

**TRANSITION FROM PRESCHOOL TO KINDERGARTEN: A PERSPECTIVE FOR
CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER**

by

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Abstract

Entry into kindergarten is a critical developmental time for children and research consistently demonstrates the need for specific practices to facilitate this transition (Pianta, 2007; Schulting, Malone, & Kenneth, 2005). Although successful transition into kindergarten is a consideration for students in general education, students with special education needs, such as students with autism spectrum disorder, may require additional transition planning (Beamish, Bryer, & Klieve, 2014; Forest, Horner, Lewis-Palmer, & Todd, 2004; Villeneuve et al., 2013). More empirical evidence is needed to draw conclusions about the types of transition practices that best facilitate this developmental period for children with autism spectrum disorder. The purpose of the current study was to add to this literature base by providing empirical evidence of kindergarten transition practices for children with autism spectrum disorder. Data were collected from a sample of 24 parents on concerns about child behaviour, implementation of transition practices, perceived importance of transition practices, and barriers to implementing transition practices. Descriptive statistics were utilized to determine the mean level of child behaviour concerns, transition practices, and barriers to implementation. Dependent *t*-tests were performed to evaluate differences between the implementation and perceived importance of transition practices. Results from the survey indicated that parents have a number of behavioural concerns as their child enters kindergarten. Levels of implementation and perceived importance of kindergarten transition activities varied, but parents rated significantly higher levels of perceived importance compared to implementation for 26 of the 28 transition activities. Results are discussed with regard to previous research, study limitations and strengths, and implications for future practice and research.

Preface

The graduate student, under the supervision of the research supervisor, conducted the present study. The research supervisor assisted in study design, obtaining approval for use of survey items, and participant recruitment. The graduate student also participated in study design and participant recruitment, and was primarily responsible for the analysis of results and writing of the present study. This thesis is therefore representative of the graduate student's work as co-investigator and lead author. The UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board granted approval to conduct the present study (certificate number H12-02567).

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to all the devoted and courageous parents who have a child with autism spectrum disorder.

Chapter 1: Introduction

School Readiness and Kindergarten Transition

The concepts of school readiness and kindergarten transition have become increasingly relevant in the childhood development literature. Recent research indicates that although practitioners, teachers, and parents acknowledge the importance of successful transitions into formal schooling, little empirical evidence on this topic actually exists (Schulting, Malone, & Kenneth, 2005). Barnett and Taylor (2009) state that entry into kindergarten is a critical developmental time for children, and achievement and behavioural competencies are established in these early school years.

Barnett and Taylor (2009) define school readiness as having two main dimensions: a child “being ready to learn” and “being ready to operate successfully in the school environment” (p. 141). The recognition of the importance of school readiness has led to an increase in pre-kindergarten programs that are designed to prepare children for formal schooling and teach skills that will extend into elementary school years (Pianta, 2007). However, academic, behavioural, and social skills are not the only elements necessary for a successful transition into kindergarten. This transition may be more reliant on the network of individuals responsible for a child and how well those individuals communicate about the child’s needs (Beamish, Bryer, & Klieve, 2014; LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer, & Pianta, 2008). School readiness should therefore be described within an ecological framework, in which readiness is dependent upon child, family, peer, classroom, school, and community factors (Barnett & Taylor, 2009; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Schulting et al., 2005). Furthermore, all entities involved in a child’s transition to kindergarten should work in an interconnected and collective fashion as this period may require

the most collaboration of any point in a child's education (Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, Rimm-Kaufman, Gercke, & Higgins, 2001; Schulting et al., 2005).

Researchers now typically agree that not only is a child's environmental context a key consideration in kindergarten transition, but also that the transition process does not look the same for all children. In other words, Pianta et al. (2001) state that a one-size-fits-all transition preparation cannot inherently satisfy the needs of diverse families. Future research therefore needs to focus on the types of transition practices that families perceive as most important, as well as most effective.

Autism Spectrum Disorder and Kindergarten Transition

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a pervasive developmental disorder that is characterized by challenges in social interactions, challenges with communication, and repetitive or stereotyped interests and behaviours. In addition to kindergarten transitions for children in general education, research indicates an increasing need for transition planning for children with special needs. In particular, children with ASD, who sometimes have challenges with transitions or changes in routine, may be in need of additional supports during the kindergarten transition period (Beamish et al., 2014; Forest, Horner, Lewis-Palmer, & Todd, 2004; Villeneuve et al., 2013).

Key Terms Used in the Current Study

Autism spectrum disorder. ASD is pervasive developmental disorder characterized by challenges in social communication and repetitive or stereotyped interests and behaviours (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This description is consistent with the diagnostic criteria for ASD used in British Columbia (BC), where the present study was completed.

Kindergarten. The first year of formal education in an elementary school is typically referred to as kindergarten. Under the BC Ministry of Education (MOE), to begin kindergarten, children must be five years old by December 1st of the year they enter school. Kindergarten in the present study follows the ages set forth by the BC MOE.

Parent. A parent is the primary, adult caregiver of a child. This individual assumes the majority of responsibility for the child. Individuals in a parenting role may include biological parents, grandparents, stepparents, adoptive parents, and foster parents. For the purposes of the present study, parent refers to mothers, fathers, or grandmothers, as these individuals comprised the final sample of participants.

Transition. Transition refers to the time period in which children leave preschool and enter kindergarten (Pianta, 2007). In the present study, transition refers to the time period of up to one year prior to kindergarten entry (i.e., up to 12 months of preschool) through to one full school year of kindergarten (i.e., up to 10 months after kindergarten entry).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The construct of kindergarten transition has evolved from a child-centred model to an ecological model, with more focus on the impact of a child's environment on his or her school outcomes (Pianta & Cox, 1999; Schulting et al., 2005). Children's physical environment (e.g., classroom), social environment (e.g., peer groups), and adult expectations can change drastically when they enter kindergarten. These factors, along with elements of the child's broader context (e.g., culture, community, and family) all interrelate to define this milestone of transition to kindergarten. These changes occur rapidly, which also distinguishes this transition experience for children and families (Pianta & Cox, 1999). Many types of kindergarten transition practices that are meant to support this environmental shift are documented in the literature. Some consensus exists regarding which practices are more commonplace, as well as which practices are perceived as more or less important. However, more empirical evidence is necessary to draw conclusions about how to best facilitate children's transition to kindergarten.

Elements of Kindergarten Transition

Pianta, Cox, Taylor, and Early (1999) spearheaded much research on kindergarten transition; they conducted a national study with data collection from approximately 3600 kindergarten teachers to determine which transition practices were perceived as important. Their results indicated that kindergarten teachers speaking with a parent after the school day was the most common transition practice, followed by letters home to parents, school open houses, and flyers as the next common transition practices. Home visits, phone calls to parents and children, and visiting preschools before the start of kindergarten were the least employed transition practices. Results from their survey also indicated that most transition practices typically occur after the kindergarten school year begins and involve more superficial activities like open houses

and flyers. Their data provided a foundation for the concept of kindergarten transition and the types of supports that may or may not be available.

Recent research generally echoes the results found by Pianta and colleagues (1999), but also reports more personal transition practices. For example, preschool students visiting their kindergarten classroom prior to the start of the school year, preschool teachers visiting the receiving kindergarten classrooms, individual parent meetings about kindergarten transition, sharing children's preschool records with the elementary school, and contact with the kindergarten teacher about children and curriculum may occur on an individual basis (Beamish et al., 2014; Early, Pianta, & Cox, 1999; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, Reed, & Wildenger, 2007).

Barriers to Effective Kindergarten Transition

Despite the lack of clear consensus on which transition practices best foster child development and learning, researchers generally agree that many barriers to successful kindergarten transition exist. One major barrier is the lack of clearly defined transition goals within educational settings (Hamre & Pianta, 2007). Other barriers include a lack of time for adequate transition planning (Quintero & McIntyre, 2010), difficulty arranging collaboration between schools (Quintero & McIntyre, 2010), limited resources available during the summer months (La Paro, Kraft-Sayre, & Pianta, 2003), and a lack of a formally developed a transition plan (Pianta et al., 1999). Furthermore, many kindergarten transitions end up employing a generic approach with little contact with individual children and families (La Paro et al., 2003; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Quintero & McIntyre, 2010).

Individuals Involved in Kindergarten Transition

The transition process should be multidisciplinary. Fowler, Schwartz, and Atwater (1991) note that service providers in the sending and receiving school programs greatly contribute to either the difficulty or the ease of the kindergarten transition. In addition, clear communication between all parties (e.g., between parents and preschools, parents and kindergarten teachers, and preschools and kindergarten teachers) is key to providing a solid foundation on which successful school transition may take place (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Villeneuve et al., 2013).

Role of the family. Parental involvement and advocacy in children's schooling is related to more positive school attitudes and greater academic success (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 1999; Starr, Martini, & Kuo, 2014). Increased parental involvement in the kindergarten transition process may help buffer the stress of the transition period and may provide opportunities for parents to learn strategies to facilitate the transition process (Fowler et al., 1991). However, the extent of parental involvement may be dependent on the sending and receiving schools' ability to implement transition activities.

Role of the preschool and elementary school. Different individuals typically take on different roles and Quintero and McIntyre (2010), in their study of 95 children, found that preschool teachers tend to be more involved in the transition process than other professionals. Similarly, Pianta et al. (2001), in their three-year longitudinal study of 110 children and 41 preschool and kindergarten teachers, found that 20 percent of kindergarten teachers visited a child's preschool classroom as a transition activity, while 90 percent of preschool teachers visited a child's kindergarten classroom. Pianta et al. (2001) also found that only 20 percent of kindergarten teachers were able to conduct a meeting about kindergarten curriculum prior to kindergarten entry.

The relationship between parents and preschool teachers is often more successful and more positive than the relationships between parents and kindergarten teachers (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 1999). Communication may drop off when the child enters kindergarten and families often experience less involvement and less communication with their child's teacher (Quintero & McIntyre, 2010; Villeneuve et al., 2013). Similarly, Quintero and McIntyre found that preschool teachers typically report the importance of transition activities such as meeting the kindergarten teacher, conducting classroom visits, creating a collaborative transition team, and participating in transition programs; however, very few of these practices take place. Beamish et al. (2014) discovered that kindergarten teachers expressed concern over limited resources for employing kindergarten transition practices and stated that their tendency was to use more classwide transition supports that apply to all students. Similarly, Starr et al. (2014) found that kindergarten teachers generally expressed a desire to be more involved in the transition process, but were hindered by administrative matters. Building the relationship between preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers may therefore be an important goal to ensure the success of children transitioning into kindergarten (Pianta et al., 2001).

Autism Spectrum Disorder and Kindergarten Transition

Autism spectrum disorder. ASD is a pervasive developmental disorder. Symptoms of ASD include challenges in social communication, such as decreased eye contact and difficulty understanding facial expressions and social gestures, difficulty initiating or maintaining conversation, and use of repetitive language or language idiosyncrasies. A second characteristic of ASD is repetitive or stereotyped interests and behaviours, such as preoccupation with specific and unusual topics, inflexibility in routines and rituals, and repetitive use of motor mannerisms (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

(CDC, 2014) estimated a prevalence rate of ASD as one in 68 individuals. However, the CDC noted that prevalence rates vary across location, sex, and ethnicity. Concerns may arise during kindergarten if a child with ASD has difficulties in language and social domains, which likely limit the child's ability to engage in social interactions and academic learning (Forest et al., 2004). Denkyirah and Agbeke (2010) note that children with ASD fare much better with academic demands when they have received proper services during preschool.

Elements of kindergarten transition for students with ASD. While individualized transition practices are considered necessary for children with typical development, children with special education needs may require additional transition planning. Forest et al. state, "the goal of transition planning is to maximize the likelihood that the potentially stressful and difficult shift from preschool to kindergarten can occur successfully" (2004, p. 103). To determine the specific transition practices that may benefit children with ASD, Forest and colleagues conducted a longitudinal study of three families with children with ASD who were transitioning into kindergarten. Overall, their data suggested a high level of perceived importance for the child's relevant services being coordinated, assurance that the child develops school readiness skills before entering kindergarten, having materials (e.g., daily schedules) prepared, and the identification of a transition team (Forest, et al., 2004). However, although certain transition activities were perceived as important, few of these practices were rated as actually implemented. While Forest and colleagues' study provided promising data for discerning transition practices for children with ASD, the single subject design does not allow for generalization or larger implications.

To add to this growing body of research, Denkyirah and Agbeke (2010) built upon the Forest and colleagues' (2004) study and further investigated the kindergarten transition elements

that preschool teachers perceived as important and as implemented. By recruiting 388 preschool teacher participants, the authors found that the following elements were perceived as necessary: timing for kindergarten transition planning and preparation (e.g., at least six months prior to the transition); assisting families in finding resources; collaboration and information sharing with families; and conducting home visits. Although this larger-scale study allowed for more generalization, data were not collected from parents. Beamish et al. (2014) also added to the work of Forest et al. and Denkyirah and Agbeke by surveying 91 teachers on transition practices; they obtained similar findings. Namely, teachers indicated high levels of perceived importance for almost all transition practices. However, similar to Denkyirah and Agbeke, data were only collected from educators and not parents.

Behavioural concerns during kindergarten transition. Families of children with special needs report more concerns regarding their child's kindergarten transition, compared to families with typically developing children (McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, Reed, & Wildenger, 2010; Villeneuve et al., 2013). McIntyre et al. (2010) conducted a survey (developed by McIntyre et al., 2007) of parents of 132 children (29 children in special education and 103 children in general education) that were about to transition into kindergarten. The survey measured family experiences and involvement in kindergarten transition, as well as overall level of concern about the transition process. Survey results indicated that families of children with special needs are commonly concerned about their child's school readiness, ability to follow directions, ability to communicate needs, and academic and behavioural competence. The authors stated that additional studies on kindergarten transition for students with special needs are essential, given that parents of these children have expressed more concern about transition preparation compared to parents of children in general education.

Barriers to effective kindergarten transition for children with ASD. Similar to the common barriers to kindergarten transition for typically developing children, challenges with administration, lack of time, and lack of collaboration are often perceived as barriers to the transition process; however, a lack of communication between service providers, and therefore the continuity of intervention practices, are more salient barriers for children with special needs (Janus, Lefort, Cameron, & Kopechanski, 2007; Starr et al., 2014).

Individuals involved in kindergarten transition practices for children with ASD. Coordination between service providers may be especially relevant for children receiving special education given their more complex needs. Communication between all parties involved in a child's transition becomes imperative (Forest et al., 2004).

Role and needs of the family. Siklos and Kerns (2006) conducted a survey with 56 parents of children with ASD to examine perceived family needs. The authors found that families reported needing to be informed about their child's ASD symptoms, to be informed and involved in the child's educational services, to have a professional available for consult, and to have an Individual Education Plan for the child. Because parents often report a lack of clear communication with their child's elementary school, as well as little knowledge about their child's school transition process, they may be required to take on the role of their child's advocate to ensure that proper services are in place (Janus et al., 2007; Starr et al., 2014). However, Siklos and Kerns note that their study reflected only a small population of families in BC. The authors suggest that future studies should aim to include a larger, more diverse sample to determine the appropriate representation of families in BC.

Starr et al. (2014) specifically addressed kindergarten transition for children with ASD from ethnically diverse families. The researchers conducted focus groups with 11 families and 24

educators (early childhood and kindergarten) and found similar results to and Siklos and Kerns (2006), such as being informed about educational decisions and consulting with a multidisciplinary team. Starr and colleagues also found that parents expressed concern about building positive relationships with elementary school staff, as they reported decreased communication in both frequency and quality. Parents indicated they felt they were their child's only advocates.

Role of the preschool and elementary school. A difference in preschool settings versus elementary school settings commonly exists. Janus et al. (2007) reported that preschools tend to emphasize the improvement of children's adaptive skills, social skills, as well as his or her unique needs; however, kindergarten classrooms are accountable for specific academic and curricular goals. Similarly, children with special needs can become attached to their preschool staff, as well as their preschool routine, which may contribute to a more challenging kindergarten transition (Fowler et al., 1991; Vaughn, Reiss, Rothlein, & Hughes, 1999). Although Vaughn et al. (1999) discuss this notion within a general context of special needs, leaving preschool staff and routines could be particularly challenging for children with ASD.

Teachers interviewed by Starr et al. (2014) expressed the need to be included in relationship building with families. They noted that kindergarten teachers are often excluded from transition preparations prior to kindergarten entry as administration typically fulfills this role. Moreover, teachers expressed the need for more knowledge about ASD and training in teaching strategies for this population.

Significance of effective kindergarten transitions for children with ASD. A successful transition to kindergarten is important for all children, but may be particularly important for children with ASD. Forest et al. (2004) note that children with ASD are especially

vulnerable during the transition from preschool to kindergarten given the linguistic, social, and behavioural challenges these children often face. The new academic, social, and physical environment of the kindergarten setting may quickly become overwhelming for a child with ASD, and their learned skills from preschool may not generalize to the new setting (Forest et al., 2004; Villeneuve et al., 2013). In addition, because many children with ASD are involved in early intervention programs at home or at preschool, attention must be paid to keeping those intervention standards in place when the child enters formal schooling (Forest et al., 2004). However, current research suggests that parents of children with ASD are generally dissatisfied with their child's special education services (Bitterman, Daley, Misra, Carlson, & Markowitz, 2008; Siklos and Kerns, 2006; Starr et al., 2014; Villeneuve et al., 2013).

Purpose of Current Study

Given the cognitive, academic, social, and communication challenges that children with ASD often experience, effective strategies for a successful transition into formal schooling are crucial (Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010). However, current kindergarten transition supports may not be based on best practices (Beamish et al., 2014; Starr et al., 2014; Villeneuve et al., 2013). Little research has examined kindergarten transitions for children with ASD, and a growing interest in the special education of these children leads to a need for empirical investigations on such practices (Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Janus, et al., 2007; Quintero & McIntyre, 2011). Because research often focuses on children who are in general education, McIntyre et al. (2010) argue, “given that children with disabilities may be at risk for difficult kindergarten entries, there is a need for additional studies to examine the impact of transition preparation interventions on kindergarten outcomes for students with special education needs” (p. 262).

The purpose of the current study was to add to this literature base by providing additional empirical evidence of kindergarten transition practices for children with ASD. Research indicates a large gap in school systems' understanding and implementation of the practices necessary for effective kindergarten transition for children with ASD into formal schooling. In addition, parents of children with ASD have consistently reported a desire for more information and supports around this significant transitional period (Janus et al., 2007; Siklos & Kerns, 2006).

The following research questions guided the present study:

1. What kindergarten transition practices do parents of children with ASD perceive as being implemented as their child transitions into kindergarten?
2. What kindergarten transition practices do parents of children with ASD perceive as most important to a successful transition to formal schooling?
3. What are the differences in what kindergarten transition practices parents perceive as being implemented compared to what practices parent perceive as important?

Chapter 3: Method

Overview

The current study was conducted over 11 months. Parents of children with ASD were recruited and surveyed their on concerns about their child, perceived implementation and importance of various kindergarten transition practices, perceived barriers to kindergarten transition planning, and family background information.

Procedure

Study Approval. The UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board granted approval for data collection for the current study in June, 2013.

Recruitment. Parents were recruited over 11 months from July, 2013 to June, 2014. Seventy-eight different community agencies, private agencies, school districts, and professional contacts that provide services to children and families with ASD in the Lower Mainland of BC were contacted via telephone or email. All service providers were initially contacted via email and then via telephone for those that did not respond (21 service providers). The service providers were asked to verbally communicate with potential participants, distribute a flyer or detailed letter with consent (see Appendix B), or post an announcement in their newsletter if applicable. The study flyer and letter described the current study, stated the investigators' contact information, and provided the link to the online surveys. Agencies were not asked to provide names of parents to the investigators. Parents were also recruited in person at three different events hosted by Autism Community Training in Vancouver and Richmond, BC. Finally, the study flyer was used for a Facebook and Craigslist ad. Overall, seventeen parents were recruited through the various means discussed and seven parents were recruited directly from the GABA Integrated Preschool and Kindergarten Program in Vancouver, BC.

The researchers originally intended to recruit two different samples (one preschool cohort and one kindergarten cohort) based on the child's age and grade. However, recruitment challenges (e.g., lack of response from agencies, agencies declining to participate, agencies not providing services to the specific demographic, and job action in the public school districts) over the 11 month period of data collection hindered the original research design. Too few responses in each cohort were collected to allow the researchers to meaningfully analyze data in two separate groups. After consultation with the supervisory committee, a decision was made to combine participants into the one sample presented in this final study.

Survey Completion. Parents were asked to complete four surveys (Concerns Scale, Families of Children with ASD Kindergarten Transition Experiences, Barriers to Kindergarten Transition Practices Checklist, and Background Information). Parents were given the option of completing the surveys online or receiving a paper copy of the materials if they preferred. Sixteen parents completed the surveys electronically and eight completed a paper copy. If the family included two parents, both were invited to participate in the study (e.g., both mother and father). Parents were given the opportunity to enter a draw for a \$100 Visa Gift Card to encourage participation. They were asked to provide basic contact information if they wanted to be entered in the prize draw or to participate again once their child had begun kindergarten. The surveys took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Participants

Twenty parents of children diagnosed with ASD that transitioned into kindergarten in September, 2013 or were transitioning into kindergarten in September, 2014 participated in the current study. Four of the parents completed the survey before their child entered kindergarten and then again after their child entered kindergarten, resulting in a total sample size of 24 data

points. The criteria for participation was a diagnosis of ASD, kindergarten entry in September, 2013 or 2014, English speaking parents, and parental consent. Diagnosis of ASD was based on parental report of a formal diagnosis made by a psychologist or physician. Parents of children of all levels of functioning on the autism spectrum were eligible for participation in the current study.

All participants reported on their child who was between the age of four years, zero months and six years, 11 months. The majority of respondents were females between the ages of 30 and 45. Most of children reported on were Asian males with English as a first language. The make up of child demographics varies somewhat from the most current report of children with ASD in BC, where approximately 20 percent of the BC population identify as Asian, approximately 75 percent identify as Caucasian, and less than one percent identify as Black (Statistics Canada, 2008). However, the native language of individuals in BC is similar to the child demographics in the current study, with approximately 71 percent speaking English as a primary language and three percent speaking Cantonese (Statistics Canada, 2008). Table 3.1 presents detailed demographic characteristics of the children reported on. Table 3.2 (see page 17) presents the detailed demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 3.1

Child Demographic Information

Characteristic	<i>N</i>	%
Child Age		
4:0 – 4:11	7	29.2
5:0 – 5:11	12	50
6:0 – 6:11	3	12.5
No Response	2	8.3

Characteristic	<i>N</i>	%
Child Sex		
Male	19	79.2
Female	3	12.5
No Response	2	8.3
Child Ethnic Background		
Asian	12	50
Caucasian	6	25
Black	3	12.5
No Response	3	12.5
Child's First Language		
English	16	66.7
Cantonese	3	12.5
Other	4	16.7
No Response	1	4.2

Table 3.2

Parent Demographic Information

Characteristic	<i>N</i>	%
Respondent		
Mother	21	87.5
Father	1	4.2
Grandparent	1	4.2
No Response	1	4.2
Parent Age		
30 – 34	5	20.8
35 – 39	10	41.6
40 – 49	7	29.2
No Response	2	8.3

Characteristic	<i>N</i>	%
Parent Employment Status		
Full Time	7	29.2
Part Time	4	16.7
No Response	13	54.2
Parent Level of Schooling		
High School Diploma or Less	1	4.17
Some Post-Secondary	4	16.7
College Diploma/Certificate or Trade School	7	29.2
Bachelor's Degree	7	29.2
Post Baccalaureate Diploma or Graduate Degree	3	12.5
No Response	2	8.3
Income		
\$20000 to 29999	4	16.7
\$30000 to 39999	0	0
\$40000 to 59999	3	12.5
\$60000+	7	29.2
No Response	10	41.7
Number of Children Under 19 Living in the Home		
1	7	29.2
2	11	45.8
3+	3	12.5
No Response	3	12.5
Number of Adults Living in the Home		
1	2	8.3
2	16	66.7
3+	3	12.5
No Response	3	12.5

Measures

Concerns Scale. The Concerns Scale was adapted with permission from the Family Experiences and Involvement in Transition Survey (McIntyre et al., 2007). The items were designed to assess parents' areas of concern as their child entered kindergarten. Parents reported concerns about child characteristics, skills, and functioning. Participants indicated their response on a 6-point Likert scale, which ranged from no concerns to many concerns. Psychometric properties of the Concerns Scale were investigated as a component of the current study. A Cronbach's Alpha value of .84 was obtained on the Concerns Scale, which indicates a good level of internal consistency for research purposes. See Appendix A for a copy of the Concerns Scale.

Families of Children with ASD Kindergarten Transition Experiences (FCATE). The Family Experiences and Involvement in Transition survey (FEIT; McIntyre et al., 2007) and the Elements for Transition to Kindergarten survey (ETK; Forest et al., 2004), were adapted with permission from the authors and combined with items drawn from the Kindergarten Transition Parent Interview (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003) to create a new measure for the present study (the FCATE). The original items for the FEIT and ETK measures were developed to survey the perspectives of families with a child with ASD on the preparation for their child's transition to kindergarten, and are rationally derived from literature (Forest et al., 2004; McIntyre et al., 2007). The scales measure transition activities that may be implemented by the child's preschool or kindergarten. Some items on the scales were adapted with wording changes for clarity and reader-friendliness. The response format was also adjusted to a 6-point Likert format to allow for greater differentiation in perceived implementation and importance of each transition item. Participants indicated their responses on a 6-point Likert scale for both perceived implementation and perceived importance of kindergarten transition properties. In addition to the Likert items,

open-ended questions were added that asked parents to reflect on their child's transition to kindergarten and the kinds of practices that were perceived as most beneficial to them.

Psychometric properties of the FCATE were investigated as a component of the current study. A Cronbach's Alpha value of .81 was obtained on the FCATE, which indicates a good level of internal consistency for research purposes. See Appendix A for a copy of the FCATE.

Barriers to Kindergarten Transition Practices Checklist (BKTP). The Barriers to Kindergarten Transition Practices Checklist (BKTP; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003) is an eight-item scale that measures common impediments to a successful transition into kindergarten. This scale was also based on an extensive review of the literature. Psychometric properties of the BKTP were investigated as a component of the current study. A Cronbach's Alpha value of .56 was obtained on the BKTP, which indicates a less acceptable level of internal consistency for research purposes. See Appendix A for a copy of the BKTP.

Background Information Questionnaire. A Background Information Questionnaire was developed specifically for the present study to help better understand the background characteristics of the families and their child with ASD. See Appendix A for a copy of the Background Information Questionnaire.

Data Analysis

The research questions were designed to evaluate parental perceptions of their child's kindergarten transition. Depending on their child's age, parents reported on the year prior to their child beginning kindergarten or the year after their child began kindergarten. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze responses on the Concerns Scale and BKTP; these analyses were exploratory and specific research questions were not formulated. In addition, the open-ended

questions are discussed qualitatively. The following specific research questions were addressed with quantitative analyses on responses from the FCATE:

Research question 1. The ratings from the FCATE assessed what kindergarten transition practices parents of children with ASD perceived as being implemented as their child transitioned to kindergarten. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the mean level of perceived implementation for each transition activity on the FCATE.

Research question 2. The ratings from the FCATE assessed what kindergarten transition practices parents of children with ASD perceived as most important as their child transitioned to kindergarten. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the mean level of perceived importance for each transition activity on the FCATE.

Research question 3. Dependent *t*-tests were used to compare the mean FCATE ratings of perceived implementation of kindergarten transition practices to the mean FCATE ratings of perceived importance of kindergarten transition practices.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of the present study was to explore the types of supports families of children with ASD receive during the transition into kindergarten. Parents rated the implementation of each transition activity and their perceived importance of these activities for their child's success. In this chapter, the results from the specific research questions posed in Chapter 2, as well as a report of descriptive statistics from the Concerns Scale and BKTP, are presented. Responses to open-ended questions are discussed qualitatively.

Kindergarten Transition Experiences

Research question 1: perceived implementation. The first research question addressed the level of implementation for each transition activity. Table 4.1 (see page 25) displays the mean levels of perceived implementation for all 28 kindergarten transition items on the FCATE. Items were rated on a Likert scale from one to six. A rating of one indicated absolutely no implementation of the transition activity, and a rating of six indicated full implementation of the transition activity. Higher ratings (i.e., ratings of four, five, or six) indicated higher levels of implementation. The mean level of perceived implementation across all items was 3.31, and the median was a rating of four. These findings indicate a moderate level of implementation across all transition activities (e.g., on average, most transition activities were implemented somewhat, but to a minimal degree). Of the 28 items, 16 were rated above the mean of 3.31 and 12 were rated below 3.31. The items identified as being implemented to a lesser degree (i.e., below the mean) included visiting multiple kindergarten placement options; kindergarten teacher visiting the preschool; talking with parents of kindergarten classmates; receiving a phone call or home visit from the kindergarten teacher; receiving written communication from the elementary school; participating in elementary schoolwide activities or attending a summer activity at the

elementary school; school teams developing preparatory strategies; readiness skills being identified and developed into instructional goals; developing instructional curriculum for kindergarten; and creating specific materials for the child's needs.

Research question 2: perceived importance. The second research question addressed the level of perceived importance for each transition activity. Table 4.1 also displays the mean levels of perceived importance for each kindergarten transition item, which were rated on the same Likert scale. A rating of one indicated that parents felt the transition activity was not at all important to their child's success, and a rating of six indicated that parents felt the transition activity was very important to their child's success. Higher ratings (i.e., ratings of four, five, or six) indicated higher levels of perceived importance. The mean level of perceived importance across all items was 4.99, and the median was a rating of six. These findings indicate a high level of perceived importance across all transition activities (e.g., on average, most transition activities were perceived as very important to a child's successful kindergarten entry). Of the 28 items, 18 were perceived as being more important than the mean level of 4.99. The items rated above this level, or the items perceived as being more important, included attending a kindergarten orientation session; attending a tour of the elementary school; attending a transition information meeting or a transition planning meeting at the elementary school; receiving written communication from the elementary school; identifying roles and responsibilities of individuals involved in transition and identifying a transition contact person; identifying related services and professional staff for kindergarten; meeting the preschool and/or kindergarten teacher to discuss the transition; developing an Individualized Education Plan; developing preparatory strategies; readiness skills being identified and developed into specific instructional goals; developing

instructional curriculum for kindergarten; creating specific materials for the child's needs; and creating a daily schedule for the child.

Research question 3: difference in implementation and importance. The third research question addressed the differences in ratings of implementation and ratings of perceived importance for each transition activity. Dependent *t*-tests were used to compare mean ratings of perceived implementation and mean ratings of perceived importance for each kindergarten transition item. Not all 24 participants answered every item on the FCATE, which led to a smaller sample size for this particular research question. A smaller sample size for these statistics could have resulted in Type II Error or underestimated effect sizes. Table 4.1 displays the *t* value and degrees of freedom for each item. Overall, 26 of the 28 pairs of kindergarten transition items on the FCATE were significantly different ($p < .05$). More specifically, ratings of perceived importance were significantly greater than ratings of perceived implementation for 26 items. The two items that did not result in a significant difference in perceived implementation and perceived importance were attending a kindergarten orientation and attending kindergarten registration.

Effect sizes were also calculated for each item pair using Cohen's *d* and are displayed in Table 4.1. Cohen (1988) suggested that effect sizes of .20 are small, .50 are medium, and .80 are large. Given that dependent *t*-tests were performed between items, the value of each effect size was corrected for dependence between means by including the correlation between the means. A large effect size was found for 15 of the kindergarten transition items on the FCATE. A medium effect size was found for 11 items, and a small effect size was found for two items.

Table 4.1

Summary of Means, Standard Deviations, t Statistics, Degrees of Freedom, and Effect Sizes for FCATE Items

Kindergarten Transition Activity	$M (SD)$		t	df	ES
	Implementation	Importance			
You Attend Kindergarten Orientation	4.53 (2.01)	5.31 (1.29)	-1.73	19	.41
You Attend Kindergarten Registration	4.79 (1.69)	4.32 (1.86)	1.11	19	-.25
Your Child Attends Kindergarten Orientation	3.73 (2.26)	5.21 (1.27)	-2.74 ^a	19	.75
Attend Kindergarten Open House with Your Child	3.53 (2.25)	4.79 (1.62)	-2.34 ^a	19	.55
Attend Tour of Elementary School with Your Child	3.58 (2.09)	5.11 (1.33)	-2.81 ^a	19	.67
You Attend a Kindergarten Transition Information Meeting at the Elementary School	4.21 (1.90)	5.53 (0.70)	-2.91 ^a	19	.75
You Attend a Transition Planning Meeting with Your Child's Kindergarten Staff	3.50 (1.98)	5.5 (1.25)	-4.31 ^a	18	1.06
You Visit Multiple Kindergarten Placement Options	2.74 (2.00)	4.05 (1.84)	-2.87 ^a	19	.66
Your Child Visits His/Her Future Kindergarten Classroom	3.79 (2.29)	4.84 (1.61)	-2.28 ^a	19	.53
Your Child's Future Kindergarten Teacher Visits Your Child's Preschool	2.22 (1.86)	4.06 (1.76)	-3.30 ^a	18	.78
Talk with Parents of Your Child's Kindergarten Classmates	2.52 (1.93)	3.89 (1.56)	-2.82 ^a	19	.65
Receive a Phone Call from Your Child's Kindergarten Teacher	1.68 (1.45)	3.89 (1.91)	-5.06 ^a	19	1.19

Kindergarten Transition Activity	<i>M (SD)</i>		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	ES
	Implementation	Importance			
Receive a Home Visit from Your Child's Kindergarten Teacher	1.56 (1.38)	3.33 (1.88)	-3.37 ^a	18	.80
Receive Written Communication Regarding Transition from Your Child's Elementary School (e.g., Letter or Flyer)	2.94 (2.08)	5.11 (1.05)	-3.69 ^a	17	.93
You and Your Child Participate in Elementary Schoolwide Activities (e.g., Spring Programs, Assemblies, Bingo Night)	2.79 (1.78)	4.26 (1.73)	-2.61 ^a	19	.60
You and Your Child Attend a Summer Activity at the Elementary School	1.95 (1.58)	3.74 (2.02)	-3.67 ^a	19	.86
Roles and Responsibilities of Individuals Involved in Transition are Identified	4.17 (1.42)	5.83 (0.38)	-4.73 ^a	18	1.27
An Individual is Identified as the Transition Contact Person for Parents and Teachers	4.17 (1.82)	5.39 (1.29)	-2.88 ^a	18	.70
Type of Kindergarten Placement is Identified (e.g., Self-Contained, Resource Room, General Education, Specialized Program)	3.72 (2.08)	5.17 (1.47)	-3.20 ^a	18	.79
Related Services needed for Kindergarten are Identified (e.g., Speech-Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Autism Specialist, Physical Therapist)	3.53 (1.78)	5.53 (0.96)	-4.19 ^a	19	1.00
Professional Staff for Your Child are Identified (e.g., Special Education Assistant, Learning Assistance Teacher)	3.63 (2.06)	5.79 (0.54)	-4.39 ^a	19	1.16

Kindergarten Transition Activity	<i>M (SD)</i>		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	ES
	Implementation	Importance			
The Preschool and Kindergarten Teachers Meet with You to Discuss Your Child's Transition	3.95 (1.90)	5.63 (0.68)	-.3.48 ^a	19	.86
The Preschool and/or Kindergarten Teacher Participate in Development of Your Child's Individualized Education Plan	3.74 (2.00)	5.84 (0.50)	-4.60 ^a	19	1.27
The Preschool and/or Kindergarten Teacher Developed Preparatory Strategies for Your Child	3.00 (1.89)	5.42 (1.22)	-5.05 ^a	19	1.19
Readiness Skills for Proposed Placement are Identified and Developed into Specific Instructional Goals for the Year	3.26 (1.85)	5.42 (0.96)	-5.05 ^a	19	1.25
Instructional Curriculum for Kindergarten is Identified	3.11 (1.88)	5.26 (1.15)	-4.89 ^a	19	1.17
Materials Specific to Your Child's Needs are Identified and Created	3.00 (1.97)	5.68 (0.58)	-6.20 ^a	19	1.76
A Daily Schedule is Identified and Created for Your Child	3.32 (2.00)	5.79 (0.42)	-5.36 ^a	19	1.51

^a $p < .05$

Child Behaviour Concerns

Table 4.2 (see page 28) displays the mean and standard deviation of each behaviour concern on the Concerns Scale. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of concern for each behaviour on a Likert scale of one to six, with higher ratings indicated higher concern. The mean level of concern across all items was 3.84. Of the 11 items, six were rated as more of a concern than the mean level of 3.84. These items included behaviour problems, following

directions, getting along with other children, getting used to a new school, toileting skills, and ability to communicate needs.

Table 4.2

Summary of Means and Standard Deviations of Responses on the Concerns Scale

Concern	<i>M (SD)</i>
Ability to Communicate Needs	4.65 (1.37)
Getting Used to a New School	4.39 (1.64)
Getting Along with Other Children	4.32 (1.55)
Toileting Skills	4.27 (1.80)
Behaviour Problems (e.g., Tantrums)	4.09 (1.65)
Following Directions	4.09 (1.44)
Being Ready for Kindergarten	3.95 (1.46)
Eating Skills (e.g., Snack Time)	3.78 (1.54)
Getting Along with the Teacher	3.48 (1.47)
Separating from Family	3.09 (1.59)
Academics (e.g., Knowing the Alphabet)	2.08 (1.61)

Barriers to Kindergarten Transition Practices

The Ratings from the BKTP are displayed in Table 4.3 (see page 29). Respondents were asked to indicate if each item was considered a barrier to participating in kindergarten transition activities for their family. Overall, six of the eight items were not considered a barrier by at least 70 percent of the participants. The items that were rated as being a barrier to the greatest extent (i.e., for approximately 30 percent of participants) were the parent having a work schedule that interfered and the parent needing childcare.

Table 4.3*Summary of Percent of Participants Indicating Barriers to Participation in Kindergarten**Transition Activities (BKTP)*

Barrier	Response					
	Yes		No		N/A	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
A Work Schedule That Interferes	7	29.2	12	50	5	20.8
Need Child Care	7	29.2	14	58.3	3	12.5
Do Not Know Others at School	4	16.7	17	70.8	3	12.5
My Own Health Problems	4	16.7	18	75	2	8.3
A School Schedule That Interferes	2	8.3	18	75	4	16.7
Choose Not to Participate	1	4.2	17	70.8	6	25
Lack Transportation	1	4.2	19	79.2	4	16.7
Do Not Feel Comfortable at School	1	4.2	21	87.5	2	8.3

Comments on Kindergarten Transition Practices

Respondents were given the option to provide additional information on their child's transition. They were asked (1) if there were additional forms of kindergarten transition activities that they were involved in that were not asked about on the surveys, (2) if there were additional forms of involvement that they would like to see included in the transition process, (3) what they perceived were the three most important transition activities as their child entered kindergarten, and (4) if a written transition planning document was developed specifically for their child's transition to kindergarten. Eight participants responded to the open-ended questions 1, 2, and 3, whereas all participants responded to question 4.

Additional transition activities offered. Participants were asked what additional transition activities they were involved in that were not specified on the survey. Some additional transition activities discussed by participants included having a social story about the new school created for their child; participating in a “Ready, Set, Learn” night at the elementary school (in which kindergarten activities were presented to new students across different stations); having their child’s professional team (e.g., speech language pathologist and occupational therapist) come observe their child in his/her new kindergarten classroom; and their child spending time with the graduating kindergarten class (i.e., classmates one year ahead of their child).

Additional transition activities wanted. Participants were asked what additional forms of involvement they would like to see included in the transition process. Participants indicated that a written transition plan would have been useful. They also commented that having their child spend a full day in their new kindergarten classroom during their last month of preschool, having options in the support staff that will be working with their child in kindergarten, and having strategies for helping parents relieve stress would have been beneficial.

Three important transition activities. Participants reported similar transition activities that they felt were most important for their child’s successful entry into kindergarten. Some of these transition activities included having multiple visits to the new elementary school; meeting the staff that will be working with their child; having their child spend extended periods of time with the new staff (e.g., kindergarten teacher and education assistant); having a strong school team (e.g., staff with a great understanding of their child’s needs); having access to the kindergarten classroom near the end of the summer to allow their child to spend more time there; having a gradual entry into the kindergarten class in September; and having a written transition document that outlines their child’s needs and potential instructional strategies.

Transition planning document. Of the 24 participants, four indicated that a transition planning document was developed specifically for their child. Twenty participants did not receive this service. There was no apparent trend in the participants who did or did not receive a transition plan, and they were four different participants (i.e., they were not the four participants that completed the survey before and after their child's kindergarten transition).

Summary

Results suggest that parents perceive most transition activities as highly important; however, implementation levels do not match levels of importance for most activities. Participants also noted a number of behavioural concerns during the kindergarten transition period. Finally, very few participants received a transition planning document specifically for their child. These limitations in transition planning are discussed with regard to practical implications in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Overview

The purpose of the current study was to explore the transition from preschool to kindergarten for students with ASD. Given the lack of research in this area, the current study aimed to provide novel, empirical evidence on the nature of supports offered during this transitional period. Specifically, parents of children with ASD who had a child that was transitioning into kindergarten were surveyed on current behavioural concerns they have regarding their child, the types of transition activities that were offered to them and their perception of importance for each activity, and barriers that may have impacted their engagement in their child's transition.

Descriptive statistics were utilized to explore behavioural concerns, levels of implementation and importance of the 28 transition activities, and barriers to participating in transition activities. Dependent *t*-tests were employed to examine if a significant difference existed between perceived implementation and perceived importance of each transition activity. These analyses revealed that parents' ratings of importance were significantly higher than ratings of implementation for 26 of the 28 transition activities. In addition, a large effect size was found for 15 of the 28 items, indicating that the difference between perceived implementation and perceived importance is substantial and may have meaningful consequences for a successful kindergarten transition. Overall, the results suggest that parents may require additional support (i.e., higher levels of implementation of transition activities) during this major transitional period.

Understanding Kindergarten Transition Experiences

One of the objectives of the current study was to add to the literature base on kindergarten transition for students with ASD. Given the lack of research on this topic and an increasing prevalence of ASD diagnoses, investigations of early educational and behavioural supports are necessary (CDC, 2014; Quintero & McIntyre, 2010).

Implementation. The mean and median ratings of perceived implementation ratings across the 28 items on the FCATE were calculated. The transition activities with the lowest levels of implementation (i.e., ratings of absolutely no implementation to minimal levels of implementation) were the 12 items with ratings below the mean level of implementation. Notably, levels of perceived importance were also significantly greater than levels of implementation for these 12 items. In other words, not only were these 12 transition activities implemented the least, but the level of implementation did not match parents' perceived importance of each activity. This finding suggests that the level of implementation of these specific supports may not be satisfactory for parents. In addition, of the 12 items, eight revealed a large effect size. Specifically, the difference in levels of perceived implementation and perceived importance was significant and practically meaningful for the following activities: receiving a phone call or home visit from the kindergarten teacher; receiving written communication from the elementary school; attending a summer activity at the elementary school; school teams developing preparatory strategies; readiness skills being identified and developed into instructional goals; developing instructional curriculum for kindergarten; and creating specific materials for the child's needs. Given that these activities were given lower ratings of implementation and significantly higher ratings for importance, and demonstrated

large effect sizes, they may be regarded as important considerations for transition plans for students with ASD.

Forest et al. (2004) found some similar results in their investigation of kindergarten transition for students with ASD. They also discovered low levels of implementation of kindergarten teachers visiting the child's preschool classroom and defining appropriate kindergarten curricula for the students. Similarly, Quintero and McIntyre (2010) surveyed preschool teachers and found that they desired higher levels of implementation for meeting the future kindergarten teacher, visiting the kindergarten classroom, and collaboration between the preschool and kindergarten staff. Although these results are based on preschool teacher and not parent informants, comparisons may be drawn; the current study found that parents generally desire more contact with the kindergarten teacher (i.e., receiving a phone call or home visit, receiving written communication from the elementary school, or attending an activity at the elementary school), and more time spent on collaboration for developing appropriate kindergarten curricula. McIntyre et al. (2007) also found that parents desired more information about their child's future kindergarten placement, the elementary schools' preparations for transition, and academic and behavioural expectations in kindergarten. Moreover, Starr et al. (2014) recently surveyed both parents and educators and found that all parties were dissatisfied with the level of communication and lack of positive partnerships. Increased collaboration between teams, especially with the receiving elementary school team, may therefore be a significant goal when considering effective transition plans (McIntyre et al., 2007; Pianta et al., 2001; Quintero & McIntyre, 2010).

Importance. The mean and median ratings of perceived importance ratings across the 28 items on the FCATE were also calculated. The transition activities with the highest levels of

perceived importance (i.e., ratings of somewhat important to very important) were the 18 items with ratings above the mean level of importance. These 18 items with importance ratings above this mean level were considered as the most important for participants. However, significantly lower ratings of perceived implementation were found for 17 of the 18 items with the highest ratings of importance. Parents appeared to want more of these activities as their child transitioned to kindergarten. In addition, of the 17 items, 12 revealed a large effect size. The difference in levels of perceived implementation and perceived importance was significant and impactful for the following activities: attending transition planning meeting at the elementary school; receiving written communication from the elementary school; identifying roles and responsibilities of individuals involved in transition and identifying a transition contact person; identifying related services and professional staff for kindergarten; meeting the preschool and/or kindergarten teacher to discuss the transition; developing an Individualized Education Plan; developing preparatory strategies; readiness skills being identified and developed into specific instructional goals; developing instructional curriculum for kindergarten; creating specific materials for the child's needs; and creating a daily schedule for the child.

Forest et al. (2004) found that all transition activities presented on their survey were rated with high levels of importance, except for the specific placement (e.g., general education or specialized program) being defined prior to kindergarten entry. Although defining the specific placement was rated as highly important in the current study, only a medium effect size was found. The study by Denkyirah and Agbeke (2010) also used the instrument developed by Forest et al., but preschool teachers were surveyed. They concluded that most of the transition items on the survey were rated as highly important to teachers (consistent with previous research with parents). General conclusions were that respondents felt that timing of preparation was important

(e.g., early planning, early implementation of a transition team, early goal setting, early identification of potential challenges, and proactive collaboration between preschool and kindergarten teams). The researchers also found that sharing information with families was rated as important. Although the current study did not evaluate the implementation and importance of transition activities over a period of time, parents indicated that more information about their child's future kindergarten placement would be beneficial. This desire for more information and collaboration, earlier in the transition process, echoes the studies carried out by Forest et al. and Denkyirah and Agbeke. Finally, Beamish et al. (2014) recently surveyed educators on the transition activities from the ETK (Forest et al., 2004) and found that teachers rated every transition activity with high levels of importance. It appears that both parents and teachers rate kindergarten transition activities as highly important. However, parents report that transition activities are often not implemented for their child, and teachers report that their level of involvement in transition activities may vary. Developing a standardized method for kindergarten transition for children with ASD, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for all individuals involved, may be an important first step in addressing the disconnect between levels of implementation and levels of importance.

Additional Factors in Kindergarten Transition

Behavioural concerns. In addition to kindergarten transition activities, parents were also asked about concerns they may have regarding their child's behaviour. Of the 11 items, six were rated as more of a concern (i.e., above the mean level of concern). These items included behaviour problems (e.g., tantrums), following directions, getting along with other children, getting used to a new school, toileting skills, and ability to communicate needs. The results are similar to those found by McIntyre et al. (2007). The respondents in their study also expressed

the most concern with behaviour problems, following directions, getting along with peers, and attending a new school. Although evidence is still preliminary at this point, the convergence of these findings may provide support for the need to incorporate these specific concerns into early intervention and transition support plans.

Barriers to transition engagement. The participants in the current study did not consider most items on the BKTP a barrier to their engagement in the transition process. The items that were rated as being a barrier more often were the parent having a work schedule that interfered and the parent needing childcare. Past studies that have examined barriers to kindergarten transition generally asked about barriers in educational planning, barriers to effective collaboration, and barriers due to lack of resources (Hamre & Pianta, 2007; Quintero & McIntyre, 2010). The current study examined more practical-based barriers (e.g., scheduling issues or lack of transportation). Taken together, it appears that both systemic (e.g., preschool and elementary school) factors and individual family factors may act as barriers during the transition process and greater collaboration may be essential (Quintero & McIntyre, 2010; Villeneuve et al., 2013).

Parent comments. When asked about transition activities they participated in that were not listed on the current study's survey, some respondents indicated that their elementary school offered kindergarten readiness workshops for the incoming students, as well as more time spent in the future kindergarten classroom. Other respondents indicated that more time spent in the future kindergarten classroom and with the kindergarten staff (e.g., teacher and education assistant) would have been beneficial. Given that past studies (e.g., McIntyre et al., 2007) have demonstrated that more information about the kindergarten placement is desired, results from the current study may be used as an example for students' transition plans. In addition, a few

respondents indicated that members of their child's early intervention team (e.g., speech-language pathologist and occupational therapist) were able to observe the child in his/her new kindergarten classroom and offer recommendations to the family and school. This practice may be a highly desirable part of any transition plan, as numerous studies have concluded that increased collaboration between families, home teams, and school teams is necessary (Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Forest et al., 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2007; Quintero & McIntyre, 2010; Villeneuve et al., 2013).

Taken together, considering these additional transition activities as a part of any student's transition plan may help alleviate stress on the child and family. A number of respondents in the current study indicated that more support for parents, and even strategies for alleviating parental stress, should also be considered as a necessary component of kindergarten transition planning. Similarly, very few of the respondents indicated that a transition planning document was developed and implemented for their child, which reiterates the results found by Pianta et al. (1999). A number of respondents also indicated that this would be a desirable practice during the transition period. A document that outlines the child's needs and instructional strategies may not only provide necessary information for the receiving elementary school team, but also help quell parenting stress.

Implications for Practice

The results of the current study provide preliminary evidence for the types of supports that parents of children with ASD receive and desire as their child transitions into kindergarten. Families and practitioners may consider which transition activities were deemed most important, and demonstrated the largest effect, when making decisions about how to best support a child's kindergarten transition. For example, the items listed as "ASD specific" on the FCATE all

demonstrated significantly higher levels of importance than implementation as well as large effect sizes (e.g., related services being coordinated, professional staff being identified, and specific materials being created).

Families and practitioners may also consider the common behavioural concerns raised in the current study and incorporate these behaviours into the child's early behaviour intervention plan. For example, interventions that support compliance and social communication may benefit the majority of children with ASD as they enter kindergarten. Ensuring that the child has ample opportunity to practice following directions that will be similar to those provided in their kindergarten classroom may be an important behavioural target. Structured play dates with peers in their future kindergarten classroom may also alleviate parents' concern about their child getting along with other children.

Furthermore, strong evidence exists that a written transition document should be considered a part of a child with ASD's transition plan. Based on the current study, few families receive this service in BC. The BC MOE does not require that a transition document be created for incoming students with ASD; however, this type of document may be an important starting point when considering how to support the individual needs of these students.

Greater collaboration between families, preschools, elementary schools, and community service providers has been a consistent need in the current study and in past studies (e.g., Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Forest et al., 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2007; Quintero & McIntyre, 2010; Villeneuve et al., 2013). Similarly, results from the current study, as well as study done by Siklos and Kerns (2006) and Starr et al. (2014), indicate that families desire elementary school teams with a distinct working knowledge of how to support students with ASD. An option for elementary schools may be to require the staff working with students with ASD to participate in

mandatory training or in-service presentations on behaviour management and instructional strategies.

Finally, given that parenting stress is common for individuals caring for a child with ASD (Baker-Ericzén, Brookman-Frazeem & Stahmer, 2005; Ornstein Davis & Carter, 2008; Starr et al., 2014), psychoeducational opportunities for parents may be a key asset to any transition plan. For example, providing more occasions for information sharing and support groups, or offering specific stress-relieving strategies, may ease the kindergarten transition process for the parent and consequently the child.

Limitations and Strengths of the Current Study

Limitations. Several limitations are noted for the current study. First, the researchers originally intended to recruit participants and analyze data based on two different samples (one preschool cohort and one kindergarten cohort). The researchers intended to group the respondents based on the age and grade of the child, including those beginning the transition process as well as those near the end of the transition process, and analyze the data separately. However, recruitment challenges over the 11 month period of data collection hindered the original research design. Too few responses in each cohort were collected to allow the researchers to meaningfully analyze data separately. The researchers therefore decided to combine both preschool- and kindergarten-aged responses into one sample.

Second, the final sample was small and not randomly selected. Biases in respondents may therefore be present (e.g., parents that voluntarily responded may be more proactive in seeking support, more engaged in the transition process, and more likely to rate transition activities as highly important). Although service providers and preschools from various locations in BC were contacted, obtaining approval to collect data from more school districts in BC may have

expanded the size and diversity of the sample. However, job action in BC schools impeded data collection after April, 2014 as communication between teachers and administration was disallowed.

Another limitation is that 23 of the 24 participants were mothers or grandmothers. One father completed the survey, but more male respondents may have added to the sample's diversity. Similarly, 23 of the 24 participants reported on their son with ASD. Obtaining more data from parents of daughters with ASD could provide alternative perspectives and experiences.

Finally, the psychometric properties of the scales used in the current study need more exploration. Although the scales were adapted from published works, they are not widely used or necessarily validated. Replications of the current study are necessary to better establish the validity of the Concerns Scale, FCATE, and BTKC.

Strengths. Despite the limitations of the current study, some strengths are notable. First, the current study provides preliminary evidence on the experience of families with a child with ASD during the kindergarten transitional period. Few studies to date have been conducted on this topic, and the present study offers a foundation for future research in BC. Second, the detailed list of kindergarten transition activities outlined on the FCATE allowed parents to examine the types of activities that are considered valid in the literature; a preview of these activities may therefore allow parents to better advocate for their child during this transitional period. Finally, the participation criteria established a clear time frame for rating kindergarten transition experiences. Specially, all parents reported on a child between the ages of four years, zero months and six years, 11 months (i.e., all children were in their last year of preschool or their first year of kindergarten). This narrow time frame allowed participants to report on transition practices there were or were not currently taking place for their child.

Implications for Further Research

First, a replication of the current study with a larger sample size would provide more confirmatory evidence for the implementation and importance of the transition activities on the FCATE. Obtaining data from a wider and more representative geographical region would also be necessary when considering the generalizability of the results.

Second, the present study collected some, but relatively little, qualitative data from respondents. A qualitative study with in-depth, exploratory interviewing of parents may provide more detailed accounts of what transition supports are being offered in the community and by elementary schools. A greater depth of information may also be obtained by conducting focus groups comprised of participants representative of the population. This type of data would allow for a richer evaluation of experiences and attitudes, which may lead to more appropriate recommendations for families, service providers, and school teams.

Future studies on kindergarten transition for children with ASD may also focus on the supports that parents receive during the transition process (e.g., information sharing, support groups, or parent training). Given that this transitional period may be related to parenting stress (Baker-Ericzén et al., 2005), such a study is warranted. Similarly, future studies may not only survey parents, but also other stakeholders in the child's transition. For example, surveying preschool staff, elementary school staff, and community service providers would provide rich, cross-informant data on transition practices.

Finally, examining kindergarten transition over a specific amount of time should provide more valuable data. Forest et al. (2004) suggest that researchers should treat the transition as occurring for over a year. Longitudinal studies with students as young as three years old may be necessary. Moreover, the FCATE (or similar tool) could be used to continually monitor the

transition process for changes in supports received and family attitudes. As originally intended in the present study, examining preschool and kindergarten cohorts separately may provide evidence for differences in supports and attitudes based on the timing in the transition process.

Conclusions

Overall, the current study has provided preliminary evidence for the types of kindergarten transition supports that students with ASD receive in BC. One general conclusion is that the majority of kindergarten transition activities are perceived as significantly important but are not implemented to the same degree. Services to support the transition into kindergarten for children with ASD may therefore not be satisfactory to parents at this time. Transition activities that are more specific to the needs of students with ASD (e.g., coordinating relevant services in the elementary school and creating necessary materials) demonstrated the largest effect in the present study. Service providers and school professionals may consider these results when beginning the transition process for the children with whom they work with. Moreover, BC preschools and elementary schools should collaborate to develop a mandatory and standardized, but individualized, transition plan that each student with ASD and his/her family receives. Coordination with home-based programs on the development of behavior intervention plans and instructional strategies may be considered. In addition, facilitating communication early on in the transition process should provide for more effective planning.

The findings of the current study should be considered in light of several limitations, especially with regard to sampling (e.g., non-random sampling, small sample size, and self-selection bias in the participants). Despite these limitations, a number of implications for practice and research are notable. Considerations for practice include having a greater working knowledge of kindergarten transition experiences for children with ASD and common

behavioural concerns that may be incorporated into behaviour intervention plans, developing a written transition document for all students with ASD, and facilitating greater collaboration between all stakeholders. Implications for future research include collecting qualitative data to further investigate parents' experiences and attitudes around their child's kindergarten transition, considering related variables like parenting stress, and investigating kindergarten transition in a longitudinal or cross-sectional design.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Measures Used in the Current Study

Section I: Concerns Scale¹

Please indicate how much each of the following areas concerns you as your child with ASD transitions into kindergarten.

Indicate the degree of your concern on the following scale.

A response of “1” indicates “**No concern**” and a response of ”6 “indicates “**Much concern**”

Circle only one response for each item

Area of Concern	No Concern Much Concern					
Academics (e.g., knowing the alphabet)	1	2	3	4	5	6
Behaviour Problems (e.g., tantrums)	1	2	3	4	5	6
Following Directions	1	2	3	4	5	6
Getting Along with Other Children	1	2	3	4	5	6
Getting Along with the Teacher	1	2	3	4	5	6
Getting Used to a New School	1	2	3	4	5	6
Being Ready for Kindergarten	1	2	3	4	5	6
Separating from Family	1	2	3	4	5	6
Toileting Skills	1	2	3	4	5	6
Eating Skills (e.g., snack time)	1	2	3	4	5	6
Ability to Communicate Needs	1	2	3	4	5	6
Other (please specify)	1	2	3	4	5	6

¹ This measure includes items adapted with permission from the Family Experiences and Involvement in Transition Survey (McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, Reed, & Wildenger, 2007).

Section II: Families of Children with ASD Kindergarten Transition Experiences¹

The following items represent a list of Kindergarten transition activities that parents may experience as their child enters into Kindergarten. Please indicate **both**

- The degree to which you are **currently receiving** each Kindergarten transition activity
AND
- **The importance** you believe each Kindergarten transition activity is to your child's success

Currently Receiving Rating:

- A **response of 1** indicates that you have **not been offered**, or have not taken part in, this transition activity
- A **response of 6** indicates you are receiving this and that this transition activity **has been fully implemented** for you and your child.

Importance Rating:

- A **response of 1** indicates that this activity is **not important** at all for your child's successful transition.
- A **response of 6** indicates that this transition activity is **very important** to you for your child's success.

Please circle **BOTH** a Current Receiving Rating **AND** Importance Rating

Activities with Your Child's Elementary School												
	Current Receiving Rating						Importance Rating					
	Not Offered			Fully Implemented			Not Important			Very Important		
You Attend Kindergarten Orientation	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
You Attend Kindergarten Registration	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Your Child Attends Kindergarten Orientation	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Attend Kindergarten Open House with Your Child	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6

¹ This measure includes items adapted with permission from the Family Experiences and Involvement in Transition Survey (McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, Reed, & Wildenger, 2007), the Elements for Transition to Kindergarten Survey (Forest, Horner, Lewis-Palmer, & Todd, 2004), and the Kindergarten Transition Parent Interview (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

Activities with Your Child's Elementary School												
	Current Receiving Rating						Importance Rating					
	Not Offered			Fully Implemented			Not Important			Very Important		
Attend Tour of Elementary School with Your Child	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
You Attend a Kindergarten Transition Information Meeting at the Elementary School	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
You Attend a Transition Planning Meeting with Your Child's Kindergarten Staff	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
You Visit Multiple Kindergarten Placement Options	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Your Child Visits His/Her Future Kindergarten Classroom	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Your Child's Future Kindergarten Teacher Visits Your Child's Preschool	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Talk with Parents of Your Child's Kindergarten Classmates	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Receive a Phone Call from Your Child's Kindergarten Teacher	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Receive a Home Visit from Your Child's Future Kindergarten Teacher	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Receive Written Communication Regarding Transition from Your Child's Elementary School (e.g., Letter or Flyer)	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
You and Your Child Participate in Elementary Schoolwide Activities (e.g., Spring Programs, Assemblies, Bingo Night)	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
You and Your Child Attend a Summer Activity at the Elementary School	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6

Activities Relevant for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder												
	Current Receiving Rating						Importance Rating					
	Not Offered			Fully Implemented			Not Important			Very Important		
Roles and Responsibilities of Individuals Involved in Transition are Identified	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
An Individual is Identified as the Transition Contact Person for Parents and Teachers	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Type of Kindergarten Placement is Identified (e.g., Self-Contained, Resource Room, General Education, Specialized Program)	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Related Services Needed for Kindergarten are Identified (e.g., Speech-Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Autism Specialist, Physical Therapist)	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Professional Staff for Your Child are Identified (e.g., Special Education Assistant, Learning Assistance Teacher)	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
The Preschool and Kindergarten Teachers Meet with You to Discuss Your Child's Transition	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
The Preschool and/or Kindergarten Teacher Participate in Development of Your Child's Individualized Education Plan	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
The Preschool and/or Kindergarten Teacher Developed Preparatory Strategies for Your Child	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Readiness Skills for Proposed Placement are Identified and Developed into Specific Instructional Goals for the Year	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Instructional Curriculum for Kindergarten is Identified	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Materials Specific to Your Child's Needs are Identified and Created	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
A Daily Schedule is Identified and Created for Your Child	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6

Section III: Additional Questions

1. Are there any additional forms of transition activities that you have been involved in that were not listed above? _____ Yes _____ No
If yes, please list them:

2. Are there any additional forms of involvement you would like to see included in the transition process? _____ Yes _____ No
If yes, please list them:

3. Was a written transition planning document developed specifically for your child's transition to Kindergarten? _____ Yes _____ No

4. What are the three most important transition activities to you as your child enters Kindergarten?

Section IV: Barriers to Kindergarten Transition Practices Checklist¹

Please indicate which of the following items you consider a barrier to your participation in your child's transition into Kindergarten. Place an "X" in the appropriate box.

Barrier to My Participation in My Child's Kindergarten Transition	Is this a barrier for you?	
	Yes	No
A Work Schedule that Interferes		
Choose Not to Participate		
Need Child Care		
Lack Transportation		
A School Schedule that Interferes		
Do Not Know Others at School		
Do Not Feel Comfortable at School		
My Own Health Problems		

¹ From Pianta, R. C. & Kraft-Sayre, M. (2003). *Successful Kindergarten Transition: Your Guide to Connecting Children, Family, & Schools*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Inc.

Section V: Background Information

The following questions are regarding your child with ASD

What is your child's age? ____ Years ____ Month

What is your child's sex? ____ Male ____ Female ____ Other

What is your child's ethnic background?

What is your child's first language?

What is the primary language spoken in the home?

Does your child have a formal diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder?
____ Yes ____ No

If yes, at what age was he/she diagnosed with ASD? ____ Years ____ Months

If yes, please specify who made the formal diagnosis (e.g. psychologist, physician):

Does your child currently receive related services (e.g., behavioural intervention, speech therapy, occupational therapy) in addition to special education supports?
____ Yes ____ No ____ Don't Know

If yes, please specify the services:

Did your child receive a formal/structured educational program outside of the home prior to entering Kindergarten?
____ Yes ____ No

If yes (check all that apply)

- ____ Daycare (centre-based or home-based)
- ____ Regular preschool
- ____ Special Education Preschool
- ____ Strong Start
- ____ Other (please specify):

Caregiver & Family Background Information

The following questions are regarding you as the caregiver. They will help us better understand the background of the families in our study. Some of them may be a bit sensitive.

Are you the primary caregiver of the child?

☐ Yes ☐ No

What is your relationship to the child?

☐ Mother

☐ Father

☐ Grandmother

☐ Grandfather

☐ Guardian (please specify): _____

☐ Other (please specify): _____

What is your sex?

☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other

What is your age? _____ Years

Are you currently employed?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, part-time or full-time? ☐ Part-time ☐ Full-time

What is your level of schooling? (please check only one)

☐ Less than High School Diploma

☐ High School Diploma

☐ Some college/trade school/university

☐ Diploma/Certificate College/trade school

☐ Bachelor's Degree

☐ Post Baccalaureate Diploma or Graduate Degree

What best describes your annual household income? (if you are not comfortable answering this question it is ok to leave it blank)

☐ Less than \$14,999

☐ \$15,999 to 19,999

☐ \$20, 000 to \$29,999

☐ \$30,000 to \$39, 999

☐ \$40, 000 to \$59,999

☐ \$60,000 or more

How many children younger than 19 years are living in your home? _____

How many adults (including you) are living in the home? _____

Is there anything else you would like to share with us? If so, please write us in the space below.

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer and Consent Letter



a place of mind
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Faculty of Education Vancouver Campus
Educational & Counselling Psychology,
And Special Education
2125 Main Mall
Vancouver, B.C., Canada, V6T 1Z4
Phone 604-822-0242
Fax 604-822-3302
www.ecps.educ.ubc.ca



Do you have a child with autism spectrum disorder who enrolled in kindergarten in September, 2013 OR will be enrolling into kindergarten in September, 2014?

If so, you are invited to take part in a study on transitioning children with autism spectrum disorder from preschool to kindergarten!

We are researchers from the University of British Columbia and are doing a study on the types of activities that may help children with autism spectrum disorder transition into kindergarten. We would like to get caregivers' point of view on what types of kindergarten transition activities they and their child are currently taking part in and what activities they feel are most important for their child's success.

If you choose to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete a few surveys that will ask questions about your child's transition into kindergarten. The surveys will take about 30 minutes to complete.

You will also have the opportunity to be entered into a draw to win a \$100 Visa Gift Card to thank you for your participation!

Link to the surveys if your child is currently in PRESCHOOL:
<http://www.surveymonkey.com/XXXXX>

Link to the surveys if your child is currently in KINDERGARTEN:
<http://www.surveymonkey.comXXXXXX>

For additional information or any questions, or to request paper copies of the survey, please contact Dr. Laurie Ford or Erin Fleming at xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxxx@xxxx.



**Transition From Preschool to Kindergarten:
A Perspective for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder**

Study Participation Opportunity

Principal Investigator

Laurie Ford, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology, & Special Education
University of British Columbia
xxx-xxx-xxxx
xxxx@xxxx

Co-Investigator

Erin Fleming
Graduate Student
Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology, & Special Education
University of British Columbia
xxx-xxx-xxxx
xxxx@xxxx

Dear Caregivers,

We are conducting a study to investigate the activities that preschools and elementary schools may implement to facilitate the transition into kindergarten for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). You are obtaining this letter because you are receiving services for your child with ASD who transitioned into kindergarten in September, 2013 or will transition into kindergarten in September, 2014. In order to add to our understanding of the types of transition activities that best support this major transitional time for children with ASD, we need your help. We are writing to ask you to take part in our study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the types of kindergarten transition activities that caregivers and their child with ASD are currently receiving, as well as what transition activities they feel would help their child enter kindergarten.

Taking Part in This Study Means

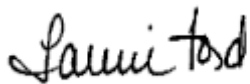
- You will complete a packet of surveys online that asks about concerns you may have about your child's transition into kindergarten, kindergarten transition activities that you are currently taking part in or would like to take part in, barriers to taking part in transition activities, and basic background information about your family.

- The surveys will take approximately 30 minutes to complete. There are no risks to taking part in the survey. If any questions make you uncomfortable, you may skip those questions. You may also contact the investigators with any questions.
- The information provided by caregivers is confidential. **No information will be reported and no respondents will be identified by name** in any reports about the study. The only people who will have access to the information you provide are the researchers working on this project.
- Note: the version of the surveys you can complete is in an online format through Survey Monkey. While every effort will be made to keep all results confidential, please be aware that the results are stored on a US-based survey and could on occasion be reviewed if requested. Your information could also be identified based on your IP address. We recognize that the information in this survey is somewhat sensitive and we want you to be aware of the limits to confidentiality. You may also request paper copies of the surveys if you would prefer to take part that way.
- There are no risks if you take part in the study. However, if at any time you have concerns about your treatment, or rights as a person who takes part in our project, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at the University of British Columbia at xxx-xxx-xxxx.
- Your taking part in the study is voluntary and will not affect any services you receive from your agency. By completing the survey, your consent is assumed by the researchers.

As compensation for your time for taking part in the study, you will be given an opportunity to enter a draw for a \$100 Visa Gift Card.

If you have any additional questions, please contact any of the investigators at the phone or email addresses listed above.

Sincerely,



Laurie Ford, Ph.D.
Principal Investigator
Dept. of Educational and Counselling Psychology and Special Education
University of British Columbia

**Transition From Preschool to Kindergarten:
A Perspective for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder**

Caregiver Consent Form

Consent for myself to participate in this research project

Please check one of the following:

☐ Yes, I agree to take part in this project.

☐ No, I do not wish to take part in this project.

Caregiver signature (please sign):

Caregiver name (please print):

If you are willing to take part in a follow up interview regarding the results of the study, please provide a phone number or email address that we can reach you at.

If you would like to receive information about the results of the study, please contact the researchers listed above.

Thank you for your consideration!