitions. Similar to Wildenger and McIntyre's (2011) study, this study did not consider the experiences of parents of children with disabilities, and did not explore factors contributing to the success or failure of the child's transition to school. These studies highlighted the importance of exploring and understanding the perspectives of the parents, but did not explore the experiences of parents of children with exceptionalities or their suggestions to help improve school transitions for their children. Therefore, considering the perspectives and recommendations of parents of children with exceptionalities can help add to research literature and further educators, helping professionals (i.e., social workers, psychologists, speech-language pathologists, counsellors, etc.), and parents' understanding of, and areas for improvement related to, these transitions.

1.1 Statement of Purpose

Children transitioning into educational settings (e.g., kindergarten) require specific support for their individual goals and learning outcomes, as well as for the purposes of their family preparation for the upcoming changes (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004). Children with exceptionalities often have a wider variety and higher intensity of needs

(Bruder, 2010). This community to school transition can present challenges for all parents but these difficulties are often heightened for families of children with exceptionalities (Atwater, Fowler, & Schwartz, 1991). It is important for educators and helping professionals to better understand how this process could be improved to create more efficient and supportive transitions for children with exceptionalities. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of parents of children with exceptionalities transitioning from the community to formal school environments to learn more about current transition practices in Canada, and begin to explore potential areas for improvement. The following research question was explored:

1. What do parents' perceive as important factors facilitating, and existing barriers to, efficient and supportive community to school transitions for children with exceptionalities (i.e., requiring specialized educational support and related services to realize their full potential)?

The findings of this study have the potential to help to improve parents, administrators, educators, and helping professionals understanding of, and to the policy and practices related to, community to school transitions for children with and without exceptionalities.

1.2 Definitions

Seven main concepts are presented throughout this research and are defined for the purpose of increased clarity:

1.2.1 Efficient. *Efficient* is defined as "systematic, individualized, timely and collaborative planning" that results in "the speedy adjustment and child's successful participation in the new educational setting" (Conn-Powers, Ross-Allen, & Holburn, 1990, p. 95).

1.2.2 Supportive. *Supportive* is defined as "establishing a transition process that enables families to participate as equal partners… and professionals to provide information, support, and opportunities that address family-identified needs and goals" (Conn-Powers, et al., 1990, p. 96).

1.2.3 Children with Exceptionalities. *Children with exceptionalities* are children with varying patterns of strength and need (i.e., in the areas of language, development, and/or learning) who may require specialized educational support and related services to realize their full potential (Hallahan, Kauffman & Pullen, 2009). Children with exceptionalities range from students with gifts and/or talents to students with difficulties, delays, and/or disorders.

1.2.3.1. Language difficulties, delays and/or disorders. Language problems of any severity or type are described as issues with the acquisition, use or comprehension of language in verbal and/or written form (McKirdy, 1985).

1.2.3.2. Developmental difficulties, delays, and/or disorders. **"**Neurodevelopmental disorders are a group of conditions with onset in the developmental period" and generally manifest before a child enters into school with personal, social, academic and/or occupational functioning impairments (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition or DSM-5, 2013, p. 31). For example, this group of disorders can include: autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and motor disorders.

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1.2.3.3. Learning difficulties, delays, and/or disorders. Learning issues are generally described in terms of a *Specific Learning Disorder* related to difficulties learning and using academic skills, specifically with reading, spelling, writing, math/numbers and general comprehension with a range of severity from mild to severe with onset during the formal years of schooling (DSM-5, 2013).

1.2.4 Transition. *A transition* involves, "ongoing efforts to link children's natural environments (e.g., their family) to support environments (e.g., school programs)" (Kagan & Neuman, 1998, p.1) often involving a set of one-time activities undertaken by programs, families and children at the end of the year to prepare for the next setting.

1.3 Chapter Organization

Literature related to early childhood programming, transitions, and parent perceptions is reviewed and organized in chapter 2 into two major sections: early childhood and school-based educational programming, and transitions. In chapter 3, the methodology of the present study is outlined, including descriptions of the participants, instrument, and data collection procedures. The results of the study are presented in chapter 4 and discussion and analysis of the results including a summary of the findings, study strengths and directions for future research are in chapter 5.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

        The review of the literature examines current theory and practice related to early childhood or community to school-based transitions for children with exceptionalities. The literature review is divided into two major sections. Section one focuses on early childhood and school-based educational programming. While section two reviews literature related to transitions including theories predominant in the literature that provide perspectives on children and transitions, issues and concerns related to transitions for children with exceptionalities, transition planning, and parental perceptions of transitions.

2.1 Early Childhood and School-Based Educational Programming.

        2.1.1 Early childhood educational programming. Early childhood education includes childcare, preschool, community programs and early intervention services (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education-Early Years, 2014). Learning begins well before the child enters a formal classroom setting and therefore the early years need to be supported as a time for emotional and physical growth, cognitive development, creativity, exploration and discovery, social belonging, and school readiness preparation (Early Learning for Every Child Today, 2007). Ideally, early years programs should prepare children for kindergarten however, children with exceptionalities often require specific early childhood intervention programs to service their needs (Pianta & Cox, 1999). In general, parents report that current early education programs do not have the desired cohesiveness with kindergarten programs (Johnson, 2003).

        Education and care for young children (i.e., three, four and five-year-olds) goes by many names (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education- Early Years, 2014). For example, early childhood education (ECE) often comes in the form of child care, day care, nursery school, preschool, pre-kindergarten, and early education. It can be delivered in a variety of center, home, local or public settings. Some programs are part-time or part-year, while others offer full-day and full-year services. They can be privately run, either non-profit or for profit, or they can be operated by the local school system or by a federally funded program (Government of Saskatchewan- Early Childhood Education, 2015).

        Early education has been described as a "continuous and creative process, which primarily fulfills moral potential of each individual. Its aim is to develop the capacities latent in human nature and to coordinate their expression for enrichment, progress and transformation of society" (Rohani, 2010, p. 1). Education must include warm, nurturing care, and enriched learning experiences designed to stimulate a child's development (Government of Saskatchewan- Early Childhood Education, 2015). Child developmental needs include cognitive, physical, and social-emotional (Anderson et al., 2003). Curriculum should be based on developmental needs, provided by well-educated and caring staff, within organized programs in order to be considered a high quality early learning environment. Specifically areas such as language, math and behavioural and social skills are emphasized in early childhood education (Grisham-Brown, 2009). The organization of these programs must be balanced with play and structured activities as well as both child-initiated exploration and teacher-lead instruction.

Early childhood education and kindergarten programs are available for children who are deemed *at risk* or living with special needs in many Canadian provinces (Child Care Canada: Saskatchewan, 2001; Education Alberta: Early Childhood Services-Programing for Children with Special Educational Needs, 2015; Government of British Columbia- Child Behaviour and Development: Special Needs, 2016; Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2010). Pre-school programs can be provided for children in targeted communities that meet eligibility criteria such as low-socioeconomic status, a high proportion of children with exceptionalities, or a population comprised of over 40% Indigenous peoples (Child Care Canada: Saskatchewan, 2001). For example, in Saskatchewan the Special Education Policy is in place for children with special needs in schools (kindergarten through twelfth grade) in order to have inclusion in typical classroom settings or funding provided for additional supports (e.g., educational assistants, adaptive technology; Child Care Canada: Saskatchewan, 2001). The Child Care Inclusion Program is designated for children with exceptionalities in child-care (e.g. licenses centers, child care homes) so children with diverse needs (e.g., developmental delays, conditions, disorders) can receive funding, grants, adapted equipment, and/or additional supports or workers to meet the specific needs of the child (Child Care Canada: Saskatchewan, 2001). In Alberta, special needs programming is provided to children based on individually and developmentally assessed needs in pre-school, school, center or family based programming in the community or homes (Education Alberta, 2015). Educational programming in any of these settings is based on meeting the child's needs and designed to facilitate and enhance learning, utilize intervention plans, incorporate family or cultural backgrounds and occur in the most enabling environment for the child (Education Alberta, 2015). Services and funding in British Columbia are available for children and youth with special needs to assist with education, social and life skills training, provide behavioural or other professional supports, and respite services for families (Government of British Columbia- Child Behaviour and Development: Special Needs, 2016). Specifically, programs such as StrongStartBC, Early Childhood Development Programs and Services, and Ready Set Learn exist for children birth to age five and each target specific needs (e.g., exposure to school-based learning activities, play-based activities, family workshops and resources) of young children with may be at risk or living with exceptionalities to assist with preparing them for formal schooling. Finally, in Ontario specialized pre-school and formal schools exist specifically for children with special needs (e.g., physical disability, behavioural disorder, mental disability or communicative disorder) and have special education programs within typical schools for children who have behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities, and require additional services to benefit fully from their school experience (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016).

What constitutes childhood can often be described as situational as different groups relate identity and life-course to this definition differently (Heydon & Wang, 2006). Therefore finding one approach to ECE to fulfill the needs of every child and every situation is not possible. However, in Canada and for the purposes of this study, definitions are given to the age group of pre-school children and based on the curriculum they are provided during this period of education. Typically, children aged three to five

years old attend pre-school or a similar junior kindergarten or care program, and by age six, children are legally required to attend formal schooling in Canada (Ferns & Friendly, 2014).

A variety of individuals are involved in the process of early childhood education, including: teachers and pre-school educators (early childhood educators), caregivers, parents, education administrators and most importantly the children, all of whom should all actively involved (Bernanke, 2012). Early childhood education programs aim to nurture healthy development from the earliest years. Programs that provide enriched experiences for children and that also involve parents have shown to benefit children from all backgrounds, but have the strongest influence on children from disadvantaged environments (Bernanke, 2012).

Early childhood programs are not simply a short term and limited experience, but have positive benefits that tend to last into adulthood (Bernanke, 2012). Children who attended a high-quality pre-school program were more economically successful adults than those who did not attend. Early childhood programs are also an important part of intellectual development. Children in these programs are afforded a solid learning base, which often results is better school performance (DeCicca & Smith, 2013). Furthermore, most of the available evidence shows that pre-kindergarten programs have positive effects on student outcomes (DeCicca & Smith, 2013). Early childhood education/intervention programs provide a beneficial foundation for later academic success and development (DeCicca & Smith, 2013). Therefore, exploring the relationship between successful transitions from these early programs to kindergarten (formal schooling) is essential.

2.1.2 Kindergarten. In Canada, early childhood education is becoming more efficient and creating more formalized learning earlier in children's lives (Heydon & Wang, 2006). However, it is important to note that attendance in a kindergarten program is not mandatory in the majority of provinces and territories, and the only regulation by law is that children enter school by age five or six (dependent on provincial ministries of education; Government of Canada-Elementary and Secondary Education, 2014). For example, school attendance is mandatory for children by age six in Alberta (Albert Education, 2013). This means it is compulsory for children to enter formal schooling by grade one, placing a child in a kindergarten program is an optional choice for parents (Albert Education, 2013). In Ontario, kindergarten attendance is also not mandatory (Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario, n.d.). However, in the 1999-2000 school year 81% of four-year-olds were enrolled in junior kindergarten with 95% of five-year-olds enrolled in kindergarten (Canadian Education Statistics Council, 2003). This means the importance of preparing children for kindergarten cannot be overstated since it is the first experience with formalized learning and educational, personal, and social expectations increase (Heydon & Wang, 2006). Kindergarten is almost always the first step into formal education for children by the age of five or six years old (McCubbins, 2004). There are different perspectives to take in terms of what type of curriculum benefits children the most at the pre-school and kindergarten education levels: prescriptive, adaptive, and emergent (Heydon & Wang, 2006; Newell, 2008; Rohrkemper, 1989; Shute & Zapata-Rivera, 2012). On this continuum, the most efficient

and static view (prescriptive) is on one end, with a more flexible paradigm (adaptive) in the middle, and the most dynamic and critical view (emergent) on the other (Heydon & Wang, 2006). The prescriptive approach to early education involves the curriculum being designed outside the classroom with measureable ends of learning, direct teacher instruction, classroom control and learning being understood in terms of stimuli, reinforcement and responses. The adaptive approach also has the curriculum designed outside the classroom but has a heavier emphasis on interaction between children, teachers and the environment (Newell, 2008). The perspective approach is partially based on the Cognitive Theory of Child Development (Piaget, 1936) as it views learning in terms of age-related cognitive changes and classroom strategies to support them (Powell & Kalina, 2009). While the teacher cannot change the curriculum, they can organize it in a way that works with the children's interests and experiences. Finally, the emergent perspective uses practice and theory as one, and is grounded on children being an important source for creating curriculums as they are considered contributors to their community and society (Heydon & Wang, 2006). This view gives teachers the power to exercise their professional judgment to change the curriculum as it is seen as a culture rather than a specific approach. The Reggio Emilia form of ECE founded in Italy (1960), best represents the emergent model as teachers, children and parents collaborate in the school and community to ethically create a curriculum that works best and connects and supports all those involved (New, 2007).

Kindergarten education has undergone many changes in past few decades in the U.S. and Canada (Elicker & Mathur, 1997). In the 1960's and 1970's, many programs were for five year olds, scheduled part day, and modeled after nursery schools with curricula based on play, transitioning to school and socialization. In the 1990's programs introduced full-day kindergarten options and made the educational aspects more skill and academic focused (Elicker & Mathur, 1997). However, with this change concerns for a lack of developmentally appropriate programming and child-lead learning were raised. Most recently, programs in the U.S. and Canada, generally incorporate a balance of both teacher-lead instruction to prepare children for grade one with the necessary academic skills, as well as child-initiated play, exploration and learning (Miller & Almon, 2009).

In Canada, while not all provinces have a formal kindergarten curriculum in place, many programs do follow relatively similar set-ups (Alberta Education, 2008). In the first year of elementary school education children often learn to make friends, become familiar with the formal school setting, and learn skills necessary for grade one. Generally, Canadian kindergarten programs provide young children with learning in the areas of: early literacy, writing and numeracy, personal and social skills and identity, and the environment and early science, through play-based learning and exploration (Alberta Education, 2008). Kindergarten programs can be full or half-day as well as Monday-Friday or only certain days of the week. Kindergarten programs typically have been scheduled on a half-day basis, either morning or afternoons (Zernike, 2000)

For children without exceptionalities, who are reaching their developmental milestones at a typical and expected rate, early education can be a relatively issue-free and exciting process (McCubbins, 2004). The transition to kindergarten, while stressful at times and full of changes for both the child and parents, is usually focused on new skill

development, routines, making friends and finding a sense of belonging (Atwater, Fowler, & Schwartz, 1991). While there are many articles in the literature about various aspects of early childhood education that are specific to typical children and their learning (DeCicca & Smith, 2013; Heydon & Wang, 2006; Johnson, 2010) there are far fewer that explore what kindergarten is like for children with exceptionalities.

Over the past few decades, transitions have become an area of interest and research in the field of early childhood special education (Rous, Myers, & Stricklin, 2007). Between 1970 and 2000 many transition outreach programs were developed and funded for young children with disabilities by the Department of Education in the U.S. These transitions included the process of moving from the hospital to home, early intervention to pre-school, and pre-school to kindergarten (Rosenkoetter, Hains, & Fowler, 1994). In 2007, a study developed a collection of themes regarding transitions to school for children with disabilities (Rous, et al., 2007) Some of these included: viewing transitions as an ongoing process, individualizing transition plans for each child, developing strategies to ease the transition and promoting adjustment, and having continual collaboration between all involved in the process.

Most often when researching kindergarten programs and children with exceptionalities the literature is based on American studies, and/or related to school-specific programs, early intervention or website-based Ministry of Education information regarding teacher's assistants (TA's) or resource classrooms. While kindergarten adaptations have been made for children with exceptionalities in Canada, this literature reflects somewhat of a paucity in the research and possibly in practice in Canadian schools today. Presently, many families with children of exceptionalities do not feel prepared for the process of their child entering school and can only relate to early intervention experiences, if applicable (Barnett & Taylor, 2008). However, early intervention cannot be viewed as a one-time inoculation ensuring school success (Atwater, Fowler, & Schwartz, 1991). Children with exceptionalities need the education, support, and resources to help prepare them as best as possible for grade one, in the same way that any typical child would.

2.1.3 Grade one.   The transition to elementary school is a major life event for young children as well as their parents (Powell, File, & Froland, 2016). Grade one, as compared to kindergarten, presents a higher level of curriculum expectations with a shift in focus from play to traditional academics such a literacy and math. Often, parent perspectives on pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs are different from that of grade one classes. For example, children require more self-regulation skills for grade one in order to plan, organize and meet the increased academic and behavioural expectations (Perez & Gauvain, 2009). Often the transition to grade one is a separate but equally important area of concern for parents and appears to mark a more academic based transition and the beginning of formal education (Yeom, 1996).

In the literature, the time frame during the transition to grade one is considered a *critical period* for both the social and academic development and growth for children (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998). A critical period is described as a limited period of time that involves stimulation from the environment that initiates particular responses from the individual. Most typical children between the ages of five and eight years of age undergo

rapid cognitive development including memory span, processing speed and learning capacity which coincides with their first years of formal education (Varnhagen, Morrison, & Everall, 1994). These increased cognitive skills result in increased abilities to learn, develop independence, and adapt to the changing social environment (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998).

The grade one environment is often structured and ritualized, and children are expected to spend a full day directing their attention to imposed, pre-set academic competencies, often while sitting still in uncomfortable chairs for extended periods of time (Sink, Edwards, & Weir, 2007). This environment is often different from the less structured, shorter, and more play-centered kindergarten environment. Parents and other caregivers also noted that the "teaching methods (and their theoretical underpinnings) used in first-grade classrooms influence how their children perceive and experience the new learning environment" (Sink, Edwards, & Weird, 2007, p. 2). Teachers also reported that the transition to grade one frequently requires different and additional practices as compared to the transition to kindergarten. Phone calls, visits, flyers, letters and open houses for the parents are regularly occur prior to and during the transitions process. Furthermore, children with disabilities or exceptionalities transitioning to grade one often require additional planning, coordination between professionals and the families and preparedness in order for the child to function and adjust to the new environment (Pianta & Cox, 2000). However, only a small portion of teachers and schools actually incorporate these transition practices, and an even smaller portion individualize support for students with exceptionalities while transitioning to grade one (Pianta & Cox, 2000).

While the grade one transition is a part of the overarching transition to formal schooling, it is a more structured and academic year that often presents its own challenges for children and their families (Powell, Son, File, & Froiland, 2002). The environment, expectations and structured practice are often found to be in contrast with the child's previous academic experiences. Finally, the transition policies and practices needed for grade one are often lacking especially for children with exceptionalities (Paro, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). Transitions to formal education are just one of many major milestones experienced across the lifetime (e.g., birthdays, religious sacraments, weddings, birth of children; Cowan & Hemming, 2005; Elder, 1998; Griebel & Niesel, 2002). It is important to understand why school transitions are important in a broader context of an individual's life, and why the success or failure of any major life transition can have long-lasting impacts on an individual academically, socially, culturally, or personally.

2.2 Transitions

Transitions are a part of life. Some transitions represent milestones in development, life or education; others are birthdays, and some milestones pass nearly unnoticed (Atwater, Fowler, & Schwartz, 1991). For children, transitions are often defined and given meaning by their families or parents before children understand the importance of them. For example, families give meaning to transitions by celebrating birthdays, recording a child's first steps, or taking their children for age or developmental evaluations (Atwater, et al., 1991). For children with exceptionalities, often additional and varied transitions outside of those typically experienced by children occur. For example, transitions into or between service programs are common for children with

exceptionalities (Atwater, et al., 1991). Furthermore, at times certain transitions such as birthdays will not only be for celebration, but serve as prompts for evaluations of developmental progress, determining eligibility for special education services, deadlines for choosing new service programs or providers, or even act as reminders that the their child is developing differently from other children (Atwater, et al., 1991). Often times, one of the biggest transitions for these young children and their family is the transition into the formal education system (Ziegler, 1985).

The transition to school is a milestone for both children and their families. In its simplest form, the transition to school is a change in place, a move from home or preschool into a formal education setting (Allen, 1980; Fowler, 1982; Vincent et al., 1980). Leaving preschool for kindergarten is one of the many separations that children meet with a combination of delight and anxiety (Ziegler, 1985). The transition to kindergarten may disrupt many of the patterns established in a child's preschool (Atwater, et al., 1991). The families and children form bonds with the programs and staff during their preschool years and leaving these services can be stressful. It is suggested that the greatest need during transitions is more information for families to facilitate understanding, participation, and clarity to guide them through the process more effectively and help prepare children. While children in early intervention programs prior to kindergarten often demonstrate cognitive gains, they also have a tendency to drop off as they enter and move through elementary school (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004). The reason being, at least in part, is that teaching style, routine, parent involvement, classroom practices and organization are often dramatically different as compared to early intervention programs. The rationale from the National Head Start Demonstration (2014) is that more effective community to school transitions will help combat the maladjustment to formal school for children and help maintain student achievement. Furthermore, efficient transitions to kindergarten can help sustain children's social, emotional and academic skills and increase the likelihood of school success (Ramey & Ramey, 1999).

For typically developing children (without exceptionalities), the transition to kindergarten can be stressful but often does not require the amount of extensive collaboration, intensity of programming or additional time planning needed for children with exceptionalities. Often, typical children require only the commonly used transition practices such as parent-teacher meetings, having one classroom visit prior to the school year, and reviewing information sent home regarding the school or program (Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999). However, typical children can experience issues such as behavioural or emotional issues, difficulties in a new environment or keeping up with the curriculum but often the issues are not as severe, intense or as long-lasting as those experienced by children with exceptionalities.

2.2.1 Theories related to children and transitions. Many theories focus on a particular factor that has an impact on childhood transitions such as: social and/or cultural influences on child development and learning in the classroom, structural components of the environment, the effect of home-school relationships, academic success, and the complex interplay of environmental, contextual, social, and cultural factors that influence the child and family (French, 2007). Four theories that could be used as a framework for

understanding children and the transition process include: (1) Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Stremmel, 1993; Jaramillo, 1996); (2) the Bio-Ecological Systems Theory (Brofenbrenner, 1990); (3) the Contextual Systems Model (Pianta & Walsh, 1996); and (4) the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition (Dynamic Effects Model; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

2.2.1.1 Socio-cultural theory. The socio-cultural theory suggests that children should be active agents in their learning and that human capacities are influenced by biological, environmental, social and cultural factors in the environment in which they develop (Vygotsky, 1978, 1988). The emphasis of the theory is that the combination of these societal factors impacts the development of education. Vygotsky suggested that children internalize social interactions through which they learn and develop (1978, 1988). When applied to the transition of early education to formal schooling, this theory is a framework that describes children's learning and the influence of adults and peers on the learning process. The school context is a place where children spend a significant amount of time and therefore highlights the importance of designing the context to allow for active interactions between the children and teachers. Furthermore, this theory acknowledges the development of the child internally and socially (intrapsychological). In order to support education and learning, children need to be supported both directly as individuals and indirectly on family and community levels.

The socio-constructivist perspective, also similarly defines successful transitions based on communication and participation on the parts of the family and institution (Niesel & Griebel, 2007). When transitioning to formal education, children are faced with the process of integrating preschool or early education experiences with kindergarten. At this time differences between the two environments can be challenging as the child confronts new socialization, cultural variety, new activities system and novel expectations. Dependent on the communication and participation of all the agents involved, these factors will affect the transition of the child between each of these environments.

2.2.1.2 Bio-ecological systems theory. Urie Brofenbrenner (1979) defined transitions as anything involving a person's adjustment to a change in environment based on an alteration to their role, setting or both. Brofenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory described the idea that children and the course of their development occurs within a complex system of relationships that form in the environment (Pacquette & Ryan, 2001). The theory explains that if there is change or conflict on any *layer* of the child's environment that it will ripple throughout other layers. There were five layers explained that create the structure of the environment, according the theory: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (Brofenbrenner, 1990). The first three layers are people, systems and structures, the fourth layer is comprised of cultural values, laws and customs and how they create a cascading effect of influence through the first three layers, and the fifth layer is the dimension of time.

The first and smallest layer is the microsystem, which includes people with whom the child has direct contact with such as family, school, childcare etc. This layer has the biggest impact on the child's development. On this level the child both influences and is influenced by the environment described as bi-directional influences. The next layer is

the mesosystem and provides the connection between the individuals in the microsystem with structures and people such as, schools, churches, neighborhoods, etc., in the mesosystem. The exosystem encompasses a larger social system in which the child may not function directly but is still impacted by. The exosystem includes the community (e.g. parents' workplace, family resources, community centers) and social systems that can have a positive or negative impact on the child. The outermost layer is the macrosystem comprised of cultural values, customs, and laws (Berk, 2000). These aspects flow throughout all other layers and interact with them in a unique interplay influencing all aspects of the child's life. Finally, the chronosystem encompasses time as it relates to a child's environments including deaths, and physical changes/aging.

This theory suggests that a child's development is steered by the interplay of many layers in their environment. When this theory is applied directly to the childhood transition from pre-school or early education to formal schooling, it states that: children are influenced (positively or negatively) by family, background, past and current learning environments, educational values, community resources, and family experiences. These factors are interconnected and affect their development and progress academically, socially and developmentally. The fundamental idea is that the only way for children to transition successfully is when there is coordination and participation between all the groups immediately involved. Another component that was later added to the theory was that of the child's biology (Brofenbrenner, 1998). By better understanding and including each aspect of a child's life outside of the school, results in can better support for their needs, goals and transition planning.

2.2.1.3 Contextual systems model. This model emphasized that the transition to formal schooling is founded on the establishment of a home-school relationship that is centered on the child's goals (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). The hypothesis is that the quality of this relationship is critical for both the success of the transition as well as the child and family, and in particular families who have strained social or economic resources. The school's openness and level of communication, community values and culture, parents' socio-economic status and personal resources each influence this relationship. This model is based on the conclusion that family-school relationships, as well as family involvement in educational programs are crucial for a child's academic success. The most efficient transitions and effective programs are not applied uniformly, but instead center around the understanding the child is an individual and needs to be seen within the context of their family and surroundings (Schorr, 1989). The theory also highlighted the importance of an explicit division of roles and responsibilities within the relationship (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). Understanding and fulfilling roles serves the purposes of maintaining the quality of the relationship as well as supporting the child's goals, adjustment and ability to face adversity in the process (Colby, 1998). When families are involved with the school and feel connected and invested, it has shown to benefit the child's academic success, the family and school's institutional interest and the teachers (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). "Students at all grade levels (including, of course, the primary grades) do better in their academic work and have more positive school attitudes if their parents are aware, knowledgeable, and encouraging about school" (Epstein, 1990, p. 105). This theory illustrates the direct impact of family-school relationships and why they are essential

components to explore in connection to the perceived success or failure of a child's transition to school.

      2.2.1.4 Ecological and dynamic model of transition. The final model is essentially built upon the previous two theories, the Contextual Systems Model (Pianta & Walsh, 1996) and Brofenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Systems Model (Pacquette & Ryan, 2001). The Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition is an interactive and inclusive model that acknowledges the five layers of the environment and the child effects, direct effects and indirect effects models, and then examines them in connection to each other, the relationships involved in the transition to school, and how they change over time. This model: (a) asserts that the child has innate characteristics that predict their ability to adjust to school (child effects model); (b) acknowledges the direct influence of the child's family, school, peers and neighborhood on their adjustment to school (direct effects model); (c) recognizes the effects of the child on their environment and the bi-directional interactions between the child and their many networks and contexts (indirect effects model) and; (d) combines the interactions between the previous three models, their development over time and the many structures that exist in all layers of the environment and the patterns they form to influence the transition to school. Essentially, the child's immediate experiences within the changing context need to be considered in addition to the patterns of interactions between individuals, groups, and institutions. Finally, the aspect of time and its affect on the development of these interactions is another influence acknowledged in its own right.

      2.2.1.5 Comparison of theories. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Stremmel, 1993; Jaramillo, 1996), the Bio-Ecological Systems Theory (Brofenbrenner, 1990), the Contextual Systems Model (Pianta & Walsh, 1996), and the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition (Dynamic Effects Model; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) are all theories or models that could be used to better understand children and the transition process. However, it is The Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) that is the most inclusive framework of the four considered theories since it outlines factors that can influence the success of a transition to school. The other three theories are less appropriate frameworks to better understanding the transition process for a variety of reasons. First, while the Socio-Cultural theory provides a strong foundation for examining specific cultural, contextual, and social aspects of the transition to school, it holds too narrow of a focus to be relevant for considering all aspects of transition process (i.e., social systems, changing relationships, children with exceptionalities). Therefore, it is not best suited for improving understanding of transitions. Next, while The Ecological Systems Model examined all the layers, structures and relationships within them, it put less of an emphasis on the quality of each of the relationships and more on their existence. The Contextual Model examined the quality and types of relationships involved in the transition process, but failed to acknowledge a variety of factors outside of the primary relationships that exist between, child, home and school (i.e., environmental factors, time related factors, social systems). While both were excellent theories to support a study of the transition process, when combined in Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition theory, they were deemed the most appropriate, and relevant choice. When combined, the two theories

provide the most comprehensive description of all individuals, groups, structures, and systems involved in the context of the transition school. This broad perspective allows for a more in-depth understanding of all possible sources of both strength and weakness that can arise during the process (e.g. relationships, environment, structures, programs, lack of communication, resources, social systems, etc.) unlike either theory on its own. Finally, while the theory is easily applied to transitions and specifically the transition to school, it is key to understand the unique components involved with transitions for children living with exceptionalities both for the purposes of this study and establishing ways in which they fit into the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition.

      2.2.2 Transitions for children with exceptionalities. The transition from pre-school to kindergarten is an important and complicated event in any child's life as it marks a new chapter in their life, effects future educational success, brings about opportunity, and facilitates new relationships (McIntyre et al., 2010; Pianta & Cox, 1999; Rous, Myers & Stricklin 2007; Schulting, Malone & Dodge, 2005). However, when the child is affected by a disability, this transition becomes even more complex and challenging (Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron, & Hughes, 2008). In the U.S. 3.5% of children under five years of age are reported to have disabilities and in Canada 1.6% (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006; Human Resources Development Canada, 2006). Children with exceptionalities transitioning to kindergarten often face more challenges and barriers than their typically developing peers.

      A variety of barriers or issues during transitions have been reported in the literature (e.g., Janus, Lefort, Cameron, & Kopenchanski, 2014; Kraft-Sayer & Pianta, 2000; Wolery, 1999, p. 258-259). For example, parents reported one of the main issues was the lack of coordination and collaboration between various service providers and resources for the child (Janus, et al., 2008). This issue results in a lack of communication, additional and overwhelming paperwork and sometimes missing or duplicated information (Janus et al., 2008,). However, transitions typically lack one person or agency that is specified to organize transitions for these children, and therefore problems can result from the multiple groups being a part of the process (Kraft-Sayer & Pianta, 2000). Problems with confidentiality, lack of cohesiveness, miscommunications and delays in intervention in the school are just a few of the other barriers listed in this category.

      The next category of barriers is related to the actual intervention provided for the child once in kindergarten. Pre-school programs often use different intervention strategies than those in kindergarten classes (Wolery, 1999). Depending on access to resources, teacher education, classroom practices, available funding, intervention training, and philosophy the strategies can change drastically from one setting to the next. Beyond the academic and developmental issues that could arise from this, inclusion and the acceptance of the child with exceptionalities within the classroom can be compromised (Janus, et al., 2014).

      The final category of issues is related to the family of the child with exceptionalities (Wolery, 1999, p. 260-261). Many families reported that when their child entered kindergarten that they had to develop new support networks. In a new school environment, parents are not yet an integrated part of the system and feel left out of

decisions. Parent reports suggested that they felt they are not always welcome in the school, not given enough knowledge into their child's progress, and do not get to participate in as many of the choices as they would like. Lastly, parents often felt as though they have to become much more active and outspoken advocates for the needs of their child during the transition, especially when there is no clear transition coordinator to go through. Overall, while there are many barriers presently impacting effective transitions in the literature and that will be examined in this study, there are also many important factors that need to be explored.

A variety of factors have also been identified as important to supporting an effective transition (e.g., Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004; Kraft-Sayer & Pianta, 2000; Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, & Cox, 1999). For example, while many studies agreed on the benefits of successful transitions, often there is a lack of consensus on what effective transitions should include (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004). "A school transition is not one fits all", programs and specific context always need to be given consideration (Kraft-Sayer & Pianta, 2000, p. 3). In understanding the importance of context and individualized programs, a brief list of promising transition practices that align with the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition (Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000) was developed (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004).

The first component to a successful transition is the awareness of, and understanding that each child comes from a unique and varied background and that plans may need to be individualized, especially for children with exceptionalities. Transition research reflects a need for a more proactive approach by schools in terms of engaging families and preparing children prior to the start of school (Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman & Cox, 1999). By reaching out to families at the pre-school level, more effective communication can take place between educators and families. Next, by developing programs with varied levels of intensity, kindergarten would have more flexibility and be conducive to the individual needs of all children. The final factor to effective transitions is family involvement. There are numerous benefits that result from family involvement in the transition process for children (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Studies indicated that when family involvement extends beyond the pre-school years that children have more positive behaviours and attitudes, better attendance and grades as well as increased graduation rates and later involvement in higher education.

Other literature reflects additional factors that appear to be important in effective and successful transitions. First, it is important that transitions be viewed as an ongoing process instead of a one-time change (Hains, Fowler & Chandler, 1988; Rous, Hemmeter, & Schuster, 1994). This continual perspective allows for collaboration, planning, reparation, and communication between all involved. Furthermore, in viewing it as a process, others in the community, from pre-school or early intervention settings or other resources can be a part of the transition. Another major theme in the literature is the need for individualized transition planning tailored to the specific strengths, needs, characteristics families, and available resources for each child with exceptionalities (Conn-Powers, Ross-Allen, & Holburn, 1990). This concept reflects the need to consider all aspects of the child's life in the transition planning process. Another factor is to identify ways to ease the transition for the children and support their successful

adjustment to formal schooling. (Salisbury & Vincent, 1990). Additionally, the need for teachers to focus on school readiness to maximize academic achievement and support children's ability to respond to various instructional styles and different environmental structures after the transition was identified (Katims & Pierce, 1995). Finally, early transition literature emphasized the importance of collaboration between and among early childhood programs as critical to successful transition efforts (Rice & O'Brien, 1990; Rous, Hemmeter & Schuster, 1994; Rous, Schuster & Hemmeter, 1999).

  2.2.3 Transition Planning. In the 1990s, the U.S. underwent many changes in terms of services for young children with exceptionalities and their families (Meisels, 1992). In particular, the number and type of intervention programs available to this group increased. From this development, changes in transition planning for children moving from these services to formal schooling have come up. Many of the identified important factors (e.g., child readiness, individualized plans, family collaboration, communication, continuity of learning) provide ways for programs to improve transitions in many specific forms (Love, Logue, Trudeau, & Thayer, 1992; Meier & Schafran, 1999; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

  One factor in particular that appears to aid transition planning the most is continued contact between all involved, especially the families (Hemmeter and Schuster, 1994). Connections with families are a valuable resource especially with children who may experience school issues. While keeping regular engagement with families during the kindergarten transition process can be complex, using the important factors mentioned above can help programs, teachers, and other professionals keep parents included. Additionally, by viewing the children's families as transition partners and keeping them involved as much as possible, the effectiveness and efficiency of the transition planning is increased (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004).

  Another important factor although far less common, especially in Canada, is that of having a transition coordinator (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004). This facilitator would work within the local school and bridge the gaps between families and teachers, administrators and other service programs. Having a transition planner is often a part of theoretical frameworks supporting the development of school and program transition teams (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000). Teams could include preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers, family workers, principals, parents, and other community representatives who collaborate in this process under the coordinator.

  In the U.S., there are many transition programs being utilized that are designed specifically to support and prepare children and their families in the transition to kindergarten (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004; Byrd, Dyk, Perry, Stephens, Rous, 1991; Hemmeter & Schuster, 1994). Five specific programs have been identified for review: Sequences Transition to Education in the Public Schools (STEPS, Hemmeter & Schuster, 1994), Countdown to Kindergarten (Vaishnav, 2000), Okeechobee, Florida Program (National Educators Association, 1998), Continuity for Success program (Parent Teacher Association & National Head Start Association, 1999), and the Family and Child Education program ((Schultz, Lopez, & Hochberg, 1995).

  The Sequenced Transition to Education in the Public Schools (STEPS) program was developed in 1983 in Kentucky, based on the local needs of children with disabilities

(Byrd, Dyk, Perry, Stephens, & Rous, 1991). As a community, seven agencies each serving different needs of children aged zero to six, with disabilities, joined together to work on the issue of transition, as it was becoming a major concern for the agencies, staff, and families of these children. The STEPS coordinators developed the model around four components based on their concerns that was comprised of administration and interagency issues, staff involvement, family involvement and child preparation (Wolery & Stilwell, 1987). Based on these, STEPS developed consistent, formalized transition procedures, better communication among staff, families, and agencies; and more successful transitions for children and families. While initially a local development, it is now implemented statewide and includes interagency policy development, regional networks of facilitators for training and technical assistance, and a local pilot or model for the development of each site (Hemmeter & Schuster, 1994). In 1989 this project was given national outreach funding and was implemented in five states (Hemmeter & Schuster, 1994).

The Countdown to Kindergarten program is based in Boston and goes year round to support families of children with preschoolers to prepare for kindergarten (Vaishnav, 2000). Families receive information about registration, calls from parents who are school volunteers, and a variety of strategies for child learning in the year prior to kindergarten. This program is considered a *reach back* program as it begins preparing families a full year prior to their child's entry into formal school instead of only the summer prior, which is often the case for most schools (Vaishnav, 2000).

The Continuity for Success program is as partnership between the National Parent Teachers Association (NPTA) and the National Head Start Association (PTA & NHSA, 1999). Continuity for Success focuses on the aspect of parent involvement in the transition from the Head Start programs to public elementary schools for children. It has increased parent involvement by connecting local and national associations to help build action plans and centralize resources for families.

In the community of Okeechobee, Florida, there is a large population of immigrants and people who are bi or multi-lingual (National Educators Association, 1998). The program used in this community ensures that pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes are staffed with teacher aids who are bilingual to help children and families with limited English proficiency make the transition to school. Additionally, schools in this area hire advocates to help these families get connected to necessary health and social services (National Educators Association, 1998).

The Family and Child Education program sponsored by the Bureau of Indian Affairs is a program that specifically targets Indigenous children and families to support early childhood education (Schultz, Lopez, & Hochberg, 1995). This program focuses on both home and center based programs for parents teaching their children early and early literacy before school. This program is a collaboration with the Parents as Teachers National Center, the National Center for Literacy, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Schultz, Lopez, & Hochberg, 1995). While educational transition programming is a crucial piece under investigation in this study, the other core component is identify and explore who actually needs to be involved in the process.

Many people need to be involved in the planning, procedures, and policies for

children transitioning to kindergarten (McCubbins, 2004). For example, the parents (Wildenger & McIntyre 2011; Villeneuve et al., 2013), teachers (Heydon & Wang, 2006; LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer, & Pianta, 2007), external service providers (Bruder, 2010; Rous, Meyers & Stricklin, 2007) and the school (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004) are each given value and consideration for the role they play in the transition. However, it is important to consider parents' perceptions and experiences with the transition process since they have first-hand and in-depth knowledge and understanding of their child, are actively and continuously involved with all of the activities preparing their child for the transition, and have unique experiences and perceptions during and after their child's transition to school.

    2.2.4 Parents' Perceptions. Many parents and families find they break ties with many familiar people and resources from the pre-school setting when moving to the kindergarten setting (Atwater, Fowler, & Schwartz, 1991). Often in this period of adjustment parents found that fewer opportunities for family involvement in the school exist, and more complex academic and social demands are present for their child. Furthermore, while parents had less involvement in the school, they had new and increased responsibilities at home with new schedules, routines, locating and accessing services, establishing relationships with new school personnel, and helping their child to make this major transition successfully (Diamond, Spiegel-McGill, & Hanrahan, 1988).

    Several authors have reviewed and reported on some of the benefits of systematically incorporating family needs and parent participation in the transition process (Hamblin-Wilson & Thurman, 1990; Johnson, Chandler, Kerns & Fowler, 1986; Knapp, Madden & Marcu, 2009; McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese & DiGennaro & Wildenger, 2007; Powell, Son, File & San Juan, 2010; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011). Some of the common themes that arose amongst these studies included: reduced confusion and miscommunications, strategies for addressing concerns, reduced parental anxiety, better insight for parents on how to support their child's adjustment and more opportunities for parents to be involved in decision making processes. Beyond this, the more parent involvement there is, the more novel ideas and different perspectives on transition practices affording the potential for change, improvement and adaptations to be made to transition polices or practices (McIntyre et al., 2007).

    Many studies have demonstrated that promoting family involvement in education may improve children's school outcomes, both in early education and beyond (e.g., Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004; Epstein, 1991). Parent involvement has been shown to be especially important as children move from early education programs to kindergarten (McIntyre et al., 2007). A recent study suggested that the effectiveness of certain transition practices could be partially due to increased levels of parental or family involvement in the process (Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005). In numerous studies, family-school partnerships enhance the children's educational experiences (Gelfer, 1991; Konzal, 2000; Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 1999; Vickers & Minke, 1995).

    Family involvement in transition planning is important for positive outcomes for the child, and therefore promoting family-school partnerships may be especially important for the child (McIntyre et al., 2007). Parents are the only individuals that offer

children academic, social and emotional support in the home environment (National Head Start Association, 1999) and already have guided their children through basic academic experiences by teaching them basic words, numbers, concepts, and skills (Pianta & Cox, 1999). Based on this early learning, parents often have certain academic and social hopes of their child's first educational experience (e.g. counting to twenty, memorizing the alphabet, making news friends; Seefeldt & Wasik, 2002). When parents are included in the transition process, these school expectations can be laid out clearly, questions can be answered, and a foundation for strong parent-teacher and parent-school relationships can be laid (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1999).

2.2.4.1 Parental concerns. A variety of parental concerns arise in relation to their involvement in, and their child's school transitions (e.g., McIntyre et al., 2007; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011). For example, parents have perceived their children's social behaviour, ability to adapt to the new school setting, problematic behaviours (i.e., inability to work independently, hyperactivity, aggression, etc.), ability to be separated from the family and be in a new environment, and ability to follow directions as just a few of the concerns when their children are transitioning (Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011). In addition, parents have expressed concerns related to their children attending a new school such as: being able to comprehend and follow the rules and directions of their classroom and the school, exhibiting problem behaviours, academic abilities, and being accepted by and getting along with peers (McIntyre, et al., 2007). Parents also have expressed worries about possible conflicts with the school, the amount of individualized attention their child will get, and how much they will be able to be involved in their child's academic activities (McCubbins, 2004). It is clear that parents have a wide range of concerns related to their child transitioning to kindergarten alone, aside from all the other potentially problematic areas such as communication, resources, and funding. Parents likely have the greatest involvement and interest in their children's academic and personal growth therefore also have their own emotional responses (e.g. stress, anxiety, nervousness) to having their children transition into a school setting, especially if their child has an exceptionality (Cohen-Podvey, Hinojosa & Kristie Koenig, 2010).

2.2.4.2 Parental stress. Parents often hold their own ideas, expectations and anxieties about the transition to school and experience a change in roles when their child(ren) move from early childhood settings to a formal educational setting (Love, Logue, Trudeau, & Thayer, 1992). Parents have described navigating the services related to their child's transition as overwhelming and stressful (Villeneuve et al., 2013). These emotional responses can be due to a variety of issues. For example, one study examined parent reported causes of stress or anxiety related to the transition to school (Johnson, Chandler, Kerns & Fowler, 1986). First, of 19 sets of parents, 20% indicated that they did not understand a lot of what went on at Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings for their child prior to the transition and therefore they felt stressed and hesitant to participate. Later, approximately half of the parents described feeling stressed during the period of time after their child was given a placement in a school classroom. Parents also experienced stress in terms of their child's readiness, skills and abilities to be in formal schooling, and if and how that will affect their inclusion in the classroom both socially and academically (Villeneuve et al., 2013). A final source of stress stemmed from

collaboration (or lack thereof) between the school, health or other external care providers, and professionals associated with their child(ren) (Villeneuve et al., 2013). The complexity of navigating numerous individuals, groups and resources can be difficult, especially when there is a lack of cohesion, communication, collaboration and cooperation between the various parties involved. With this in mind, other studies developed models and propositions for combatting sources of stress for parents, some of which are described below.

The utilization of transition planners through which parents could identify needs for their child and family, define their level of involvement in the transition process, and clarify family and staff responsibilities is one possible solution for parental stress and ineffective transition practices (Fowler et al., 1988). First, transition planners would prepare parents to be involved in the upcoming process and all of its components before they occur. Second, the planner would help parents determine where they wanted their child placed for kindergarten. Among 30 families who accessed transition planners, 87% of parents reported a fulfilled desire to carry some responsibility for planning their children's transitions, and felt less left out and anxious about the process, indicating it's success (Fowler et al., 1998). Transition planners can also help articulate parent concerns to the school, support the validity of parent needs and facilitate participation in meetings. Furthermore, transition planners assist with goal development and/or monitoring of the success of goals and the transition itself. Finally, planners may act as liaisons between groups involved in the transition process to ensure effective communication, coordination of services for the child, and provide an organized format for confidential information sharing and safe-keeping (Atwater, Fowler & Schwartz, 1991). Each of these duties, when fulfilled by the planners can help provide support, clarity and collaboration to all involved in the transition process.

A supplementary study described a model for coordinating the involvement of families and professional staff in the transition process (Atwater et al., 1999). The model outlined various activities for parents to be involved for both the benefit of their children as well as the reduction of their own stress about the process. Some of the activities included: identifying necessary future school skills, collecting information about community resources, verbalizing their specific concerns to the school, participating in IEP development and transition planning meetings, monitoring their children's progress, and evaluating the success of the transition.

Without proper organization, communication, support and planning it is clear that transitions to school can cause a great deal of stress for parents making their new role even more challenging. When parents are unable to assist their child's transition effectively, smoothly, and as seamlessly as possible, it appears that the likelihood of negative repercussions for the children involved, increases. Poor parent-teacher and/or school relationships can also have consequences for the child both directly and indirectly, adding to the cumulating list of reasons why parents' perceptions of the barriers and important factors that facilitate effective school transitions are crucial to examine to help shape and improve practices and policies for the future.

2.2.4.3 Parent identified barriers. Parents, like children may also experience challenges or barriers during the transition into kindergarten (McIntyre et al., 2007).

When this occurs, parents often express the desire for many things they feel are lacking in the transition process or that they believe could be added for the benefit of the child. For example, more than 80% of parents indicated that they wanted more information about the academic expectations in kindergarten (McIntyre et al., 2010). Over 75% of parents in the study also voiced a desire for more information regarding the future placement and teacher for their child. Another 69% of parents responded with a desire to know more about what their child's teacher was doing to prepare for the transition. Many parents agreed that these factors were significantly lacking during the transition and were difficult to deal with or overcome.

Another study comprised a list of five main things that parents wanted from their child's pre-school or future/current kindergarten but often found barriers or challenges to: (1) summaries of the child's developmental progress both to maintain up to date with their child's progress; (2) the child's future educational needs before they begin kindergarten so steps can be taken to prepare them; (3) classroom placements most appropriate for the child's needs; (4) arrangements for the parents and child to visit the classroom individually prior to the school year beginning; and (5) future contacts and exchange visits between the preschool and kindergarten to promote cohesiveness and open communication between the two resources (McIntyre et al., 2007).

Parents also reported six desires they had but felt were impacted by challenges, they were: (1) communication and participation in the decision-making instead of being left out or given all the responsibility; (2) exchanging information about their child openly and regularly; (3) collaboration on their child's future learning goals alongside the teacher and other necessary professionals; (4) identification of potential placements that would be most appropriate for the needs of their child; (5) selection of a school or kindergarten class based on available resources for their child; and (6) formation and sustaining of a relationship with the new teacher (McIntyre et al., 2007).

It is apparent that parents have found many personal challenges and barriers related to their child's transition (Atwater et al., 19991; Conn-Powers et al., 1990; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011; Villeneuve et al., 2013). Additional issues explored in the transition section of this paper highlighted parent concerns related to administration, community resources, lack of options, etc., that all exacerbated this already stressful time for parents, especially those of children with exceptionalities (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004; Janus et al., 2008; Kraft-Sayer & Pianta, 2000; Wolery, 1999). These reasons highlight the necessity of this study and exploring parents' perspectives on all areas of their child's transition in order to better understand the best practices for this process.

2.3 Summary

Early childhood programming, (e.g., daycare, intervention services, pre-school) is an important step in preparation for formal schooling (Government of Saskatchewan, 2015). Unfortunately parents often report that they do not experience the desired level of cohesion between the two services, and that the transition out of early childhood programs and into kindergarten or grade one can be difficult (Atwater et al., 1991; Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004; Johnson, 2003). While there has been increased interest in researching early childhood education and creating programs or facilitators to assist with the transition to kindergarten or grade one, currently much of the research is based out of

the U.S. and not in Canada (Rous, Myers, & Stricklin, 2007). Furthermore, a smaller body of literature exists on children with exceptionalities transitioning to formal education (e.g. Knapp, Madden & Marcu, 2009; McIntyre et al., 2010; Podvey, Hinojosa, & Koenig, 2010). Parents of children with exceptionalities in particular have reported numerous concerns (i.e., behaviour problems, kindergarten readiness, academics, following directions, getting along with peers), stresses (i.e., lack of high quality individualized transition practices, lack of information, poor communication), and needs (i.e., emotional support from school/family, future kindergarten placement, academic expectations, child's skills, how preschool prepared for transition) related to transitions, planning, professional collaboration, and the lack of organization during the transition process (McIntyre et al., 2007; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011; Villeneuve et al., 2013). Parents have reported barriers to effective transitions such as: feeling overwhelmed with responsibility, lack of established channels of communication, not receive enough information prior to the school year, lack of individualized interventions, and lack of support (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004; Johnson, Chandler, Kerns & Fowler, 1986; Kraft-Sayer & Pianata, 2000). Some theories that have examined factors related to child transitions include: the Socio-Cultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1988), Brofenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Systems Theory (Pacquette & Ryan, 2000), Contextual Systems Model (Pianta & Walsh, 1996), and the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). The literature, theories, and research on transitions to formal education have highlighted the many difficulties faced by parents and the multifaceted range of obstacles, delays, and stresses involved in individualized and efficient transition planning.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

The present study explored parents' perceptions of current transition practices from early childhood settings to formal schooling (e.g., kindergarten, grade one) for their children with exceptionalities using a basic qualitative research design. Qualitative research and strategies are used to gather data and seek objective analyses of subjective information and meanings (Ponterotto, 2002). Qualitative methods are based on the theory that reality is socially constructed, and that human variables are complex and difficult to measure (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992). Additionally, qualitative methods work from the assumption that the lived experiences of participants should be described in their own words rather than researchers attempting to categorize and quantify their experiences using pre-established quantitative scales (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). Qualitative approaches emanate from numerous disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, history, literature, and psychology and utilize a great variety of methods (Ponterotto, 2002). This type of research seeks to contextualize and interpret subjective experiences and information and places value on increasing human knowledge (Johnson, 2010).

Qualitative researchers serve as the data collection instrument in order to gain the desired insight and understanding to answer the *why* question (Ponterotto, 2002). Most often the researcher is directly involved with the participants or environment of the study itself. In doing this, the researcher suspends their pre-existing worldview to learn the worldview of others and therefore becomes a learner of sorts in the process. The researcher is a co-investigator, rather than as the expert scientist, and attempts to distribute power instead of holding it (Ponterotto, 2002).

The strengths of qualitative research include, generating rich detailed accounts of emotions, beliefs, and behaviors and gaining an in-depth analyses of complex experiences that can't be fully captured through measurement scales (Castro, Kellison, Boyd & Kopak, 2010). Qualitative research utilizes the narrative mode of an individual sharing their story and bridges it with the researcher's ability to understand, interpret, and analyze the meanings within it (Rogers, 2000). This process is important as it contributes to the continued understanding of human development (Rogers, 2000). Research could more critically portray the factors that shape the human experience (class, race, gender, ability) through a deepened and more accurate understanding of human development (Kidder & Fine, 1997). Finally, qualitative research has the capacity to conceptualize complex phenomenon in depth with only a few cases (Ponterotto, 2002; Rogers, 2000; Sofaer, 1999).

3.2 Basic Qualitative Research

Basic qualitative research works under the assumption that individuals socially construct meaning for their experiences based on their unique interactions in the world (Merriam, 2002). Qualitative researchers can use a variety of approaches (designs) such as interpretive, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnographic, narrative, or case study to learn how individuals experience and interact with their world in a particular context and point in time (Merriam, 2002). Basic qualitative research involves methods such as

field participation, field or clinical observation, case studies, or interviews using specific questioning types (e.g. open-ended, closed-ended (Johnson, 2010). Interviews can be conducted in either a structured, semi-structured, or unstructured format. Structured interviews involve the same questions asked in the same order, without elaboration or explanation. Unstructured interviews involve the same questions being asked but a more conversational tone with the freedom to elaborate and ask follow-up questions (Johnson, 2010). Semi-structured interviews are defined as conversations that involved a planned direction and an idea of what topics need to be explored (Fylan, 2005). Based on the researcher's perspective, a method is selected with the objective of developing a pattern, perspective, or narrative (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative research designs can be with individuals or groups and can come in many forms such as a biographical study, case study, ethnographic (e.g. longer term investigation of a group or culture), narrative (e.g. information gathering through interviews and storytelling), or using ground theory to continually interpret raw data (Creswell, 2003). In qualitative research the inquirer (researcher) can act as an observer, participant, or interviewer (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

The present study employed a basic interpretive qualitative research design to explore the perceptions of parents of children with exceptionalities transitioning from the community to formal school environments. Unlike other approaches to qualitative research, an interpretative design is not founded in a particular theoretical foundation (e.g. grounded theory) and doesn't actively seek to understand a particular phenomenon (e.g. phenomenology). This approach is used when a researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon. Basic interpretative qualitative designs hold a few basic characteristics. First, this design type seeks to gain an understanding of participants' specific experiences (Merriam, 2002). This perspective aligns with the social constructionist approach that prescribes to the idea that the view of the participant is most significant as they interpret and construct meaning for their subjective experiences. Next, this design often utilizes the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. The current study employed the student-researcher as interviewer to co-construct and understand the meanings, themes, and core aspects of the participants' experiences. Another characteristic of interpretive research is that it is inductive and seeks explanations for concepts, themes and patterns that emerge from the data. Finally, the results of an interpretative design study are purely descriptive and provide a rich, detailed account of the participants' experiences and use previous literature and applicable theories or models to help frame the information gathered.

In the current study, the researcher acted in the role of interviewer and co-investigator to explore the participants' assumptions, experiences, and meanings constructed from the world in order to better understand the experience of school transitions for children with exceptionalities (Creswell, 2003). Interviewing was selected as the method of qualitative research because it allowed for gathering in-depth information about a research question from the participants (Johnson, 2010). While the interviews were a longer process they allowed the researcher to go deeper into the participants' beliefs, attitudes, inner experiences, and perspectives (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). For this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to ensure that all the

participants were asked the same questions but still allowed for a more conversational tone and the freedom to elaborate and ask follow-up questions (Johnson, 2010). Semi-structured interviews were selected as they assisted the researcher with answering the question of *why* versus the question of *how many* which is more often explored in quantitative work. Semi-structured interviews also allow for opportunity to explore sensitive topics in a more empathetic and appropriate format. Finally, semi-structured interviews were also selected because they are adaptable and allowed the student researcher to follow up with the participants, clarify questions, and re-word or explain things in a different way, which helped acquire the information needed to create a more complete picture from the information gathered in relation to the topics in the study (Fylan, 2005).

Specifically, the research question explored in this study was:

1. What do parents' perceive as important factors facilitating, and existing barriers to, efficient and supportive community to school transitions for children with exceptionalities (i.e., requiring specialized educational support and related services to realize their full potential)*?*

3.3 Participant Recruitment and Selection

Upon University of Saskatchewan Ethics Board Approval (Behavioural Research Ethics # 15-291), purposeful sampling was used to recruit four parents/guardians whose children had either transitioned into kindergarten within the past 12-18 months, or were in the beginning stages of transitioning into kindergarten in the fall (2016). Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information- rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). This type of sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Although there are several different purposeful sampling strategies, criterion sampling or identifying and selecting participants or cases that meet predetermined criterion was used in this study (Palinkas et al., 2015). The following inclusionary criteria was used to determine whether participants were qualified to participant in the study: (1) age: participant's child was between the age of 4 and 6 years old; (2) the participant's child had transitioned to school in the past 12 months; (3) the participant's child had one or more language, learning or developmental issue of any severity; and/or (4) the participant child had a condition related to impairment in personal, social, or academic functioning (e.g. Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Motor Disorders). Participants were recruited from a large urban area in Saskatchewan through flyers posted in family oriented community agencies (e.g., Early Childhood Intervention Programs, Counselling Services, Public Health Services), preschools, early childhood intervention service organizations, an online bulletin website of a post-secondary institution, and in schools in both public and catholic school divisions (see Appendix A).

Seven participants responded to the call to participate in the research but only four parents met the inclusionary criteria were selected to participate in the interviews. Specifically, three parents had children who were too young to meet the age criteria for the study and therefore, more importantly had not yet experienced the process of

transitioning their children to formal education. However, an exception was made for one participant who did not meet all of the inclusionary criteria. Brigitte had a child (Nicholas) that met the age and condition criteria, but had not yet transitioned to school. Unlike the other three parents who were excluded from participating, Brigitte had already met with staff from her son's school and had started the planning process to ensure his needs would be met once he transitioned. Therefore, she was accepted as the fourth participant in this study.

Each participant made initial contact with the research either via telephone call or email as stated on the study invitation poster. All participants then received a secondary phone call from the researcher to: build initial rapport, confirm that the participant met the specified inclusionary criteria from the list of participant email screening questions (see Appendix B), and to either set or confirm the interview date and time.

Confidential telephone interview dates and times were arranged for the convenience of two of the participants. For these two participants, all of the forms were scanned and emailed or mailed to the participants so they could be read, sign, copy, and return them to the researcher prior to the date of the telephone interview. On the date of the telephone interview, each participant was asked if they had any questions or concerns regarding the signed documents prior to beginning the interview.

In person interviews were arranged for the remaining two participants. First, the consent form was reviewed with the participants (see Appendix C). The purpose of this form was to clearly indicate that participation was voluntary, that participants were free to only answer questions they were comfortable with, and could withdraw from the research study at any time without explanation or penalty. Next, the second consent form for the use of video/ audio taping technology was reviewed as it was mentioned in the primary consent form but included as a separate document (see Appendix D). This form was designed to ensure that participants understood that they had the right to refuse to be audio taped as well as that if they consented to being taped that all material would be secured, kept confidential, and used only for the intended purposes. Following this, an additional consent form for use of interview transcripts was discussed as it too was noted in the primary consent but included and utilized as a separate documents (see Appendix E). This document clearly indicated that participants may refuse to have their transcripts used, and that they may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time during the interview without explanation or penalty. Finally, the de-briefing form was reviewed to ensure the participants understood: the purpose of the study; how the information gathered would be utilized, stored, and eventually destroyed; and the services available (with contact information) if any negative repercussions related to the participation may arise (see Appendix F). Contact information for the student researcher was also included in the case that the participants had any questions or concerns or if they wished to know the results of the study. Finally, this form also reminded participants that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time during the interview or the follow-up meeting, which was optional and for the purposes of transcript review and the choice to release the transcript information. This instance however, did not occur. Once all forms were reviewed with the participants the interview began and all demographic

and interview questions followed from the interview script in a semi-structured format (see Appendix G).

3.4 Data Generation

      One interview session was held with each of the four participants. At the beginning of the interview, parent and child demographic data was obtained but was not digitally recorded to help ensure participant confidentiality. Participants were then asked a series of open-ended questions based on topics related to those explored in the Family Experiences and Involvement in Transition (FEIT) questionnaire (McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro, & Wildenger, 2007) regarding a variety of areas related their child's recent transition to kindergarten. For example, these questions explored parents' perceptions of the topics such as: early education/intervention (e.g., did your child attend an early childhood education program prior to kindergarten?), the transition to formal schooling (e.g., what were the primary issues for you/your child as he/she transitioned to kindergarten?), the planning process (e.g., did you have any contact with the school/teacher before the transition?), concerns/problems (e.g., what barriers did you encounter in your child's transition to school?), stresses (e.g., what could have been done to help you feel supported or encouraged?), and important factors to success (e.g., was there an interconnectedness of services, resources, people etc., involved in your child's transition?). The interviews ranged from approximately 42 to 50 minutes in duration. Two interviews were held in private meeting rooms at on the campus of a post-secondary institution that was agreed upon for both parties. In order to accommodate the busy schedules of two participants who lived at a distance from the student researcher, their interviews were scheduled at mutually agreeable times and conducted over the phone, in quiet rooms, with no opportunity for the phone conversation to be overheard or recorded. All interviews were digitally recorded. At the end of the interview participants were thanked for their participation. The two participants' who completed in-person interviews were given hard copies of the signed forms, documents, and recruitment poster. The two participants who completed telephone interviews were offered mailed or emailed copies of the signed forms, documents, and recruitment poster, at which time both participants' reported they had made copies prior to returning the documents to me. All participants were asked if they had any questions or concerns about the nature of the study or if they would require any assistance in attaining counselling services. Additionally, participants were offered a follow up meeting to allow them to add, change, or deleted portions of the transcript with which they did not feel comfortable. No participants desired a transcript review meeting and each participant then signed the transcript release form before leaving. At this time all participants were advised that all efforts would be made to protect identities in the final manuscript copy of the thesis. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and all personally identifying information was cleared or altered for the final manuscript. Participants were also advised that direct quotes may be used within the final manuscript, and that this may interfere with ensuring complete participant anonymity.

      Every effort was made by the researcher to ensure participants' confidentiality was protected by ensuring no identifying information was shared at any point in the process or afterwards without permission of the participant. Further, given that the topic

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of interest of the study was of a sensitive nature for participants, contact information of local counselling agencies, distress or crisis lines was provided in the event that a negative emotional or psychological reaction during or after the completion of the study occurs. All participants were provided with contact information for additional questions, concerns or information required from the researcher. Finally, participants were encouraged to contact the researcher if interested in the results of the study after its completion.

3.5 Data Analysis

The process of data analysis was completed throughout the data collection process. Thematic analyses were used to identify, organize, and report themes within the interview responses to provide a qualitative description of parents' perspectives on transitions related to stress and quality of life (Braun & Clark, 2006). Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative analytic method in the field of psychology (Braun & Clark, 2006). While qualitative methods are incredibly diverse and complex, thematic analysis should be considered a foundational method.

Thematic analysis was used as the foundation and guiding format throughout the analysis process of the current study. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic method used for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clark, 2006). "It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail and can be utilized to interpret various aspects of the research topic" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 79). Through a coding process, themes and patterns are identified and connected to the data in a meaningful way. A theme is defined as something that captures what is important about data in relation to the research question. By doing this it represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set. It is hypothesized that common themes will emerge across the participants' transcribed interview responses and will help to guide a deepened understanding of the transition process and specific, key areas in need of improvement as reported by the participants (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Unlike other methods of qualitative analyses (e.g., grounded theory, interpretive phenomenology analysis, narrative analysis, etc.) thematic analysis is not tied to pre-existing theoretical framework (Braun & Clark, 2006). The benefit of its lack of theoretical tie is that it is flexible and can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches.

In the current study, a six-step approach was followed in order to move through each of the phases involved with thematic analyses (Braun & Clark, 2006). The *first phase* is to become familiar with the data through transcription, re-reading, and noting key ideas. This phase consisted of listening to the audio recordings, transcribing the interviews, and then reading and re-reading the transcripts along with the audio recording to ensure accuracy of information and wording. At this time any repeated words, utterances or unnecessary filler words were removed from the transcripts, and all potentially identifying information was removed or altered with pseudonyms. The *second phase* is to generate initial codes across the entire data set and then collate data applicable to each code (Braun & Clark, 2006). Highlighting and creating codes (summary terms) from the information in the interview transcripts was completed to create semantic (obvious) codes stated by the participant. Additionally, analysis of personal, written notes

from the interviews helped create a latent codes that represented implied meanings, perceptions, and feelings communicated by the participants that emerged within the transcripts. The *third phase* is to search for themes by gathering and grouping the data relevant to each potential theme (Braun & Clark, 2006). The semantic and latent codes were grouped into a few broader categories that represented the main concepts of the codes. The *fourth phase* is to review the themes to determine if they connect with the coded information, and the entire data set in order to create a map of the analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). Using the new, broad categories of the codes a visual map was created and organized, themes and sub-themes were developed, and codes that were not deemed relevant to the themes were removed. Participant quotes were then selected and added to each theme in order to help represented and support the main ideas from the transcripts. The quotes were later narrowed down to only the most powerful and meaningful quotes to ensure they accurately represented not only the themes, but the participants themselves, and their experiences. The *fifth phase* is to then define, name and then refine the themes and overall information from the analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). This phase was an ongoing process of choosing clear and concise names for the final four themes and defining them according to the transcript information, research question, and overall meaning derived from each participant's experiences. Once the four themes were named, defined and finalized, each was connected to and woven into the four main layers of the Dynamic and Ecological Transition Model (Pianta & Walsh, (2000). Consideration was given to the fifth layer of the model (chronological layer of time) but was later deemed inappropriate and irrelevant to the data. The *sixth (final) phase* is to produce the report of the final, analyzed extracts and tie them to the research question and related literature (Braun & Clark, 2006). After reviewing chapter two, additional literature was added in order to link new ideas that emerged from the interviews. Finally, a process of writing, editing, and modifying the results section in chapter four was completed to ensure quality writing, clear communication of ideas, and an accurate depiction of the research and its participants (Braun & Clark, 2006).

3.6 Evaluation Criteria and Trustworthiness

There are five types of validity criteria to evaluate the credibility and trustworthiness of an action research study (Gall, Gall & Borg (2007). The five types include: outcome validity, process validity, democratic validity, catalytic validity, and dialogic validity. Two of the types, process and democratic validity, applied to the current study as they explore concepts such as: (a) how the research process (data collection, analysis, interpretation, etc.) guards against bias during the study; and (b) whether or not the multiple perspectives and interests of all involved are given consideration. Process validity regards the different phases of the research, including data collection, analyses, interpretation, and the use of multiple sources of information. In this study, care was taken to ensure the entire process was conducted in a way that conveyed respect to the parents and children involved in researching this sensitive topic. Accuracy and honesty were safeguarded in the informed consent and rapport-building process, and in keeping all confidential, personal information and records secured in locked office in which only the researchers can access. Next, democratic validity indicates the extent to which the research has been done collaboratively, and that multiple perspectives and interests are

considered. In this process, parents with varying experiences and perspectives responded to a short series of demographic questions, were interviewed, and given the opportunity to have a transcript review meeting, indicating multiple perspective involvement. In this study, the focus was on conveying respect, value, and importance for the parents' perspectives, and giving them the appropriate consideration for potential changes to be implemented to the current transition processes. During the interview process a few additional steps were taken to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the data and results. First, private meeting rooms were booked for both the in person and telephone interviews on the campus of a post-secondary institution. Second, participant consent for audio recording the interviews for later transcription purposes was attained. Third, remaining aware of the power differential between the interviewer and interviewee and attempting to build rapport with the participant was considered to ensure feelings of comfort and safety for the participant. Additionally, ensuring that the participants knew that they did have to answer questions they were not comfortable with and that they did not feel coerced to respond in a particular way was verbalized explicitly. Finally, the interview questionnaire itself was prepared and stated in a way that was not leading, value-laden, inappropriate, or in unclear terms.

The current study also demonstrated credibility, meaning the study accurately measured what it intended to and that the results reflected answers to the research question and purposes. Additionally, trustworthiness of the study was ensured by providing rich descriptions of the data, conducting the analyses using a well supported method of analysis (i.e., thematic analysis), and connecting the results to an appropriate and applicable theoretical foundation (i.e., Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transitions; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Finally, throughout the process the researcher was involved extensively with the participants to promote understanding of their experiences, perceptions and perspectives of the research topic (i.e., transitions to school for children with exceptionalities) and ensure that the results reflected only their stories and experiences.

In the current study, as student-researcher, I acted in the role of interviewer and co-investigator, rather than expert scientist (Ponterotto, 2002). In qualitative research, it is not possible to work objectively as a researcher, given the active role and prolonged engagement with participants (Gasson, 2004). Instead, the researcher can work alongside the participants to explore the meanings and patterns within their stories and experiences with the understanding that researcher biases are always present. While objectivity may not be attainable or desirable in qualitative research, ensuring a level of conformability in the results is important. As the researcher and interviewer I utilized my extensive experiences working with and supporting special populations of children and their families to provide a level of care, understanding, sensitivity and respect for the participants and their experiences. However, I ensured that none of my own expectations or biases was reflected in the results of the study. Conformability posits that findings, should, for the most part, reflect what is being researched (i.e., participants experiences) and not the biases, theories or beliefs of the researcher (Gasson, 2004). As a graduate student with both undergraduate and graduate level research methodology coursework, I was able to draw upon my knowledge base of how to effectively conduct interviews and

develop an appropriate interview script based on empirically support research. Finally, with practical counselling and therapeutic experiences working as a practicum student, I was able to establish rapport, develop relationships, and create meaningful dialogue with the participants prior to, during and after the interview process.

After reflecting on the completion of this study, I realized that results provided me with surprises, learning opportunities, and ways to inform my future practice. First, after completing the initial literature review, I realized I held the expectation that the participants were going to describe their experiences of transitioning their children to kindergarten and not grade one. I had not anticipated that all three parents' of children currently in grade one would report only minor difficulties transitioning to kindergarten and instead describe challenges of a much higher intensity and frequency when their child entered grade one. Furthermore, the challenges faced when transitioning their child to grade one were much more widespread in terms of the negative affect on the families home, social and school lives than I had imagined. Next, what I learned from this research and from the participants, is that while every parent and child interprets and brings meaning to their experiences in a unique and subjective way, that there were more commonalities and consistencies across participants than I initially predicted. From this, I realized that a potential opportunity for future research could be to examine whether or not these common experiences and themes exist across Saskatchewan and Canada or if they are a result of specific school division, school, or school staff practices currently being utilized for transitions. Going forward, this study provides professionals with practical information to use in schools, with parents, and with helping professionals in the community involved with this population. Personally, I also gained a deeper appreciation of parents and their experiences during school transitions and better understand how schools approach transitions for children with exceptionalities. This knowledge allows for me go forward as a more sensitive, understanding, and communicative professional supporting parents and families of children with exceptionalities. Additionally, this information encourages professionals to act as stronger advocates for parents and children when working with schools and promotes the establishment more effective and collaborative relationships with parents and related resources, thereby reducing the stress on parents to coordinate multi-disciplinary professionals.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

There were two primary ethical concerns within this study that were given consideration prior to and during the data collection phase of the study. First, and foremost, given that the study was on a topic of a sensitive nature (i.e. children with exceptionalities) and children in general, who are considered a vulnerable population, attention sensitivity was paid. A vulnerable population is identified based on socio-economic status, geography, gender, age and disability status (Center for Disease Control, 2014). It was important to be mindful of the parents' needs and their emotional and psychological state during all aspects of the study (e.g. wording, descriptions, information consent, interview questions, rapport, etc.). Second and finally, thought was given to the manner and time frame in which to build rapport with the parents before and during the interview process. Interviewing can be a complex, emotional, and difficult task for parents so considering the interviewers qualifications was important. Each participant

was contacted over the phone and/or via email prior to the interview for rapport building along with setting the date, time and place of the interview. When researching a topic of a sensitive nature it was important that attention to confidentiality, respect, sensitivity was paid and that steps were taken to ensure that the participants had access to resources (e.g. counselling services) should any negative consequence arise during or after involvement in the study process.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter introduces the four individuals who participated in this study and presents their thoughts, perceptions, and experiences related to the transition to school for children with exceptionalities. Participants and their children were assigned pseudonyms in order to protect confidentiality. The quotes utilized from the participants' interviews were often edited to assist with participant confidentiality as well as to increase clarity or coherence of the statements. For example, individual names of people, groups, institutions or organizations mentioned by participants were altered or omitted, and repetitive words or statements (i.e., umm, so, you know, like) were removed. Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition (Dynamic Effects Model) was used a framework for generating themes from the information gathered from participants in relation to the research question.

4.1 Participants

Seven individuals responded to the call to participate for the study. However, the pre-determined inclusion criteria of the study resulted in three individuals being unable to participate (i.e., individuals' children had not yet entered kindergarten or were in process of transitioning to kindergarten). Therefore, four female, adult parents between 36 and 40 years of age who had varied backgrounds, ethnicities, levels of education, and occupations participated in this study. All four participants had one male child with exceptionalities. Three of the participants' children were currently in grade one and had transitioned to formal schooling the previous academic year (2014-2015), and one participant's child will be transitioning to formal schooling in the fall of 2016. The participants, and their children whose stories of transition they shared, included: Shannon and her son William, Angie and her son Ben, Tanya and her son Jacob, and Brigitte and her son Nicholas.

Shannon, who was 38 years of age, was the first participant to be interviewed. Shannon is the primary caregiver of her biological son William, who was six years of age and in grade one at the time of the interview. William was described as having: strong academic abilities (e.g., advanced written language and reading abilities for his age), sleep difficulties (e.g., trouble falling asleep, waking up many times throughout night), dysregulation of emotions (e.g., emotional outbursts or breakdowns), and moderate struggles managing sensory aspects of the classroom and home environment (e.g., difficulty focusing and regulating emotion in noisy, bright spaces). Shannon is married and has one other child. At the time of the interview Shannon was teaching post-secondary courses but had to drop down to part-time work due to the amount of time she was spending at her son's school dealing with a variety of issues. Shannon was interviewed in person in a private meeting room on the campus of a post-secondary institution.

The second participant to be interviewed was Angie, who was 38 years of age at the time of the interview. Angie is the primary caregiver of her biological son Ben, who was six years of age and in grade one at the time the interview. Ben was described as having moderate gross and fine motor difficulties (e.g., struggles sitting upright in desk, difficulty holding and gripping standard writing instruments, and issues with

manipulating small objects) as well as some emotional difficulties connected to his transition to school (e.g., angry outbursts, difficulty managing emotions). Angie is married and has one other child. At the time of the interview Angie was not employed outside the home. However, she stated that prior to the increased amount of issues and time spent at her son's school she had considered returning to work. Angie was interviewed in person in a private meeting room on the campus of a post-secondary institution.

Tanya, who was 36 years of age, was the third participant to be interviewed. Tanya is the primary caregiver of her biological son Jacob, who was six years of age and in grade one at the time of the interview. Jacob was described as having: academic difficulties (e.g., behind grade level in reading), issues with attention (e.g., unable to sustain attention and focus on in class assignments), communication/speech and language concerns (e.g., not progressing at developmental level verbally), overstimulation in the classroom (e.g., jumping around in classroom), and specific interests and behaviours (e.g., playing with, and fixated on, certain toys). Tanya is separated from her husband and has one other child. At the time of the interview Tanya was working full time outside the home. Tanya's interview was conducted over the telephone.

The fourth participant to be interviewed was Brigitte, who was 40 years of age at the time of the interview. Brigitte is the primary caregiver of her biological son Nicholas, who was four years of age and in pre-school at the time of the interview. Nicholas was described as having: advanced academic abilities (e.g., exceptional language and reading skills); weak fine motor skills (e.g., difficulty with artwork and manipulation of writing utensils), difficulty with transitions (e.g., difficulty entering or leaving new places), some communication/speech and language concerns (e.g., behind in certain areas of speech development for his age), and specific interests (e.g., fixated on certain activities and/or toys). Brigitte is married and has other children living both in and out of the home. At the time of the interview Brigitte was not employed outside the home but had worked as a teacher prior to choosing to stay at home. Brigitte's interview was conducted over the telephone. While Brigitte's son Nicholas met the age and condition criteria, he had not yet transitioned to school at the time of the interview. However, given that Brigitte had already begun the planning process with her son's school to help ensure the efficacy of the transition process it was evident that her data would benefit the research and add to rich, detailed descriptions of parent experiences. It was also determined, after completing the interview process, transcribing, and conducting thematic analyses with Brigitte's interview data that her experiences were consistent the data reported by the three other participants. Additionally, this data helped the study reach saturation with sufficient, detailed and rich descriptions of the parents' experiences, perceptions and perspectives on the transition to school for children with exceptionalities.

Participants were interviewed by the graduate student researcher to explore their experiences and perspectives related to the barriers and important factors involved in supporting successful transitions to school for children with exceptionalities. Participants' stories were reviewed in conjunction with Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transitions and revealed four major themes: (1) Same Parent, New Role: Processing Emotional Responses and Balancing Increased

Expectations During Transitions; (2) Unmet Needs, Ability to Thrive: Supporting Children with Exceptionalities; (3) New Relationships, Limited Resources: Navigating the Formal School Environment; and (4) Financial Burden, Emotional Toll: Transitioning From Early Childhood Settings to Formal School. All four participants discussed aspects of each of the four major themes. These themes are discussed and linked together using meaningful participant quotes.

4.2 Theme 1 Same Parent, New Role: Processing Emotional Responses and Balancing Increased Expectations During Transitions

The participants discussed the varying challenges they have faced during the transition process being the parent of a child with exceptionalities (i.e., stress, frustration, and isolation), and how these challenges have influenced and changed their lives (i.e., balancing life and work expectations, and changing their expectations and roles as parents).

Shannon, Angie and Tanya reported that they had each experienced emotional, psychological, financial, occupational and generalized stress and exhaustion from parenting a child with exceptionalities while navigating the transition process. First, Angie shared the emotional difficulties she experienced during the transition process: "I basically broke down in the school, I was like 'I don't know what to do' and I started crying." Similarly, Tanya described her emotional difficulties during her son's the transition process stating, "So I went home, sat down and when they [her children] went to bed, I sat down thinking about it and I cried a lot."

Angie also expressed how heavily the burden of parenting a child with exceptionalities weighs on her when she explained that she was not able "…to be 'me' all the time. It's just tiring, you know? Plus juggling all the other stuff. It would be really great if somebody could take over for a while." She went on to explain the difficulty of the transition process, declaring, "It's hard. It's tiring, it's a lot of back and forth to school, it's a lot of stress because I don't know what to do often about it…it has been really stressful and it has been really, just hard." Shannon recalled her stress dealing the entire transition process to kindergarten as "a little overwhelming."

Angie and Brigitte also shared their feelings of isolation in their journey of parenting a child with exceptionalities. Angie described how she felt alone and unsure of how to handle the many responsibilities of being a parent and transitioning a child with exceptionalities to school, sharing: "We are left in the dark…they've left everything up to us." However, despite the challenges of feeling isolated Angie felt things could be done to help connect parents of children with exceptionalities:

> …It would be really great it there was some sort of parent forum or something for discussing these things. Support groups! Yes, that would be great. It would be nice if you could talk to other parents about their similar situations.

These challenges influenced and changed the lives of the participants as they worked to figure out how to balance their life and work expectations, and change their expectations and roles as parents. Angie revealed the occupational struggles she dealt with during the transition process: "Well I've thought somewhat about going back to work but then I think 'I can't do it yet. Now my youngest son is also having issues too, like school issues, maybe because of his brother, I don't know." Similarly, Shannon

articulated her in challenges with job roles: "It was really difficult. I'd be called at work. I had to drop down to part time work so that I could accommodate having to go there [to the school] on afternoons here and there."

All of the participants described similar experiences related to the unexpected difficulties they encountered while their children transitioned to school. They revealed how having a child transition to school without the support, organization or ease they had anticipated has impacted them. Shannon experienced a change of outlook regarding education and what that would mean for her and her son, sharing: "So we kind of changed our attitude towards school to, this is not going to be the primary place where he learns things and skills, but it is going to be the place where he learns social life." Brigitte had to take on the extra burden of preparing her son for his transition to school, stating: "I take it upon myself to do his programming at home. I'm lucky enough to be able stay at home." Angie similarly felt that the experience of school was not what she had anticipated: "You know, [it's] like coming in blind. Why is my kid not anywhere near any of these other kids?" She also recounted the struggles she faced almost daily with her son when he transitioned to school:

> I remember when he started kindergarten, at the end of his day when he would come home for lunch, it was hard… that was a difficult time, he was very angry after school, very angry. There would be a lot of hitting, kicking his brother, yelling and screaming, mainly at the end of his day, so at lunchtime.

When asked what the cause of the emotional bursts was, Angie stated: "Nothing he could vocalize, just that he was always in a bad mood after school." Angie did however go on to describe how they managed that and how things improved over time:

> It's gotten a little better. There's still a little bit of on edge time, but he seems to have better control. We can now make it into the house. The first thing we do when he gets home from school is he watches TV... He gets a snack and he watches TV, because that's all he do…So now we just go straight to the TV and snack time and it works ok.

Shannon, Angie and Tanya shared how they experienced their roles as parents changing as they each encountered a lack of sufficient/effective communication and collaboration between external resources and the schools in supporting their child. First, Shannon felt her and her husband had to always take the lead in managing the school and her son's external supports: "We had to instigate all the communication." Similarly, Angie described her and her husband's experience communicating with the school, stating: "We are the communicators between things." Angie went on to add that she would have to raise concerns about her child numerous times before they were acknowledged by the professionals in her son's life: "I'm not the crazy parent who thinks that my kid is so special. Really other people think he's struggling too, really it's not that he's not trying, he really has issues." Tanya also felt that when she sought out professional help for her child she was not taken seriously or that she would not get the amount of support she required during and after the transition period, stating: "So even up until now, I want help, but I don't get help. I don't get the help that I need or the answers that I want." Tanya also expressed that it was unclear what types of help were available:

"So if I need something then I have to ask them, 'can you do this?' 'Can I get some help with this?"

These parents discussed the varying challenges they faced as parents of children with exceptionalities during the transition process (i.e., stress, frustration, and isolation). Further, the parents shared these challenges influenced and changed their lives (i.e., balancing life and work expectations, changed expectations and roles as parents in the school system). Often these parents felt if it were not for them, most of the communication between the home and school would not have occurred. In addition, if they needed anything to be done for their child they had to initiate and seek out the help on their own. However, aside from their personal struggles, the participants also described the needs and difficulties faced by their children during the transition.

4.3 Theme 2 Unmet Needs, Ability To Thrive: Supporting Children with Exceptionalities

The participants also discussed their perceptions of their child's experiences both at home and school, during and following the transition to formal schooling related to: the unmet need for both additional and more individualized supports and resources for children with exceptionalities when entering school, and how each parent manages their child's specific struggles and challenges as they transitioned to school and the impact those had on their ability to thrive in a new environment.

Shannon and Tanya both articulated the additional support, work, and resources children with exceptionalities require to transition to school successfully and manage daily life. Shannon explained that it took months of communicating with the school before she had convinced them that her child needed more supports than what they were providing, regardless of his academic achievement in the classroom:

> I think that by most of the way through the year the kindergarten teacher had recognized that he was a little bit different. Whereas before December she was like nope, no problems whatsoever, he's achieving everything fine. We had to kind of make her aware that the academic achievement is going to be very different from the social achievement.

Shannon also touched on the additional work she and her spouse had to do at home with their children to help ensure their relationship was not impacted by the uncontrollable factors associated with her son's exceptionality:

> We have the same kind of books and resources at home and we've started to help his sister understand why he is often mean or seems sad or angry. We've had to really nurture the relationship between him and his sister.

On the other hand, Tanya focused on the importance she placed on having a team supporting both children with exceptionalities and their families, sharing: "Yes, it's a team helping the child or helping the parents to cope or to help the child." She also felt transitions could be improved "…if they [the children transitioning] get more support."

Shannon, Angie, and Brigitte also highlighted the importance of educators considering each child's individual needs, and the needs of their families, during the transition process. For Shannon, her son struggles were with "…emotional issues, [and] separation anxiety. There was a lot of fear in making friends, social issues." Her son also experienced particular difficulty with the social aspects of school, reporting: "He would

always play with one or two friends. He had great difficulty if one of those two, his two best friends, weren't there." These difficulties often resulted in her son becoming the victim of bullying. "There was this one particular kid that, when he was in kindergarten picked on him that also picked on him in grade one and they're in the class together now." Initially, the school did not initially address the issue. However, eventually the school intervened and found new ways to address bullying in at such a young age by implementing a school wide bullying program. The school "… had a big celebration of on the anti-bullying day, and for the younger grades, the teachers were each given books and resources and age-appropriate material to prevent this."

For Angie, her son's greatest challenge was getting to school each day: "A few times he's refused, flat out refused to go into school and so I've had to coax and coax and drag and drag and spend half the day at school trying to encourage him to stay." Brigitte felt the upcoming transition itself would be her son's greatest challenge, since: "He has such a hard time with transitions that is his weakness." In addition to sharing personal and child-specific experiences, the participants also expressed their concerns directly related to the encounters they each had with the schools and the impact they had on the transition process.

4.4 Theme 3 New Relationships, Limited Resources: Navigating The Formal School Environment

Participants discussed their perceptions of the role that the school faculty and staff played in their child's transition, focusing on specific school factors they felt caused stress and difficulties for their child and families during and following the transition to formal schooling (e.g., lack of available resources, establishing new and effective channels of communication with school). The participants described their experience. Shannon, Brigitte, and Tanya all commented on how the perceptions and expectations they initially held for their child's educational experience changed in a negative way due to the problems they encountered during their child's transition to formal schooling. As parents of children with exceptionalities, the participants stated that school was something they anticipated would make their life and the life of their children easier to manage and provide them with extra supports, resources, and a sense of community. Unfortunately, their experiences were quite the opposite.

Shannon recalled her change in perception, stating: "Going to school was supposed to ease my burden a little, instead, it added…I felt like going to school, there was a lot of times where it would be just so much easier to home school him." She went to share, "There's kind of a culture when you go into the school and it feels like everyone is overworked and they don't have time for you. I wish it was more, warm." Similarly, Brigitte expressed that due to the amount of academic, social and emotional work she does with her son at home that she feels her child does is both home and school educated: "We homeschool at home but we still send our kids to school." For Brigitte it was not only the additional work she took on with her son but the lack of effort she felt the school was putting in that made things more stressful: "I just really would have liked them to put some effort into the transition." Finally, Tanya shared that her stress resulted from feeling disappointed and let down by her son's school, declaring: "Because school is really important for me…I felt sad at the same time and I didn't know what to think because I

didn't expect that we would have that problem." Tanya had always placed great value on education and felt the school was not fulfilling their responsibility to her son's needs when he began to fall behind: "I was thinking that they [school team] have seen a lot of kids so they would know what is ok and what is successful…they know what they are doing."

      Shannon, Angie, Tanya and Brigitte all commented on the perceived lack of resources that the schools were able to provide for their children. Each participant highlighted the specific supports their child needed but did not receive in addition their individual concerns related to child's school specifically. For example, Shannon stated that the only reason she was able to make adaptations in the school for her son was because she was concurrently utilizing external resources to support him: "We met with the teacher and our child psychologist to come up with a plan for making the classroom less stimulating." Shannon further commented the additional work she and her family did to provide the school with resources to make social interactions easier for her son:

> One of the things that's really helped in grade one is we provided the teacher
> with some books that she can read to the class about children with disorders and
> they're written for the age group so that members of the class can have more
> understanding with him and what he's going through…

Angie highlighted how difficult it was to transition her son from an interdisciplinary therapy-based early childhood program into the formal school environment. Like many parents she had anticipated a relatively smooth switch over from her son receiving therapies from an external resource to receiving them from the school team. She shared: "Because there is nothing. I was hoping that the school would just take over where his OT [Occupational Therapist] left off. But no. So we go, we pay [to see a private OT] once a week." Angie also spoke specifically about the forms of therapy that her son required but were not available to be provided by the school: "But I know that's in a dream world. If he had an OT, a school OT, that would be great. But it's not possible. It's public school and they can only provide so much." While Angie understood the limitations of schools, she noted the impact that these restrictions have on families, explaining:

> That would be ideal if he could have an OT at school who worked with him at
> school. But I mean, I understand they can't, so we pay to go to his OT and it's a
> hundred bucks a visit almost and we go every week.

      Tanya's first expressed that she felt let down by the school and was upset with the fact that although her child was in need of individualized care, it would not be provided to him: "What I expected before school started, even before kindergarten, is that if the child needs an EA [Educational Assistant] then he would get a one-on-one. But here it is something that is not possible." Tanya was also concerned there was a lack of specialized consideration given to children with exceptionalities even before the school year began: "…They sent an information package explaining, to get or to try to get the kids ready for kindergarten. And that was for kids, either for kids with disabilities or not, they sent the same package…" Brigitte also felt that her child's school lacked an individualized approach to supporting children with exceptionalities transitioning to school, stating: "There needs to be a specific transition process for special needs

students. There needs to be a list of goals and measureable outcomes-something that can be shown to parents."

Tanya was also concerned with the school's lack of understanding, knowledge, and experience supporting children with her son's disorder. She expressed she was frustrated because she expected the school staff to be experts working with her child. "Now for grade one, I can see that the teachers in general…don't really have a very big knowledge of his disorder…" Tanya went on to explain that even after her son had an established individualized education plan and goals the school did not actually have the resources to meet all of his needs. Tanya recounted how she had to apply funding to access external supports:

> They have an SLP [Speech Language Pathologist] and OT. But, they are not there all the time because they go school to school. But I think it would be of help if they had a psychologist. Even if the psychologist doesn't stay there permanently…

Brigitte viewed her child's school as an obstacle to the transition process since they lacked the resources to support her son's targeted goals, declaring: "Oh yes the school is a huge barrier. Their lack of resources, their lack of initiating and their lack of follow through." Brigitte felt the school was a barrier and lacking both initiation and follow through in transition planning due to the staff being overworked with students they were currently trying to support. At the time of interview, the pre-school her son was attending was a part of the school he would be transitioning to in the fall of 2016. Even though she has had contact and observed the functioning of the school, she felt she had to initiate all the groundwork for her son's transition: "I find that the school he's attending is overwhelmed with the special needs of their students and I feel that they were unlikely to initiate and follow through appropriately with the transition." Brigitte recounted that she had questions she presented to the school in preparation for her son's transitions, but had thus far gotten no response:

> I would really like to see, how it is decided who gets EA support. I would also like to know how it is decided how many students are in a classroom and how many students with special needs are in a classroom.

Finally, all four participants described communication issues as an area of concern related to their children's transition. Each parent felt there was either not enough communication with the school, the communication that did occur was not thorough, or the school would not follow through on what was communicated. For example, Shannon touched on the lack of sufficient and effective communication and lack of follow through, stating: "I would have liked to know the teacher and had a chance to meet with them before class started." Similarly, Angie commented she wanted to have communication with the school prior to her son beginning school: "I guess ideally, it would be great to talk to the teacher before school even starts." Angie further explained that a lack of communication before the school year begins leaves parents feeling unsure, unprepared, and nervous in anticipation, recalling it was "…like coming in blind." Shannon also took issue with the fact that when communication did occur between home and school, that often her perspective would not be given enough consideration. She felt her suggestions could have made the transition easier on her son:

We made formal requests for having the kids [her son and his best friend] put together, I think that would have helped his transition...Our concerns could have been taken more seriously. Our transition to grade one could have been eased.

Shannon also expressed her desire for more regular and in-depth communication about her son and his progress in school, noting, "If there was more regular feedback rather than two or three report cards a year that would be helpful. Which puts more work on the teacher and it's difficult, but it would be helpful."

Tanya's issue with school communication was not that it did not exist but that fact that it was unexpected and upsetting, sharing when she heard from the school: "…I was surprised cause that was something that I never knew, that we had that issue." Tanya had not anticipated her son would have any problems in grade one, since in kindergarten, "…he didn't really have any problems at that time." Tanya also had difficulty communicating with the school. She felt the school should have a better knowledge base of how to support students with exceptionalities and should not have needed to ask for help to solve a problem she did not know existed: "You know, I didn't even actually know at all until the teacher came one day and was telling me [about her son's struggles] and asking me what to do because it was like he couldn't do anything." Brigitte felt that the lines of communication were open with her son's school, but that they didn't follow through on issues that would arise in their discussions, recalling: "It's open, I can talk to them and tell them whatever I want, they just don't do anything about it. I think they're open but unresponsive."

Each parent highlighted the specific challenges of finding resources, developing new professional relationships, and managing communication and collaboration with the schools but these concerns were not limited to the educational setting. Each of the four participants further described these concerns in relation to external and community resources, professionals and services, and the additional task of interlinking these services with those in the school.

4.5 Theme 4 Financial Burdens, Emotional Toll: Transitioning From Early Childhood Settings to Formal School

The participants discussed the challenges of accessing, and benefits of securing, external resources and services for their children as they transitioned out of early childhood settings and into the school environment. The four parents highlighted both the positive and negative factors associated with utilizing resources outside of the school prior to, during, and following the transition. Some of the participants also commented on the unexpected financial burden they faced during this process and described the procedure of attaining funding for professional services. Finally, the participants also shared their perceptions of professional collaboration and the difficulties of building new relationships when leaving early childhood settings and entering formal schooling.

Shannon, Angie and Brigitte explored the financial aspects involved with supporting a child with exceptionalities. They each touched on the positive and negative factors associated with paying for private therapies. During the interview sessions there was also brief mentioning of the predicament that faces many parents who are not in a place financially to pay for private resources and the difficulties and setbacks their

children might encounter if they aren't receiving the services they need through school or public sources.

For Shannon, given that her family had access to benefits her experience was one that articulated in a more positive light: "I mean we're lucky that we have a benefits plan that pays for all the child psychology and the occupational therapy that he needs. We didn't have to wait." She explained that not having to spend unknown periods waiting for services really made the difference for her son's progress and growth. Unlike other families who she knew had to wait up to or over a year to receive the same services that she was able to have covered by her plan and begin immediately. She declared: "That [having benefits] was really a key, a key role for time, even just time, like the not having to wait the nine months or the 18 months for the services." Similarly Brigitte also highlighted how fortunate she felt that she and her husband were in the financial position to pay for private therapy for their son, stating: "And we're lucky enough that we're in the financial position to pay for private therapies." Finally, Angie expressed her frustration of having to pay out of pocket in order for her son to receive therapy in a timely manner. She reported: "Because there is nothing. I was hoping that the school would just take over where his OT left off. But no. So we go, we pay once a week."

Professional collaboration, or lack thereof, was one that appeared particularly troubling for Shannon, Angie, Tanya and Brigitte. They recounted how difficult it was to have to manage private resources, school resources, and public services as well as having to be the primary liaison and communicator between them all. Each of them noted the benefits that they expected would come from effective professional collaboration as well as the strengthened relationships they anticipated would develop from more functional and open professional communication.

Shannon offered her perspective on ways she felt that professional collaboration could be strengthened first at the government level creating a "trickle down" effect for other professionals and agencies. Shannon suggested:

> On a government level it might be nice if it wasn't an opt-in disability benefit kind of system, where the onus is all on the parents and the experts to fill out the forms to be qualified for it. But once a diagnosis was achieved, it should be more of an opt-out process. You've got a diagnosis, it's registered with the provincial and federal system, and then you get a benefit of some sort. Rather than having to do all the groundwork first. And then for those people who don't need the benefit, they could opt out.

She went on to declare if there was a change in the way that disabilities were understood and perceived at the government level, and then resulting change would follow on smaller levels between agencies, services, and companies involved in supporting these populations. For example, she suggested: "There could be communication between insurance agencies about what's being covered by insurance, where help is, and what's offered by the government."

Angie also described her experiences with the lack of collaboration between professionals that her son accesses:

> It would be really great if there could be more collaboration. I mean it's hard when we're doing private OT (occupational therapy) and physio (physical

therapy) in one place and then stuff with the school too. It's all kind of disjointed.

She further expressed that all she wanted for her child's professional services: "… just more communication would be nice." In addition, Tanya felt that one of the issues with professional collaboration is the lack of communication between each of the services that are supporting her child: "They [professional resources] don't actually work together because it's like they're not really communicating…" Tanya indicated, that as a parent of a child with exceptionalities, she expected professionals to work together to help make it easier for families manage the many services for their child(ren): "Because, if they were connected then everybody would be on the same page. Or they could help more." While she recognized the demand placed on professionals she went on to state: "I think it would be helpful if everybody is on top of everything. Which is not easy and maybe it's too much to ask because everybody is busy too."

Brigitte touched on the way she perceives the existing professional collaboration between childhood services: "It's wonky. It is an absolute mess." Trying to communicate between all of the resources was something she found difficult and commented on the need to find better ways for professionals to work together collaboratively and directly along with the families. She reported: "…it's a huge disconnect. I attempt at connecting it and I get shut down." However, she also highlighted the benefits that she perceived as possible if professionals were better able to communicate:

> If we're all connected we could all be working on the same thing and we could see real steps in development instead of these big gap. Goals would become sequential and they would also become intertwined with other's goals rather than being isolated and compartmentalized.

Later, Brigitte discussed how more efficient and effective professional collaboration could benefit her child specifically: "…It [professional collaboration] would do amazing things for him. I think his goals would definitely be achieved and surpassed or they would have a better chance of being achieved and surpassed."

Angie, Tanya and Brigitte each briefly revealed their experiences transitioning their child from an individualized, intervention-based early childhood program setting into the formal school setting. Issues such as feeling lost trying to navigate services, the lack of individualized care and attention provided for their children while between environments, and the additional support needed for children with exceptionalities and their families when leaving early childhood intervention programs were discussed. Angie's biggest concern was the lack of individualized services in the school system that starkly contrasted her child's previous program. She expressed: "The only kind of more frustrating part is that he doesn't get any sort of specialized support or anything."

The biggest issue for Tanya was the loss of services for her when he entered formal schooling and how surprised she was to find this out: "He went there [an early intervention program] before kindergarten for SLP and for OT. But once the kids are in kindergarten then they stop their care, they don't take care of them anymore once they're in kindergarten." She further explained that the school informed her that she had to find external services, apply for funding and get approved in order access services on her own if she wanted her son to continue receiving specialized supports. She reported:

No they [the school] can't provide therapy. But it's just a matter of time, a matter of me calling to find someone because we already have the funding for that. So it has been approved and I have the list of private SLP and private OT in Saskatoon. It's just that I need to call and ask and find out who is available…

Finally, Brigitte recalled that in her experience, the biggest challenge associated with moving from early childhood programs to school was the lack of community support and access to resources. As a teacher, she articulated what the schools are expected to do with regards to supporting children with exceptionalities and how as a parent, she now experienced the gaps that exist in a new way. She communicated that difficulty she experienced losing child and family the connections and supports when transitioning her so child into school. She shared that the as a parent of a child with exceptionalities, the thing she wanted most was: "Community support and resources definitely."

While each parent experienced unique challenges, stresses, and barriers, Shannon highlighted the difference she felt when she found about this research study: "It's a bit of a relief actually. I hope that the results from this project get out and help to inform the transitions for kids with exceptionalities that aren't so easy to see. It's a relief." She went on to state: "I'm happy that someone's looking into this. I think there are a lot of parents out there in isolation."

4.6 Summary

Each participant shared experiences and personal stories that exposed some of the barriers, important factors, successes, and challenges they have encountered during their child's transition to school. Their stories revealed four major themes: (1) Same Parent, New Role: Processing Emotional Responses and Balancing Increased Expectations During Transitions; (2) Unmet Needs, Ability to Thrive: Supporting Children with Exceptionalities; (3) New Relationships, Limited Resources: Navigating the Formal School Environment; and (4) Financial Burden, Emotional Toll: Transitioning From Early Childhood Settings to Formal School. The parents each recalled the ways in which they have navigated through the many challenges they have encountered during their child's transition to formal schooling, and have offered unique perspectives on ways to improve this transition to school for children with exceptionalities. The participants highlighted not only their personal challenges of developing new professional relationships, finding new resources, and balancing numerous professionals and a new school, but also the unique challenges faced by their children. The next and final chapter discusses this study's findings in relation to existing literature, the practical implications of the findings, strengths of the current study, and areas for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this basic interpretive qualitative study was to examine parent perceptions of barriers and important factors affecting the transition to school for their children with exceptionalities. Each participant described their experiences and the positive and negative factors that impacted their child's transition. Participants also described aspects of the transition process that they felt if changed, could be helpful for children with exceptionalities. This chapter reviews and summarizes the main findings of this study, and connects the findings to related research literature. Implications for educators, schools and related professionals, strengths of the current study, and directions for future research are also outlined.

5.1 Summary of Findings

The objective of this study was to explore the perceptions of parents of children with exceptionalities who had, or were about to, transition from early childhood intervention or community settings to formal schooling. The intent was to examine the barriers parents have encountered during this transition process as well factors that increased the likelihood of efficiency, effectiveness, and success of the transition. The study will help increase the knowledge base around transitions practices in Canada, and in particular the way in which transitions are accomplished for children with exceptionalities. The experiences of Shannon, Angie, Tanya, and Brigitte were captured with quotes and shared through this study. Each participant reflected on their experiences and expressed the ways in which they have previously, and are currently, managing the challenges, difficulties, and setbacks at home, school, and the community for their child with exceptionalities.

Parents discussed the varying challenges they have faced during the transition process being the parent of a child with exceptionalities (i.e., stress, frustration, and isolation), and how these challenges have influenced and changed their lives (i.e., balancing life and work expectations, and changing their expectations and roles as parents) in the first theme: Same Parent, New Role: Processing Emotional Responses and Balancing Increased Expectations During Transitions. This theme showcased Shannon, Angie, Tanya, and Brigitte's experiences and perceptions being the primary communicators and liaisons between the professionals involved in their child's life. Each of the participants described the variety of emotional, psychological, and financial challenges involved in transitioning children with exceptionalities to school. In particular, Shannon, Angie and Tanya highlighted emotional breakdowns and the sense of being overwhelmed and exhausted by the burden of their responsibilities. For example, recall that Shannon shared: "Going to school was supposed to ease my burden a little, instead, it added…I felt like going to school, there was a lot of times where it would be just so much easier to home school him." Shannon and Angie also discussed their inability to work full time or return to work outside the home based on their unexpectedly large role in their child's daily school life. The parents shared feeling unprepared, their desires for more communication with the school, and their frequent struggles dealing with the lack of resources available to help support their child entering the school environment. Feeling ignored and not being given consideration from the school was also a common

experience for the participants. Additionally, each participant felt that, if they had been acknowledged earlier on, issues could have been resolved or reduced. Finally, the experience of isolation affected each parent. The need for support groups, raised awareness about the difficulties of parenting a child with exceptionalities, and getting more recognition for the extra work each parent has to do to support the needs and goals of their child was discussed.

In the second theme, Unmet Needs, Ability To Thrive: Supporting Children with Exceptionalities, parents shared perceptions of their child's experiences both at home and school, during and following the transition to formal schooling related to. Their concerns specifically related to: the unmet need for both additional and individualized supports and resources for children with exceptionalities when entering school additionally how they managed their children's specific struggles and challenges as they transitioned to school, and the impact these struggles have had on their ability to thrive in a new environment. Shannon and Tanya elaborated on the fact that although their children have identified exceptionalities, they were not receiving adequate or frequent amounts of support. The two parents described their frustration as well as the additional work they had to do at home with their child to help ensure they were progressing. The two also discussed the importance of having a team working with the family to ensure that the child's needs and difficulties are being address appropriately. Shannon, Angie and Brigitte also shared the specific difficulties that their children encountered while transitioning. Some of the challenges included: emotional, social and academic issues as well as particular difficulties with eating at school, making friends and convincing their child to attend school each day.

Parents described their perceptions of the role that the school faculty and staff played in their child's transition in the third theme, New Relationships, Limited Resources: Navigating The Formal School Environment. The participants recounted specific school factors they felt caused stress and difficulties for both their child and family during and following the transition to formal schooling. Shannon, Tanya and Brigitte discussed their disappointment and frustration with the lack of available resources from the school as well as the perceived lack of effort and individualized planning on the behalf of the schools. The participants expressed the negative impact of feeling forced to find external or private resources in order for their children to receive services. The participants revealed their surprise when they discovered schools are not able to pick up where early childhood intervention programs leave off. Recall that Angie commented: "Because there is nothing. I was hoping that the school would just take over where his OT [Occupational Therapist] left off. But no. So we go, we pay [to see a private OT] once a week." Additionally, the participants reported school as unexpectedly stressful, added to their workload, and made daily life more difficult. Shannon and Brigitte explained that if it weren't for the social aspects of formal schooling, both considered home educating their children to avoid the additional stresses of formal schooling. Finally, the challenges of establishing new and effective channels of communication with the school were also discussed. The parents reported that school is often met with the anticipation that the child will receive what they need from their teachers and school staff and in some ways reduce the amount of direct responsibilities

the parent holds. However, all four participants experienced communication challenges while working with the schools. For example, Shannon and Angie stated how unprepared they felt sending their child to school with little to no communication with the school or teacher prior to the transition. The parents reported that with improved communication, clear roles and responsibilities, and attention to their requests the transition process could be more efficient and successful.

In the fourth and final theme, Financial Burdens, Emotional Toll: Transitioning From Early Childhood Settings to Formal School, parents outlined the challenges of accessing, and benefits of securing, external resources and services for their children as they transitioned out of early childhood settings and into the school environment. Shannon, Angie, and Brigitte discussed the benefits of being able to either pay for private therapies or have benefits that covered them, and the challenges they may have faced if they did not have the finances to access external supports for their children (e.g. extensive wait lists, regression of abilities, lack of resources). However, Tanya was able to share her experience of not having the financial means to pay for private therapy and the resulting process of seeking, applying for, and accessing funding and professionals. Angie, Tanya and Brigitte also highlighted how difficult it is to be the primary communicator between community professionals and school professionals. Disjointed professional collaboration and the direct impact it had on the participants' children was the primary concern reported. Brigitte and Tanya explained the likelihood of increased support, effective goal setting, and academic, personal, social and emotional success for their children if professional resources communicated and collaborated effectively.

5.2 Integration of Findings with Existing Literature

As expected, the findings of the current study were consistent with the existing body of literature on parents' roles and experiences during childhood transitions, transitions to school, and transitions for children with exceptionalities. The four major themes identified were in line with research focused on parent relationships with the school, navigating external resources, parental stress, concerns, and challenges/barriers as well as factors that increase the success of the transitions. The results of this research were also compatible with Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition (Dynamic Effects Model). The four major themes identified in the current study reflected the layers of ecological systems as defined by Brofenbrenner (1979) and the relationships and contexts in which the children, parents, school and external resources exist as described by Pianta and Walsh (1996).

The broadest layer of Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition, is the chronosystem that encompasses the dimension of time, which was not directly relevant or applicable to this research. The concept, as defined by Brofenbrenner (1979) was grouped into external aspects, such as timing of deaths, or internal aspects such as developmental changes the child experiences as they age, neither of which was related to the results. In the current study, the only consideration given to time as factor was in terms of how quickly parents were able access to resources, the amount of time spent planning and coordinating the transition and the child's difficulties noted over time as they transitioned into kindergarten and then grade one.

The next layer, the macrosystem, makes up social class, attitudes, beliefs, values, culture, customs, laws and policies that together have a cascading effect throughout the primary levels below it. Essentially these principles affect the structures, systems, programs, and perspectives on many larger issues, and ways in which a community functions. While not directly connected to any of the four major themes in particular, this layer has a more general connection to two of the major themes: *New Relationships, Limited Resources: Navigating The Formal School Environment*, and *Financial Burdens, Emotional Toll: Transitioning From Early Childhood Settings to Formal School*. Societal beliefs, values, and norms determine community resources and their purposes and operations. In the current study, each of the parents likely lived in the middle class range, and had the understanding that both schools and external resources should serve the purpose of supporting the child's goals and meeting their needs. However, this layer highlights the possibility that the priorities and values that a society places on certain populations or programs may not always align with those of individuals or families. This is exemplified in the lack of resources in schools, lack of funding for programs once the children reach school age, and lack of professional collaboration between specialized services due to the limited staff and magnified responsibilities.

The next layer, the exosystem, is a larger social system in which the child may or may not function directly. This layer connects directly to the major theme of *Financial Burdens, Emotional Toll: Transitioning From Early Childhood Settings to Formal School.* This layer includes all resources such health services, specialized care programs, the parents' workplace, community-based family resources and incorporates mass media influence. The concepts within this layer are consistent with the theme and sub themes of financial availability to pay for community or private resources and therapies, professional collaboration between services and the challenges of transitioning from early child intervention programs into the formal school environment.

The next layer, the mesosystem, provides the connection between the structures and individuals involved at this level with those at the microsystem level. This layer includes schools, faculty and staff, family members, churches, peers, daycares and neighborhoods. This layer directly relates to the major theme of *New Relationships, Limited Resources: Navigating The Formal School Environment*, and more broadly connects to the major theme of*, Same Parent, New Role: Processing Emotional Responses and Balancing Increased Expectations During Transitions*. This layer includes all interactions between the school, family and children, and merges with the sub-themes identified in the results. If the structures are not communicative and collaborative with the parent and child on the microsystem level then issues arise and flow between layers is altered.

The final and innermost layer, the microsystem, most importantly includes the parent and child. At this level the child and parent have direct contact and interactions with those in the mesosystem layer, which the results of the current study have proven to be essential to the child's success transition to school. This layers principles are consistent with two of major themes identified in this research: *Same Parent, New Role: Processing Emotional Responses and Balancing Increased Expectations During Transitions* and *Unmet Needs, Ability to Thrive: Supporting Children with*

Exceptionalities. As mentioned in chapter two, the influences on this level are bi-directional but most importantly, have the most immediate and direct impact on the child. When the child is experiencing challenges while transitioning or in school, it is essential that the parent is able to rely on the services and professionals at the mesosystem level to help manage them. In the current study, the four participants highlighted the heightened stress of parenting and transitioning a child with exceptionalities and additionally, having to act as the primary communicators between all services and people on both the meso and exosystem levels. Often, parents feel isolated with their child in the microsystem when their interactions and relationships with the supports in the mesosystem are not functioning effectively.

This theoretical model illustrates the importance of interactions between all of the layers and systems as well as the individual roles and responsibilities carried by the groups involved on each level. While the five specific layers and ecological perspective as developed by Brofenbrenner (1979) created the structural framework for the results of this study, it was the addition of the Contextual Systems concepts that established the importance of the interconnectedness and quality of the relationships involved that made this theory the appropriate choice. While the layers primarily related to the major themes of the study, it was the context in which they each existed and the meaning that each of the parents associated with their experiences that made it viable to use for this research.

5.2.1 Same Parent, New Role: Processing Emotional Responses and Balancing Increased Expectations During Transitions. The four participants in the current study reported stress, heightened emotionality and the feeling of being overwhelmed with responsibility as their child with exceptionalities transitioned to school. Consistent with recent literature, parents of children with exceptionalities often find the transition to school a stressful, overwhelming and emotional experience (Villeneuve et al., 2013). The parents in the current study also reported feeling unprepared and unsure of the extent to which their child would struggle in the new environment. Johnson, Chandler, Kerns and Fowler (1986) found that frequently, parents experience anxiety and stress when feeling unprepared for the transition, disconnected from the school and uncertain about their child's readiness to handle the new environment.

According to Atwater, Fowler, and Schwartz (1991) parents reported feeling as though they were losing or breaking ties with the resources they had from their child's pre-school or early intervention setting. Three of the four participants in the current study reported feeling as though they were "coming in blind" to the formal school setting after leaving the comfort and connectivity of the early childhood setting. Diamond, Spiegel-McGill, and Hanrahan (1988) also found that once children enter the school environment, not only do the parents feel they have fewer resources, but that they have fewer opportunities to be involved in supporting their children. In the current study, consistent with these findings, the four participants all experienced difficulty in establishing new resources in the school but conversely felt that they were much more involved with the school than they had anticipated and often in a negative or stressful context. According to Bohan-Baker and Little (2004) family involvement is one of the most important factors for effective transitions, but as Hemmeter and Schuster (1994) explained the involvement

must in the context of positive, respectful relationships between home and school. Another issue brought forward by McGill, and Hanrahan (1988) was that the school environment presents children with increased academic and social demands and that parents often do not feel equipped to manage them. This finding was also consistent with the participants' experiences in the current study. Finally, congruent with the results of the current study, the authors also stated that parents reported new and increased responsibilities at home, having to locate and access new services, and establish new relationships with the school personnel in a very small period of time.

Extensive research has demonstrated the benefits of incorporating family needs in the transition process, as well as having parents actively participate in the child's transition (Knapp, Madden & Marcu, 2009; Powell, Son, File & San Juan, 2010; Hamblin-Wilson & Thurman, 1990; Johnson, Chandler, Kerns & Fowler, 1986; McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese & DiGennaro & Wildenger, 2007; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011). Some benefits that parents and schools have reported include: reduced role and responsibility confusion, better communication, increased and effective strategies, reduced anxiety, better insight for parents, and better child adjustment to school. Unfortunately, in the current study, planned and purposeful parent-school collaboration was not a regular occurrence and while the four participants recognized the potential benefits that effective partnership could have, they did not always experience them. The parents acknowledged that if the schools had been more receptive to their suggestions, perspectives, and involvement earlier on in the process, that novel ideas and perspectives on transition practices and improvement and adaptations to transition polices or practices could have occurred. These positive changes are also supported by research conducted by McIntyre et al., (2007).

5.2.2 Unmet Needs, Ability to Thrive: Supporting Children with Exceptionalities. McIntyre et al., (2007), and Wildenger and McIntyre (2011) described a variety of parent reported concerns related to their child's transition to school. Consistent with this research, the four participants discussed concerns about their children's social behaviour, ability to adapt to the new school setting, child-specific problem behaviours, separation anxiety, eating habits, academic abilities, being able to comprehend and follow the rules and directions, and being accepted by, and getting along with peers. Furthermore, research conducted by McCubbins (2004) reported additional parental concerns that almost identically reflected those reported in the current study, which included: worries about possible conflicts with the school, the lack of individualized attention available for the child, and level of parental involvement in the child's academic activities.

5.2.3 New Relationships, Limited Resources: Navigating the Formal School Environment. In the current study, each of parents reported that there was no person or team assigned to facilitating transitions to school for children with or without exceptionalities. Without a specific person or group to work with, role confusion, ineffective and/or insufficient communication and frustration were often issues reported by parents. Fowler et al., (1988) suggested that having a designated transition coordinator would allow for parents to effectively identify the needs of their child, define their level of involvement in the transition process, and clarify the division of roles and

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responsibilities during the transition. While none of the parents specified that they desired a specific facilitator, they all identified experiencing issues that could be eliminated by utilizing a transition planner. Similarly, a study by Atwater et al., (1999) described a model for coordinating families and professionals during the transition process. The model outlined roles, parent-school activities, forms of communication, plans for identifying the child's goals, abilities and areas of weakness, goal development meetings and methods for monitoring and evaluating the success of the child's transition. Each of the four participants in the current study identified at least one of the above concepts as areas they felt needed improvement during their child's transition. Another factor acknowledged as an issue for parents was the lack of consensus on what the child's transition process should include, which was identified by Bohan-Baker and Little (2004) as one of the more important factors for a successful transition. Additionally, parents reported frustration with the lack of individualized planning to meet the needs of their child specifically, which was reported by Kraft-Sayer and Pianta (2000) who explained that transitions to school should not be viewed as a 'one-size fits all'' program. Conn-Powers, Ross-Allen, and Holburn (1990) re-iterated the value of individualized programs for children with exceptionalities and the benefits that come from plans being tailored to the specific strengths, needs, characteristics, family, and resources for each child.

5.2.4 Financial Burdens, Emotional Toll: Transitioning From Early Childhood Settings to Formal School. Villeneuve et al., (2013) indicated that parents repeatedly experience stress due to the complexity of managing a wide array of professionals and services. This task is often too complex for a single individual and the resulting consequences are lack of cohesion, communication, collaboration and cooperation between the various parties involved. Janus, Lefort, Cameron, and Kopenchanski (2014) reported similar and additional barriers. The authors reported that when multiple agencies are serving different purposes during the transition to school, problems related to confidentiality, lack of cohesiveness, miscommunications and delays in intervention could occur. In the current study the four participants described the challenges of professional collaboration and the need for better communication especially while the child transitions from early childhood intervention settings to school. In Saskatchewan, province-wide community resources are terminated for children with exceptionalities when they enter school. For two of the parents in this study, increased financial demands occurred, as they had to pay for private therapies not provided by the school or covered by their benefits plan.

5.3 Implications for Educators, Schools and Related Professionals

The results of this study provide insights that are three-fold: (1) parent perceptions of current transition practices in Saskatchewan for children with exceptionalities; (2) barriers and important factors to successful transitions to school; and (3) possible policy and programs changes that have the potential for improving school transition practices for children with and without exceptionalities. These insights create an opportunity for educators, schools, and helping professionals who work in communities and schools (e.g., psychologists, social workers, etc.) to better understand current transition practices, as well as how parents interpret and experience the process. Part of developing improved transition practices is first to understand why the current practices are not effective. The

results of this research allow for professionals, schools, and service providers in the community such as occupational therapists (OT's), speech and language pathologists (SLP's), childhood intervention services, and specialized care providers to begin to understand not only the academic challenges, but also emotional, psychological, and financial difficulties faced by children and families. This knowledge base creates a foundation for moving towards solutions for how to better support parents and families during the transition process in order to reduce parental stress, and improve existing transition practices. Additionally, the results of this study allow for parents of children with exceptionalities who are experiencing isolation in their difficulties to become more aware of how many other parents are also struggling and working to meet their child's social, emotional, and academic needs. By creating awareness parents can feel more connected to and supported in their journey to transition their children into formal school environments. Ideally, this research will instill a sense of hope for families who are also struggling to navigate the many components involved in the transition, knowing that they are not alone.

The comments made by the parents in the study help highlight the disconnect that exists between families, schools, and external resources. For educators and schools, the quotes and information shared by the participants brings awareness to how difficult the daily life of a parent of a child with exceptionalities can be. The relationship between school and home, while so essential to the success of the transition, cannot work effectively if the school staff does not understand the context and experiences of the family and child involved. Rimm-Kaufman and Cox (1999) described the importance of being engaged with families prior to, and during, the transition to effectively prepare the children and parents. The four major themes identified in this study illustrated the main areas of concerns for parent that need to be addressed: parental stress, difficulties and needs of the child, school-based concerns, and managing external resources. Next, in order for transitions to be efficient, schools and parents must define what meaning they associate with efficient transitions, and how they will be evaluated and measured. The results of this study demonstrated that parents want concrete, measureable, individualized, systematic, and collaborative planning that results in appropriate goals and supports for their children. It is important for both school teams and professionals (e.g., SLP's, OT's, Psychologists) and resources external to the school (e.g., pre-schools, early childhood programs, and intervention services) to put in the time and effort to planning the transitions, and to work cooperatively with parents to ensure accurate information, appropriate planning and attainable goals are set.

Another important consideration for schools as outlined in this study, is the difficulty faced by the child when transitioning to grade one. While McCubbins (2004) acknowledged that kindergarten is often the first step to formal education. Perez and Gauvain (2009) explained that grade one is a unique challenge in its own right. The grade one environment is more formalized, planned, and organized and children are expected to regulate themselves in a more advanced manner to meet the increased academic and behavioural expectations. Yeom (1996) described this transition as more formally marking the academic transition to school and the beginning of education. Three of the participants in the current study specified that the challenges of transitioning to grade one

were increased and more difficult to navigate than those in kindergarten. Recall that Tanya described her experience when her son transitioned to grade one: "I was surprised cause that was something that I never knew, that we had that issue." [In Kindergarten] "…He didn't really have any problems at that time." This was an unexpected but essential piece of information to gather from this research. Knowing this, schools and educators can better plan, prepare, and work alongside parents when transitioning children from kindergarten to grade one, and give increased attention to the ways in which the child will need to be supported to meet the additional expectations.

   Finally, based on the results of the current study there are specific implications for professionals and external resources (i.e., Psychologists, SLP's, OT's, early childhood intervention) to consider. From the research it was acknowledged that it is important for professionals to understand the impact that poor communication and collaboration between services has on families. It is a large responsibility for parents to have to organize information, coordinate programs, communicate ideas, and liaise between a variety of professionals. The transition from early childhood programs to school, or between school and external resources, should be a shared responsibility between both families and professionals. Existing literature demonstrates the importance of sharing the roles and responsibilities and utilizing active communication between home and resources (McIntyre et al., 2007, Rice & O'Brien, 1990; Rous, Hemmeter & Schuster, 1994; Rous, Schuster & Hemmeter, 1999). These researchers also emphasized that parent involvement and professional collaboration has been proven to be especially important as children move from early education programs to formal school environments.

5.4 Strengths of the Current Study

   The strengths of this study are four-fold: (1) the research topic is novel as it is the first of its kind to examine the transition to school for children with exceptionalities from the perspective of the parent; (2) the study helps begin to bridge a gap in Western Canadian research literature on children with exceptionalities transitioning to school; (3) the results highlight transition practices that if changed could improve the process and increase the likelihood of efficient (i.e., systematic, individualized, timely and collaborative), supportive (i.e., families participating as equal partners), and successful (e.g., less stressful, better organized, increased achievement of child's goals) transitions; and (4) the interview process in this study served as a platform for parents of children with exceptionalities to be valued and listened to, and additionally allows for both the participants in the study and other parents who may read the results of the study to be aware that they are not isolated in their challenges.

   First, conducting a study that examines a novel research area creates an opportunity for learning, growth, and development to occur in an area previously unexplored. While there is an extensive body of literature on transitions, childhood transitions, and transitions to school, there is only a small body that exists around transitions for children with exceptionalities (e.g., Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron, & Hughes, 2008; Kraft-Sayer & Pianta, 2000), and currently very little research that investigates the topic from the perspective of parents (e.g., Janus, et al., 2008; Wolery, 1999). The four participants who graciously shared their stories and experiences offered first-hand knowledge into the strengths and challenges of current transition practices.

Finally, given that parents are often experts on their children's needs, abilities, strengths and weaknesses, it made sense to go directly to the source when exploring what could be done improve transition practices for children and families.

Second, given that there is a large body of research dedicated to childhood transitions to school and transition programs conducted in the United States (e.g., Hemmeter & Schuster, 1994; National Educators Association, 1998; Parent Teacher Association & National Head Start Association, 1999; Schultz, Lopez, & Hochberg, 1995; Vaishnav, 2000), the current study adds to the relative paucity of research on the topic in Canada. The only way to understand, conceptualize, and improve transition practices in Canada is to study them in Canada. The current research sheds light on school transitions in Canada, and specifically in Saskatchewan. While the existing literature from other countries served to guide this research study (e.g., Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004; Byrd, Dyk, Perry, Stephens, & Rous, 1991; Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000), the findings of the current study help to build up Canada's body of research, and ideally create a greater push for improved transition practices.

The third strength of the study is that the results offer a variety of areas that could be improved upon by schools, professional resources, and both provincial and federal government agencies. The study aimed to not only explore what the parents experiences were during their child's transition to school, but also what the barriers and important factors are for successful transitions. The participants discussed broad barriers such as poor communication, lack of resources, lack of professional collaboration, high levels of stress and feeling overwhelmed with responsibilities. More specifically, the participants noted financial barriers, child-specific concerns in school (e.g., paying out of pocket for private therapies, applying for funding for services, child behavioural issues, social adjustments), the loss felt when their child moved out of an early childhood intervention program, and in some cases feeling isolated and alone in navigating the transition. These themes offer beginning points for schools, professionals, and early childhood and intervention programs to make changes targeted at improving transition policies and practice. On the other hand, the participants also highlighted the benefits they anticipated if: (1) professional collaboration between school teams, external professional services, pre-schools, and with the family and communication did occur; (2) benefit plans provided coverage for private therapies; and (3) if the home-school relationships were positive, open, and supportive. The themes found in this study suggest aspects of the process that should be continued and utilized in transitions as they increase the effectiveness, efficiency, and success.

Lastly, the fourth strength of the study is that the parents who had experienced numerous challenges, frustrations, and setbacks were given the chance to feel heard, valued, and understood. The interview sessions created an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their experiences in a setting that fostered respect, honesty, curiosity, and the freedom to share without judgment. The results of this study also serve as a platform that empowers, validates, and gives a voice to not only the parents who participated in the research, but to every parent living in isolation and struggling to manage their child's transition.

5.5 Directions for Future Research

The findings of the current study suggest four possible paths for future research on the topic of parent perspectives of the transition to school for children with exceptionalities. First, future researchers could be to attempt to duplicate the results. The current study provides initial information about parents' perceptions of transitions for children with exceptionalities. Therefore, additional studies both in the province and across Canada would help add to the body literature in the area.

Next, given that qualitative research is often based on self-report data, there is always the potential for a single perspective to be relied on too heavily, and other perceptions of the same event or experience not be included (Crewell, 2003). However, given the purpose of the current research study, it was essential to explore the real life experiences and perspectives of parents transitioning their children with exceptionalities to school. Therefore, the findings were based exclusively on the subjective lens that was inherently placed on each of the experiences provided by the individual participant. However, it is possible the events described by the participants could have been interpreted and described differently from perspectives of other individuals involved. Therefore, in the future, to build upon the results of this study, additional interviews with other individuals could be incorporated to explore different experiences of the same events and transitions. This could include spouses, teachers, school team, and related professionals (e.g., school counsellors, psychologists, OT's, SLP's) in community organizations involved during the transition. These interviews could allow for more in-depth information to be gathered regarding the transition process, provide additional information about each of their perspectives, allow for observation of any commonalities or disparities in their interpretation of the same experiences, and highlight the need for increased communication and collaboration between all individuals supporting the child.

Third, given that the study had initially expected to explore the strengths and challenges of transitioning a child with exceptionalities to kindergarten, it was not expected that the participants would report the transition to grade one as much more difficult. Considering this, the next potential direction for future research would be to examine the perspectives of parents when their child transitioned to kindergarten and grade one. Therefore, a possible offshoot of this could be to conduct research that compares and contrasts parent perceptions of the transition to kindergarten with parent perceptions of the transition to grade one. A study utilizing this perspective would allow for additional information to be gathered about kindergarten and grade one transitions as well as shed light on possible differences or similarities between the two.

The fourth and final future direction would be to allow for a greater time period dedicated to recruitment and participant selection. In the current study, recruitment proved to be challenging as this population is often busy, with limited time available to participate in non-essential activities. As previously mentioned, seven individuals contacted the student researcher with interest in the study, however three did not meet the study criteria. Having additional participants may have benefitted the study by providing the researcher with more information to utilize, additional barriers or important factors to consider, novel solutions to current challenges in the transition process, and/or additional data that is consistent with that shared by the four other participants. However, it was

determined that further recruitment would not be required as the transcribed data from the four interviews reflected saturation, meaning no new information or themes were observed (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Additionally, the information gathered with four participants was deemed satisfactory in order for the study to be replicated (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012; Walker, 2012), the themes were in depth and well supported by quotes, and therefore there was not a need to code further information (Guest et al., 2006). Finally, while one participant's (Brigitte) son (Nicholas) had not yet transitioned to school Brigitte had already initiated planning the upcoming transition process with the school. Again, following the interview and thematic analyses, it was decided that based on the amount of information and insights Brigitte contributed that aligned with the research, additional participants would not be required for the study. However, given that the she was sharing from a smaller and only initial collection of experiences, it is possible that if her son had already transitioned that she may have had more information, insights, novel ideas, barriers, important factors or experiences to disclose. Therefore, with additional time allotted for recruitment, it is possible that future studies would have a larger body of data to analyze with more opportunity for learning and understanding of this population and their perspectives on the transition to school.

5.6 Conclusion

The majority of previous research on childhood transitions has focused on typically developing children and/or from perspectives other than the parents (e.g., DeCicca & Smith, 2013; Johnson, 2010; Heydon & Wang, 2006; McCubbins, 2004). Only a limited amount of research has been conducted in Canada on childhood transitions with an even smaller proportion focused on children with exceptionalities, and very little from a parent perspective (e.g., Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron, & Hughes, 2008; Ziegler, 1985). The major contribution of this research was the insight it provided into the need to improve transition practices in Canada for the parents and children with exceptionalities. Awareness of the appropriate supports and strategies for the children and parents was an important factor contributing to the academic, social and emotional success of the children transitioning. Another finding from this study revealed that stress, exhaustion, and feelings of being overwhelmed had a significant impact on the lives of the parents. Furthermore, the lack of professional collaboration, available resources, and communication between external services, such as community intervention programs and related professionals (psychologists, OT's, SLP's) and the school also significantly affected the parents and children. The lack of individualized programming for the children was also reported to cause parents frustration.

As researcher, interviewer, and co-investigator I realized that the results of this study could help to inform both my own and other professionals future practice with families and schools. First, I was surprised at the intensity and frequencies of challenges faced by these children and their parents during the transition to grade one. The participants expressed that preparing for the transition to kindergarten and its difficulties was only one small aspect of the overall transition to formal school and that schools and external professional need to do a better job of preparing families for the transition to grade one. Next, while every parent and child interprets and brings meaning to the transition to school in a unique and subjective way, there are many commonalities and

consistencies between their experiences. This provides professionals with the opportunity to explore why that is and determine if those perspectives are consistent with parents or families they are working with and helps to better understand and support them. Third, this study practically informs school and community professionals by increasing the understanding the challenges faced by this population. Additionally, this understanding can inform their rapport and therapeutic relationship building abilities with families and allow them to be more sensitive, understanding, and communicative professionals supporting parents of children with exceptionalities. Finally, this information invites helping professionals to be advocates for parents and children when working with schools and assist with the establishment more effective and collaborative relationships with parents and related services.

Overall, despite the many challenges that the participants within the current study faced, they all reported instances in which they were able to move forward and pursue programming and accommodations to meet the needs of their child, adapt and adjust their plans and approaches when faced with setbacks, and still report positive experiences or benefits they would expect to accompany change being made to current transition practices. The participants identified barriers, important factors, areas in need of change, possible solutions and valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the current transition practices in Canada.

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PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR
RESEARCH IN:
*Parents' Perceptions of Transitions to School for their Children
with Exceptionalities*

I, Megan Adams Lebell, am a graduate student researcher in Educational Psychology and Special Education at the University of Saskatchewan. I am interested in children with exceptionalities or special needs, families, and the transition process to formal schooling (kindergarten). I am seeking volunteers to participate *in one, semi-structured interview and one follow up meeting.* Participation would take approximately **60 minutes** of your time each meeting and will be held at the University of Saskatchewan, Education Building or a community location at participant convenience.

In order to participate, the volunteer (parent) must have a child who:
  A) **Is between the age of 4 and 6 years old**
  B) **Has transitioned to school in the past 12 months**
  C) **Has one or more language, learning or developmental issue of any severity**
  D) **Or a condition related to impairment in personal, social, or academic functioning (e.g. Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Motor Disorders)**

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study,
please contact: **Megan Adams Lebell**
Graduate Student-Researcher
Master's of School and Counselling Psychology
at
maa275@mail.usask.ca

**This study has been reviewed and approved
by the Research Ethics Office, University of Saskatchewan.**

APPENDIX B
Participant Recruitment Screening Questions

A) Is your child or children between the age of four and six years old?

B) Has your transitioned to school (kindergarten) in the past 12 months?

C) Does your child have one or more language, learning or developmental issue of any severity related to:

- The acquisition, use or comprehension of language
- The use or comprehension of academic skills such as reading, writing, math/numbers or spelling

   Or:

Impairment in personal, social, or academic functioning (e.g. Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Motor Disorders)?

Consent Form

<u>Project Title:</u>
Parents' Perceptions of Important Factors and Barriers to School Transitions for Children with Exceptionalities

<u>Researchers:</u>
Megan Adams Lebell, Graduate Student, Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan, maa275@mail.usask.ca

<u>Supervisor:</u>
Dr. Laureen McIntyre, Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan, 306-966-5266

<u>Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:</u>
The primary purpose of this study is to explore parents' perceptions of their children with exceptionalities, who have transitioned from the community to formal school environments in the past 12 months. Secondly, it is to learn more about transition practices in Canada and to begin to explore potential areas for improvement.

<u>Procedure:</u>
Parents' of children with exceptionalities (who have met the studies inclusionary criteria) will answer questions in the form of a semi-structured interview. The interview will be conducted by the graduate studies researcher and supervised by faculty supervisor. At the beginning of the interview, demographic information will be collected for the parent and child for the purposes of better understanding the population being studied, exploring similarities and differences of participants and looking at potential sub-groups within the sample. At the end of the study, you will be provided a debriefing form. The interview/study should take approximately **60** minutes of your time and the follow up meeting (to review the transcript of your interview) will take approximately **30-60** minutes of your time. Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study, or your role, by e-mailing the researchers at the addresses listed above.

<u>Potential Risks:</u>
There are no known or anticipated physical, psychological, or social risks to you by participating in this research. However, due to the possibly sensitive nature of the topic/interview questions counseling services are available should you experience any emotional distress. If needed, please contact the 24 hour Saskatchewan Healthline at 1-877-800-0002 or Mental Health and Addiction Services at (306) 655-7777. At the completion of the study, you will be given a sheet that explains the study in more detail and you will be provided the opportunity to ask questions.

Confidentiality:
Your data will be kept completely confidential and no personally identifying information will be associated to your data. While anonymity is not possible with interviews, pseudonyms will be used in all documents so now information can identity you. All data will be summarized in a combined form.

Storage of Data:
Data and consent forms will be stored separately in a secure location at the University of Saskatchewan by the research supervisor. In instances where the data are published in an academic journal and/or presented at a professional conference, the data will be stored for a minimum of five years after completion of the study. When the data are no longer required, they will be destroyed beyond recovery.

Right to Withdraw:
Your participation is voluntary and you may answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the study for any reason, at any time during the study task or follow-up meeting without explanation or penalty. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time during the interview, including at the follow-up meeting to review the interview transcript.

If you choose to withdraw from study, you will be provided a debriefing form with information about the study and contact information, should you wish to contact the researchers. Any data that you have contributed up until your decision to withdraw will be destroyed beyond recovery.

Follow up:
To obtain results from the study, please use the contact information given to you on the debriefing form. The student-researcher would be more than happy to provide summarized results of the study to participants.

Video/Audio Taping:
A separate video/audio tape consent form has been provided to be read and signed by the participant and student-researcher regarding confidentiality of video or audio taping interviews.

Transcript Release:
A separate transcript release form will be provided to you at the follow up meeting to be read and signed by the participant and student-researcher regarding.

Questions or Concerns:
For any questions or concerns please contact the student-researcher by email: maa275@mail.usask.ca or the research supervisor, Dr. Laureen McIntyre, Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan, (306) 966-5266, laureen.mcintyre@usask.ca.

This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office: ethics.office@usask.ca , (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

Signed Consent

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided: I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

_____
(Name of Participant- Print)

_____   _____
(Signature of Participant)   *(Date)*

_____   _____
(Researcher Signature)   *(Date)*

APPENDIX D
Permission to Audio Record Form

I, _____, hereby give my consent for
(Name of Participant-Print)

_____, a Graduate Student in the
Master's of School and Counselling Psychology program at the University of
Saskatchewan to audiotape/videotape (circle one) this interview.
The contents of the tape will be kept confidential and my identity will not be disclosed
beyond what appears on the tape. I understand that the tape will be used to assist in the
teaching and learning of psychological skills and the continued exploration of the topic of
study, but will not be used for any other purpose. Specifically, I understand that the tape
may be viewed/heard by
- An experienced psychologist or faculty member who is providing supervision to
  me and other graduate students.
After the study/interview process is complete, I understand that the tape will be kept only
for the specific purposes that it is intended, locked securely with the University of
Saskatchewan, faculty supervisor and then destroyed/erased after five years.

_____   _____
(Signature of Participant)   (Date)

_____   _____
(Signature of Student-Researcher)   (Date)

APPENDIX E
Transcript Release Form

I,_____,
(Print name)
have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have
been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the
transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said
in my personal interview with *Student-Researcher, Megan Adams Lebell*. I hereby
authorize the release of this transcript to *Megan Adams Lebell* to be used in the manner
described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release
Form for my own records.

_____ _____
(Name of Participant-Print)   *(Date)*

_____ _____
(Signature of Participant)   *(Date)*

_____ _____
 (Signature of Student-Researcher)   *(Date)*

APPENDIX F
De-Briefing Form

Thank-you very much for your participation in this study! Your contribution and involvement in this research assists in the completion of my graduate, Master's thesis and provides me with the opportunity to increase my knowledge behavioral research methods as well as educational psychology.

The primary purpose of this study is to explore parents' perceptions of their children with exceptionalities, who have transitioned from the community to formal school environments in the past 12 months. Secondly, it is to learn more about transition practices in Canada and to begin to explore potential areas for improvement. It is hypothesized that common themes such as: stress, concern and frustration, smooth transitions, communication and family involvement, as well as coordination, collaboration, and earlier planning will emerge across the participants transcribed interview responses in this study. It is predicted that these themes will help to gain a deeper understanding of the transition process and lead to the identification of specific, key areas in need of improvement (as reported by the participants). Finally, this study has the potential to help develop the field of transitions, in particular for those with exceptionalities and their families. Knowing this, the results of this study could help to shape future steps taken in revising, improving and changing policies, procedures and the planning of transitions to school for children with exceptionalities.

The data will be used as the basis for a master's thesis in educational psychology to better understand how parents of children with exceptionalities perceive and experience the transition to school process. Your data will be kept completely confidential and no personally identifying information will be linked to your data. Normally, the data will be destroyed once the thesis has been completed. In instances where the data are published in an academic journal and/or presented at a professional conference, the data will be stored for a minimum of five years after completion of the study. When the data are no longer required, it will be destroyed beyond recovery.

Due to the possibly sensitive nature of the topic/interview questions, counselling services are available should you experience any emotional distress after the completion of the study. Please contact the 24 hour Saskatchewan Healthline at 1-877-800-0002 or Mental Health and Addiction Services at (306) 655-7777.

If you have any concerns or questions about this research, please feel free to contact the student-researcher, Megan Adams Lebell, by email: maa275@mail.usask.ca. Alternatively, you may also contact the supervisor, Dr. Laureen McIntyre, by email: laureen.mcintyre@usask.ca, or phone (306) 966-5266.

You are also encouraged to contact the researchers for a copy of the results which should be available by October, 2016. Any questions regarding your rights as a

participant may be addressed to the Behavioral Research Ethics board through the Research Ethics Office at ethics.office@usask.ca, or by calling (306) 966-2975. Thank you again for helping us with this research.

Thank you again for your participation in this study! ☺

Student Researcher:
Megan Adams Lebell

Faculty Supervisor:
Dr. Laureen McInyre

Demographic Information
Child
    1) Child's name: _____

    2) Child's school: _____

    3) Child's date of birth: _____ Age: _____

    4) Child's gender
- Male
- Female

    5) What is your child's race/ethnic background?
- Caucasian
- African American
- Hispanic: _____
- Asian:_____
- First Nations:_____
- Metis:_____
- Mixed: _____
- Other: _____

    6) Is English the primary language spoken in your child's home?
- No
- Yes

Demographic Information
Parent
7) Are you primary caregiver?
- No
- Yes
-

8) How long has this child been in your custodial care?
- Less than 6 months
- 6-12 months
- 1-2 years
- 2 + years
- Most of child's life (all but a few months)
- All of child's life
- Child is not in my custodial care
-> Who/where does your child currently live?
- With other family (specify):_____
- Foster Home:_____
- Other (specify):_____

9) What is your gender?
- Male
- Female
- Unspecified

10) What is your relationship to your child?
- Biological Parent
- Step Parent
- Adoptive Parent
- Other relative
- Legal guardian
- Other (specify) _____

11) What is your age? _____

12) What is your race/ethnic background?
- Caucasian:_____
- African American:_____
- Hispanic: _____
- Asian:_____
- First Nations:_____
- Metis_____
- Mixed: _____
- Other: _____

13 What is your marital status?
- Married or living with partner
- Separated
- Divorced
- Single
- Other _____

14) Are you employed?
- No
- Yes; Part-Time
- Yes; Full-Time

15) Do you have any other children?
- No
- Yes
- If yes, where do they live?_____

Early Education Information

16) Did your child attend an early education program prior to kindergarten?
- No
- Yes
- Don't Know

17) What type of educational program was your child enrolled in last year?
- Nursery school
- Daycare (Center-based)
- Daycare (Home-based)
- Special Education Preschool (specify):

_____
- Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K or Pre-School) in a school
- Other: _____

18) In what ways (if any) was your child prepared formally for kindergarten /formal schooling?

Specialized Needs Information:

19) Does your child currently receive special needs related services (e.g., speech therapy, occupational therapy)?
- No
- Yes
- Don't Know

20) Does your child currently receive special education as part of an Individualized Education Plan (aka: IEP PPP, IPP)?
- No
- Yes
- Don't Know

Transition Information: Semi-Structured Interview Script

21) When did your child transition to formal schooling/kindergarten?

22) What were the primary issues for you/your child as he/she transitioned to kindergarten?

23) Are these above issues still a problem?
- In what way?

24) What were your academic, behavioural or social concerns for your child as they transitioned to school? (e.g., readiness, comprehension)

25) How did you deal with or navigate those concerns or worries?

- Did someone or a group/resource help or support you?

26) What barriers did you encounter in your child's transition to school?
- How did you deal or cope with those?
- How did you navigate the barriers?
- Were you able to overcome them? How?

27) Did you receive any information about your child's school prior to the transition?
(e.g., teacher, classroom, expectations, transition plan)

28) What information would you have liked before the transition?

29) Did you have any contact with the school/teacher before the transition?
- If yes, when?
- How many times?
- In what context?
- What was the contact like?

30) What contact would you have liked with your child's teacher or school prior to the transition?

31) Were there any specific transition meetings or information that you attended or received before your child started school?
- If yes, what occurred at the meetings?
- If yes, what information did you receive?

32) Does your child's school have a specific transition team?
- If yes, who was involved?
- If yes, what did the team do?
- If yes, were you involved in the team meetings? In what way?

33) Did you feel supported in your child's transition to school? (e.g., emotionally, practically, encouraged)

34) What could have been to help you feel supported, prepared, encouraged, etc.?

35) Were there family supports that you used or access while going through the transition with your child?
- In what way?
- What was the impact of having or not having those supports?
36) Were there any supports from your community or external resources that you used or accessed while going through the transition with your child?
- In what way?

- What was the impact of having or not having those supports?

37) Was there an interconnectedness/collaboration of services, resources, people, etc., involved in your child's transition? (e.g., did the service providers you and your child were involved with work together and collaborate to facilitate the transition)
- What was the impact of that interconnectedness or collaboration? (e.g., on you, your child, navigating barriers, stress etc.)
- Did the collaboration or shared responsibility change over time? If so, how?
- What could have an interconnectedness of services and people done for your child's transition?

38) Is there anything else you would like to add that you feel might be important to share?