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Administrative Support and Challenges in Nebraska Public School Early Childhood Programs: Preliminary Study

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Abstract

One hundred seventy-six teachers employed in prekindergarten programs in Nebraska's public schools were surveyed regarding their perceptions of the administrative supports and challenges associated with their programs. Both early childhood and early childhood special education teachers participated. Overall findings suggest that most administrators of early childhood programs advocate for quality programs and support teachers' unique budgetary requests and work-hour schedules. Consistent with the findings from reports by Brotherson et al. (2001) and Lieber et al. (1997), teachers indicated that their supervisor (principal or other type of administrator) relied on them for knowledge about recommended practices in early childhood programs. Teachers supervised by principals versus teachers supervised by other administrators reported some disparity regarding their supervisor's support; knowledge of the program; and advocacy for flexible schedules, home visits, and contacts with families and noneducation agencies. Implications for teachers and administrators are presented.

School districts across the country frequently are designated for federal- and state-funded early childhood (EC) programs, and elementary schools in particular often house the teachers, staff members, and children associated with those programs (Gallagher, Stegelin, & Gallagher, 1992). These EC programs often include group programs for preschool-age children in half- or full-day classroom settings 1 day to 5 days a week. Other programs may offer home-based services to infants and toddlers or consultation services for staff members in community childcare and preschool settings that require EC personnel to travel or work in settings away from a direct supervisor. Some EC programs enroll only children with identified delays or at-risk factors; others operate integrated programs for children with and without delays. Furthermore, exemplary EC programs emphasize the importance of teacher-parent collaboration and encourage frequent contacts with families (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997; Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1997).

Children with disabilities have been enrolled in U.S. public schools since at least 1975, when a federal law was passed that mandated free and appropriate educational opportunities for these children, ages 5 to 21, through Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Since 1986, when the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was amended, schools have been required to offer such opportunities for preschool children with disabilities (3–5 years of age). In a few states (Iowa, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, and Nebraska), legislation requires the state departments of education to also offer their citizens free early intervention services for infants and toddlers with developmental delays. In addition, the value of early intervention for select groups of young children and their families has been noted through recent increases in (a) federal funding and support for programs such as Even Start and Early Head Start (Knitzer, 2001) and (b) the number and types of kindergarten and childcare programs in the public schools (i.e., 4-year-old or all-day kindergarten, before-

and after-school care; Children's Defense Fund, 2001; Sholman, Blank, & Ewen, 1999).

Administration of these diverse EC programs has been described as challenging, but also critical, to the success of the program's goals (Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, & Schertz, 2001; Gallagher et al., 1992). Enrollment of these young children has forced public schools to redefine their mission. Principals of elementary schools, in particular, may find themselves responsible for EC programs that historically have not been a part of those schools. As a result, these principals may be administering programs with which they are unfamiliar and for which they lack management training. Furthermore, individual principals may vary in their ability to understand the unique needs of the EC staff members, children, and their families (Brotherson et al., 2001; National Association of School Boards of Education [NASBE], 1988). For example, the tendency to supervise EC programs and staff in ways similar to the kind of supervision provided for staff and programs in the primary grades is understandable but, in many cases, inappropriate.

As a result, EC teachers may find themselves involved in discussions, tasks, and decision-making that teachers in primary grades could assume would be handled by the school administrator or principal. Brotherson and colleagues (2001) reported that a majority of the 61 principals they surveyed relied heavily on their certified EC teachers for knowledge of nationally recommended practices in integrated EC programs. Such communication is complicated by the fact that teachers and administrators bring different kinds of training and experiences that may result in less than optimal outcomes. For example, Rusher, McGrevin, and Lambiotte (1992) reported that kindergarten teachers and administrators agreed on the needs for a child-centered approach to teaching young children and for the use of motor activities and expressive arts in the curriculum; however, they disagreed on the need to address academics in these programs. In another study, some kindergarten teachers reported that they seldom planned for or implemented practices to support the successful transition of preschool children and their families to kindergarten (Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999). Teachers indicated that administrative policies, such as the absence of class rosters in the spring and summer months and the lack of resources and time on the job, prevented them from focusing on recommended practices.

The support of administrators is considered to be a major contributing factor to the creation of positive relationships among the various adults involved in EC programs nationwide and to the successful implementation of services for young children and their families (Johnson et al., 1992; Lieber et al., 1997; Lieber et al., 2000). Among the specific supports administrators must provide are the following:

- listening to staff members' concerns,
- establishing a shared vision among staff and families,
- acknowledging the abilities of staff members, and
- providing appropriate resources for staff planning and training and for networking with community agencies.

Garwood and Mori (1985) described the responsibilities of the administrator of EC programs for children with disabilities as needing to go beyond the traditional management issues of staff hiring, staffing stability, budgets, space, and acquisition of technologies. These administrators must attend as well to the following:

1. issues concerning the complexity of early childhood development;
2. the complexity of developmental delays in the youngest children;
3. cooperation with various agencies;
4. interaction with families of very young children, including infants; and
5. federal and state rules and regulations (Garwood & Mori, 1985; Johnson et al., 1992).

Administrators of EC programs have multiple roles to play, but their foremost concern must be working with staff members, families, and communities to create successful programs (Buysse, Wesley, & Keyes, 1998; Lay-Dopyera & Dopyera, 1985; Swan, 1985). The degree to which administrators can assume these roles varies, however, because of training, experience, and program variables.

Brotherson and colleagues (2001) reported that elementary school principals in Iowa did not always perceive themselves as capable of solving the problems they identified in regards to administering inclusive EC programs in their schools. The survey and interview data from this study indicated a reliance on EC teachers and other professionals. The principals identified a number of challenges, including (a) an increase in the number of young children with challenging behaviors being identified for services, (b) societal changes and the social needs of families, (c) a shortage of qualified personnel, (d) a lack of training and support for administrators, and (e) the need for community agencies to work with schools to support stressed and high-risk families. The lack of training and time available to principals, as well as a perceived loss of control for out-of-building services common in EC and family support programs, often were mentioned as justification for the desire to hire additional personnel to help coordinate interagency and multisite efforts for the EC programs. In a survey study by Gallagher and colleagues (1992), principals also cited limited school resources, for exam-

ple, facilities, finances, and availability of qualified staff members, as well as their own limited knowledge of EC practices and teachers' needs, as major barriers to the successful implementation of EC programs.

Cavallaro, Ballard-Rosa, and Lynch (1998) found these same concerns among 43 EC school administrators in California who supervised inclusive infant, toddler, and preschool programs. These administrators described challenges in establishing their inclusive EC programs when (a) parents of nondisabled children were required to pay tuition for any unmandated services, (b) infants were served predominantly in home settings without exposure to typically developing peers, and (c) the number of children with disabilities (in larger programs) prohibited increasing classroom enrollments with nondisabled children.

In summary, the literature has indicated that there are both real and perceived challenges facing administrators of EC programs for infants and preschool children, particularly when associated with public schools, elementary school principals, and programs involving children with disabilities (Brotherson et al., 2001; Garwood & Mori, 1985; Lieber et al., 2000). Reliance by administrators on the EC teachers' knowledge of recommended practices suggests that teachers play an important role in shaping a program's design as well as in delivering the actual program. Teachers' views concerning the quality of administration they observe in their programs may shed light on administrators' perceptions of inadequacy and the call for specific administrator competencies associated with the supervision of EC programs (Garwood & Mori, 1985; Johnson et al., 1992). Among studies that looked at perceptions of such issues, Cavallaro and colleagues (1998), for example, included only school administrators' perceptions in their description of inclusive infant and preschool programs in California, and they focused primarily on describing program models, rather than the quality of program administration. The study by Johnson and colleagues (1992) that identified important administrator competencies did include service providers in the sample, but only 28% of the respondents were teachers (more than 50% were supervisors) and public schools were not exclusively studied. Finally, Lieber and colleagues (1997) included interviews with EC teachers but did not focus on issues exclusive to public school-based EC programs. A larger sample of EC teachers employed in public schools may offer the data needed to validate previous reports about administrative strengths and challenges.

Nebraska offers a unique opportunity for exploring the perceptions that EC teachers in public schools have of EC administrators. This rural state contains more than 500 school districts, and there is a state mandate to provide special education/early intervention services in the public schools to children with disabilities

or developmental delays from age of diagnosis (birth) through age 21 years (Nebraska Department of Education, 2000). State guidelines for quality EC programs encourage inclusive practices and the inclusion of children with and without disabilities in the same EC programs. In addition, many federally funded (i.e., Head Start), state-funded, and local EC programs are housed in public schools across the state. The state-funded programs include inclusive preschools and infant/family projects in collaborative partnerships with local school and nonschool providers. The locally sponsored EC programs include such services as after-school childcare and teen mom/infant-care programs. Furthermore, recent state regulations have called for all teachers associated with EC programs housed in the public schools to have proper EC credentials, including appropriate teaching certificates (EC or ECSE), and knowledge of early childhood and literacy development, family systems, developmentally and culturally appropriate practices, and home visiting principles (Nebraska Department of Education, 2002). Finally, although elementary principals may be assigned responsibility for the EC programs housed in their buildings, other administrators may be associated with the EC program. In urban areas, district project coordinators may supervise EC staff members across multiple buildings and programs. Because of the small size of some rural districts in this state, cooperative ventures across multiple districts have resulted frequently in EC administrators taking on the role of program coordinator, special education director, or project supervisor working out of regional educational service units or in cooperation with local elementary principals of schools where programs may be housed.

As part of a state-funded project to enhance public school administrators' knowledge of EC programs for children ages birth to 5 years, we developed a multiphased investigation of the perceptions of parents, administrators, and teachers regarding current EC administration practices in Nebraska schools (LaCost & Grady, 2002). The present study was designed to identify the following:

- who EC teachers report to be their immediate supervisor,
- how EC teachers perceive the quality of administrative support,
- if teachers perceive that there are differences in the administrative support provided by principals versus that provided by other supervisors,
- how EC teachers in rural and urban communities differ in their perceptions, and
- if EC teachers perceive any difference in administrative support or challenges for integrated versus segregated EC programs in the public schools.

The results might provide information useful for designing statewide training and technical support for EC administrators.

Method

Participants

All teachers on record with the Nebraska State Department of Education for the academic year 2000–2001 were invited to participate in this study if they were associated with the state's early childhood special education (ECSE) or other EC education prekindergarten programs. These 316 teachers included 257 ECSE teachers serving 3,071 children with disabilities ages birth to 5 years in the year 2000 (classroom or home-based) and 59 other EC teachers (total student enrollment unknown) employed in nonspecial education programs for children at risk under the age of 5 years that were not specifically special education programs (i.e., Even Start, Head Start, Title I, 4-year-old kindergarten).

Instrument

A 4-page survey for gathering information about teachers' views on the administration of EC programs was constructed. This survey consisted of 58 items clustered around themes identified in a review of the literature on EC administration issues and in focus groups conducted with EC parents and administrators in Nebraska. The items inquired about the following:

- values teachers held regarding EC programs in the public schools for young children ages birth to 5 years;
- administrators' knowledge of and support for unique EC issues such as space, schedules, budgets, and staffings;
- the role of elementary schools and administrators in communicating with families of young children;
- the need for building-level and community-level collaboration in school-based EC programs;
- the degree of inclusionary practices in EC programs; and
- teachers' characteristics (e.g., education, gender, age), work settings (i.e., homes, elementary schools, communities), and administrative arrangements (i.e., principal, on-site program director, off-site program director).

Teachers were asked to rate each of 46 items along a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). An additional 12 demographic items required teachers to mark "yes" or "no" or to select an appropriate

item from a list of options. To ensure that respondents could easily understand and complete the survey, a small group of EC teachers piloted the survey and provided useful feedback. Modification of the survey wording and design was completed prior to mailing it out.

Survey Distribution

The survey, a letter explaining the purpose of the study, and a stamped, self-addressed envelope were mailed to the teachers at their last known place of employment. Two weeks after the first mailing, a follow-up letter and another survey were sent to ensure a satisfactory response. Two months after the first mailing, telephone calls were made to 30 randomly selected teachers who had not returned a completed survey in order to document the reasons for nonparticipation. These teachers reported the following reasons: (a) didn't receive the survey, (b) too busy, (c) lost return mailing address, and (d) returned it but it probably was lost in mail.

Data Analyses

All data were coded and entered in the computer by a graduate student associated with the project. In order to help ensure accuracy of data entry, 10% of the surveys were randomly selected and coded by a second graduate student. Errors that were found were typographic in nature. They were corrected before the data were analyzed. Raw data, which were collapsed to reflect the responses of "agree" and "disagree" only, were converted to percentages.

After overall responses were summarized, the data were analyzed using a chi square to determine the distribution of responses for select demographic variables. Subsequent analyses (i.e., the Mann-Whitney test) of respondents' ratings permitted a comparison of responses among groups to identify significant differences in representative samples. These groups included (a) teachers supervised by principals and teachers supervised by other administrators, (b) teachers housed in integrated (general education EC and ECSE) buildings and teachers in segregated (general education EC or ECSE only) buildings, and (c) teachers from communities of the following sizes: small (population under 5,000), medium (population 5,000–10,000), medium to large (population 10,000–25,000), and large (more than 25,000).

Results

Respondent Demographics

Overall, 176 surveys were completed and returned, for a return rate of 56% of all EC teachers surveyed. These surveys represented 130 ECSE teachers and 43 other EC

Table 1. Early Childhood Teacher Demographics

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Role		
EC teacher	43	24
ECSE teacher	130	74
Unknown	3	2
Community size		
Population < 5,000	30	17
Population 5,000-10,000	22	13
Population 10,000-25,000	21	12
Population > 25,000	94	53
Unknown	9	5
School district size		
< 200 students	19	11
200-400 students	16	9
400 students	120	68
Unknown	21	12
Program location^a		
Elementary school building	119 (66) ^b	68
Elementary school portable	13 (3)	7
Other district-owned building	25 (8)	14
Child's home	75 (7)	43
Community preschool	45 (7)	25
Community childcare setting	29 (1)	16
Integrated/segregated EC setting		
General education EC-only in building	20	11
ECSE-only in building	80	45
Both EC programs in building	76	44
Integrated classrooms in buildings		
99	56	
Immediate supervisor		
Building principal	89	51
Off-site principal	11	6
Building-level program director	18	10
Off-site program director	51	29
Unknown	7	4

N = 176. EC = early childhood general education; ECSE = early childhood special education; Integrated EC setting = ECSE and general education EC programs in building; Segregated EC setting = ECSE or general education EC programs in building.

a. Duplicated counts; teachers were asked to "select all that apply."

b. Reported only this location.

teachers; 3 surveys did not identify the teachers' professional credentials/program. The return rate was 51% for all ECSE teachers and 73% for all other EC teachers listed with the Nebraska Department of Education. Table 1 provides a summary of participant demographics.

Teachers represented both urban and rural communities. The majority of teachers reported working in EC programs that were housed in elementary school build-

ings or portable units on the grounds of elementary schools; 14% were housed in other district-owned buildings. Nearly half the teachers reported that their work takes them to children's homes, community preschools, or childcare programs, and 48% reported delivering services in multiple settings. Because most ECSE teachers in rural areas of Nebraska serve infants, toddlers, and preschoolage children with disabilities, few teachers in this sample reported working exclusively in children's homes or childcare facilities. Less than half (44%) the teachers surveyed reported that both general education EC and ECSE programs were housed in their buildings, but 56% of all the teachers reported that their class contained children with and without disabilities.

Administrators/Supervisors

Despite the large number of teachers reportedly housed in or on the grounds of elementary schools (75%), only about half (57%) the respondents reported that the elementary school principal (on- or off-site) was their immediate supervisor. Table 2 provides demographics for the principals and other supervisors acting as EC program administrators/supervisors in Nebraska. A small percentage of teachers (12%) were not associated with an elementary school but identified an elementary school principal as the immediate supervisor. More than a third (39%) of the teachers reported that someone other than an elementary school principal provided supervision for their EC programs and services. This includes 18% of those teachers housed in elementary school buildings or portables. The administrators who were not principals were identified as building-level program directors (10%) or off-site program directors (29%). More specific job titles were not requested or reported. We know that this group could include special education directors for regional educational service units and area cooperatives, building or district-level early childhood supervisors, and special or federal project coordinators.

Administrative Support

Teachers were asked to rate their degree of agreement with statements that explored school-family-community relations, inclusion efforts in their programs, administrative support, and relationships between teachers and program supervisors. The proportionally larger number of ECSE teachers in the data set prohibited a comparison of ECSE and other EC teacher responses, $\chi^2(1, 167) = 49.586, p < .0001$. Table 3 presents a listing (with percentages) of the predominant administrative supports identified by the Nebraska EC teachers. Nearly two thirds of the teachers surveyed reported that their supervising principal relied on the expertise of teachers' and EC consultants for decisions regarding the EC program. A greater percentage agreed that their EC ad-

Table 2. Demographics of Early Childhood Administrators

Administrative assignment	Principal		Other supervisor		χ^2
	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	
Teachers					
EC	32	(84)	6	(16)	
ECSE	64	(52)	59	(48)	
Unknown	4	(50)	4	(50)	
Totals ^a	100	(57)	69	(39)	$\chi^2(1, 161) = 12.486, p = .0004$
EC program location					
In elementary school	78	(68)	37	(32)	
Not in elementary school	22	(41)	32	(59)	$\chi^2(1, 169) = 11.158, p = .0008$
Building-level programs					
Integrated EC programs	52	(69)	23	(31)	
Segregated EC programs	40	(53)	36	(47)	
Unknown	8	(44)	10	(56)	$\chi^2(1, 151) = 4.423, p = .035$

EC = early childhood general education; ECSE = early childhood special education; Integrated EC setting = ECSE and general education EC programs in building; Segregated EC setting = ECSE or general education EC programs in building.

a. Totals do not equal sample size of 176 because 7 (4%) teachers did not report their administrators' category/type.

ministrator had knowledge of and advocated for their EC program. The majority of teachers reported that their immediate supervisor helped them recognize the need for change and growth and provided necessary support and direction. Furthermore, more than half of the teachers reported administrative support for a flexible work schedule and time with families, and they indicated that their administrator recognized the reasons for unique budget requests.

Administrative Challenges

A number of possible administrative challenges were identified from the data. These included survey items describing positive qualities that fewer teachers (< 50%) agreed were evident in their EC programs or administrators. These items addressed issues associated with (a) the role of schools in families' lives; (b) school collaboration with community programs; (c) the presence of EC programs in elementary schools; and (d) staff employment, staff development, and evaluation of EC teachers and programs by supervisors. See Table 3 for a listing (and percentages) of the predominant items identified as possible challenges for administration of EC programs in Nebraska.

Role of Schools in Families' Lives. The majority (70%) of teachers indicated that elementary school personnel need to take a more active role in supporting families of young children. More than half (57%) of the teachers surveyed reported having discussions at their work settings about the need to support parents of children in EC programs by offering classes on parenting, literacy, and social behavior of preschool-age children. Less than half, however, reported contact or activities with par-

ents at least monthly, and 22% of the teachers indicated that their programs did not accommodate meeting with families before or after school.

School Collaboration with Community Programs.

The overwhelming majority (93%) of teachers surveyed agreed that EC educators need to collaborate with community agencies to meet the needs of families with young children. Teachers agreed that the increase in the number of families in their communities with many needs, the significant health-care needs of some children, and the transitions of children among various community programs required community-wide collaboration. Less than half of the teachers, however, reported being involved in collaborative efforts with non-education agencies on at least a monthly basis, and a little over a third reported that a collaborative venture existed between their own program and another EC program.

EC Programs in Elementary Schools. Sixty-one percent of the EC teachers reported feeling welcome in their elementary schools; however, 34% did not feel welcome. Furthermore, less than half of the teachers agreed that space and phone/computer access was adequate. Finally, although only 43% reported that preschool-age programs caused any major challenges for elementary principals, 58% noted administrative concerns in serving infants and toddlers.

Additional features of EC programs in elementary schools may contribute to the feeling of isolation that some EC teachers reported. Sixty percent indicated that they needed help in making inclusion work. A similar percentage (59%) agreed that staff members

Table 3. Predominant Administrative Supports (and Possible Challenges) Reported by Early Childhood Teachers

Supports/challenges	EC teachers agree (%)
EC administrator has	
Knowledge of EC program	72
Advocated for EC program	72
Assisted in recognizing need for EC teacher change and growth	70
Respect for EC teacher's expertise	65
Provided program support & direction	62
Recognized EC program unique budget requests	62
Options for flexible work schedules & EC teachers' time with families	58
Employed qualified EC personnel	49
The EC program has	
Monthly teacher contacts with EC families	48
Adequate space & supplies	43
Collaboration with nonschool agencies	40
Collaborative ventures between EC programs	39
Smooth transitions from preschool to kindergarten	31
Kindergarten teachers who perceive themselves as extensions of EC programs	28
EC-specific tool for evaluating EC teachers	11

Wording represents minor paraphrasing of actual survey items for purposes of table presentation.

in their buildings view young children's behavior problems as a concern and a possible deterrent to inclusion of young children with disabilities in general education programs. Fifty-three percent of the teachers, however, indicated that their preschool-age children (with and without disabilities) were included in some school-wide events. Unfortunately, less than a third of the EC teachers stated that children's transitions from early childhood to kindergarten programs were smooth and without problems, and only 28% said that kindergarten teachers viewed themselves as extensions of the district's EC programs. Finally, 65% of the EC teachers said that their unique staff development needs were responsible in part for isolating them from the rest of the elementary school staff.

EC Staff Employment, Development, and Evaluation Practices. Fifty-one percent of the teachers noted a lack of qualified personnel employed in their public school EC programs. This may be associated with a statewide EC teacher shortage or with the fact that 74% of the teachers reported that their supervisors used the same evaluation tool to evaluate the EC teachers that was used to evaluate elementary school teachers. Furthermore, 34% of the teachers also reported that their supervisors used the same evaluation tool to evaluate both homebased and classroom-based performances; another 45% neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement, which suggests that either they did not know what instrument the administrator used to evaluate them or the administrator did not evaluate the EC teacher. Finally, 96% of the EC teachers agreed that they needed more time for staff development activities applicable specifically to EC programs.

Principals and Other Administrators

Table 2 presents demographics for the administrators/supervisors of the EC teacher respondents. The Mann-Whitney test and chi-square statistics were used to compare responses from teachers who had a principal for an immediate supervisor with responses from teachers who did not. A principal was more likely to be the immediate supervisor of a general education EC teacher than an ECSE teacher, and he or she was more likely to be the supervisor of any EC programs housed in elementary school buildings than of programs in other locations. Principal-administered programs were more often reported for teachers who worked in buildings that housed both special education and general education EC programs. Furthermore, EC teachers were more likely to report inclusion of their children in schoolwide events ($z = -3.04, p = .0023$) and to feel welcomed by elementary school staff ($z = -3.32, p = .0009$) if they had a principal for an immediate supervisor.

Teachers stated significantly more often that administrators other than principals demonstrated traits that were supportive of the EC teachers' roles and responsibilities. For example, administrators other than principals were reported more frequently as having knowledge of EC programs ($z = -4.128, p < .0001$) and of the unique challenges and budget requests associated with these programs ($z = -2.078, p = .0037; z = -2.257, p = .024$, respectively). These program administrators were also reported more often than principals to provide flexible work schedules ($z = -2.297, p = .0216$), encourage home visits ($z = -2.443, p = .0146$), and accommodate teachers' schedules to permit meetings with families ($z = -2.322, p = .0203$). Significantly more teachers reported that these non-principal administrators acted as a liaison with other EC administrators ($z = -3.702, p = .0002$) and advocated for their EC program ($z =$

Table 4. Distribution of Early Childhood Teachers and Elementary Principals in Segregated and Integrated Elementary School Buildings

	Integrated building		Segregated building			
	ECSE + other EC ^a		ECSE only ^b		Other EC only ^c	
EC Personnel	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)
All teachers ^d	76	(43)	80	(45)	20	(11)
Teachers in integrated classrooms ^e	41	(54)	51	(64)	7	(35)
Principal as program administrator/supervisor ^f	52	(69)	43	(54)	5	(25)

ECSE = early childhood special education for children ages birth to 5 years; Other EC = general education early childhood program for children under age 5 years; Integrated classroom = children with and without disabilities enrolled in same classroom. a. $n = 76$; b. $n = 80$; c. $n = 20$; d. $n = 176$; e. $n = 99$ (56%); f. $n = 100$ (57%)

-2.320, $p = .0203$). Teachers with supervisors other than principals were significantly more likely to view ages birth to 3 years as critical to a child's development ($z = -3.228$, $p = .0012$) and collaboration with community agencies as important ($z = -3.04$, $p = .0023$). More teachers with administrators who were not principals agreed that elementary schools needed to take a more active role in regard to families in their communities ($z = -2.108$, $p = .035$) than did teachers with principals as the immediate supervisor.

Integrated/Segregated Programs

Table 4 provides the distribution of teachers and principals in segregated and integrated buildings. Less than half of the teachers reported working in buildings that included both ECSE and general education EC programs, and only 56% indicated that their classroom contained both children with and without disabilities. In addition, only 54% of the integrated buildings (housing both types of programs) had children with and without disabilities in the same classrooms. More of the teachers associated with primarily ECSE programs (64%) reported integrated classrooms; only 35% of the other EC teachers had children with disabilities in their classrooms.

Principals supervised 54% of the teachers in segregated programs and 69% of the teachers in integrated programs. Teachers in integrated settings were significantly more likely to (a) report monthly parent contact activities ($z = -2.36$, $p = .0183$), (b) discuss with colleagues the school's role in responding to societal changes ($z = -3.44$, $p = .0006$), (c) include the young children in schoolwide activities ($z = -2.23$, $p = .0258$), and (d) have kindergarten teachers who view themselves as an extension of the EC program ($z = -2.84$, $p = .0045$). Significantly more teachers in segregated settings, however, reported a greater range of disabilities in their EC programs ($z = -2.06$, $p = .0394$) and more evidence of support for paraeducators ($z = -2.123$, $p = .0338$). Home

visiting also was reported more often by teachers in segregated programs (48%); only 28% of teachers in integrated programs reported home visiting to be a part of their job responsibilities, $\chi^2(1, 157) = 6.990$, $p = .0082$.

Community Size

Community size did not appear to be a factor in regards to the administrative supports EC teachers perceived that they received from their immediate supervisor. On the other hand, 64% of the teachers in integrated buildings were from communities with populations of more than 25,000 and more than 400 students in the school, whereas 57% of teachers reported segregated ECSE programs in communities with less than 25,000 citizens, $\chi^2(3, 153) = 7.890$, $p = .048$. Because there were significantly more teachers in this study from large (more than 25,000 residents) communities than from medium or small communities, $\chi^2(3, 169) = 92.325$, $p < .0001$, the responses of teachers from the large communities often outweighed those of teachers from smaller communities. When the responses from teachers in the smaller-size communities were compared (populations under 25,000), however, significant differences were noted on some items regarding specific issues relative to programs in elementary schools (Kruskal-Wallis one-way ANOVA). The teachers from communities with populations of 10,000 to 25,000 were more likely to report feeling isolated from elementary school staff, $\chi^2(2, 63) = 6.009$, $p = .0495$, and to be having difficulty transitioning children to kindergarten, $\chi^2(2, 73) = 9.748$, $p = .0125$, than the teachers from communities of less than 10,000 citizens.

Discussion

In the present study, we examined teacher perceptions of administrative supports and challenges in public school EC programs in one state. In general, the

Nebraska teachers revealed satisfaction with the administrators who were their immediate supervisors, but they revealed some areas of concern that will require attention. Although the return rate was respectable, it did not represent all the employed EC teachers in the state. Furthermore, because the sample comprised mostly ECSE teachers and teachers from larger urban communities, the results may not be generalizable to all EC program administrations. The results of this study should be considered a preliminary "snapshot" of current EC program administration issues in Nebraska schools and should be interpreted with caution.

In line with previous literature regarding competencies needed by EC administrators (Garwood & Mori, 1985; Lieber et al., 1997), the Nebraska teachers reported receiving support for unique program budget requests and recognition of the need for professional change or growth. The EC administrators in Nebraska were generally described as knowledgeable of and advocates for the EC programs in the public schools that served infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children with and without disabilities. This is particularly reassuring given the facts that (a) more than half of the administrators referenced in this study were elementary school principals and (b) 16%–43% of the teachers reported providing some EC services off-campus in children's homes or community childcare or preschool centers.

The Nebraska EC teachers confirmed the views of principals and administrators (Brotherson et al., 2001; Lieber et al., 1997) in noting these administrators' reliance on the expertise of the former. Furthermore, the EC teachers agreed with previously surveyed administrators that challenges exist and assistance is needed from administrators for ensuring EC-specific staff development/ training activities, securing appropriate program space, hiring qualified EC personnel, and making inclusionary practices work (Brotherson et al., 2001; Cavallo et al., 1998; Gallagher et al., 1992; Lieber et al., 1997). These universal issues appear to be pertinent in both urban and rural communities and for both principals and other supervisors.

Johnson and his colleagues (1992) stressed that EC administrators needed to be able to assess staff members' strengths and needs and to evaluate programs appropriately. In the present study, however, few teachers reported that their EC administrator used EC-specific or setting-specific (home-based vs. classroom-based) tools to evaluate performance. The use of evaluation tools designed for assessing the competence of elementary classroom teachers may provide little useful information about the competence of the EC teacher if the latter is observed in home-based discussions, coaching sessions with families, or in nonacademic preschool classrooms. In addition, the fact that so many EC teachers were unable to report the type of evaluation tool used for their performance evaluation suggests that evaluation is not

always conducted in a systematic fashion or shared with teachers. The lack of cooperative efforts between teachers and administrators could negatively influence the overall quality of the EC program and the long-term relationship of these important program personnel (Johnson et al., 1992; Lieber et al., 2000).

The Nebraska teachers echoed the concerns of other EC teachers and administrators in noting that desired practices are not always implemented, possibly due to established policies or staff attitudes (Pianta et al., 1999). For example, despite a belief in the importance of collaboration with other EC programs and community agencies and the role the administrator should play in such collaborations (Garwood & Mori, 1985; Lieber et al., 2000), few teachers in the present study reported such collaborative ventures to be in place. Furthermore, transitioning children from preschool to kindergarten was perceived by many EC teachers to be less than smooth, and these teachers also saw kindergarten teachers as not always viewing themselves as extensions of the EC programs. Furthermore, administrators who were not principals were more likely to support flexible work schedules and arrange opportunities for teachers to meet regularly with families than were principals. It may be that principals see these unique EC program needs as conflicting with the needs and schedules of other elementary building staff, or it may reflect a limited knowledge of recommended practices or ability to successfully facilitate them on the part of the principals.

The demands on a school administrator's time and knowledge can be endless, and attempts to be available to and supportive of all assigned staff members may result in a less than equitable distribution of the administrator's attention. The past and current data suggesting that EC administrators rely on the expertise of the EC teachers support a possible limit to administrators' abilities to know all programs well. The literature on principal-teacher relationships, in particular, would support these findings, in that stronger relationships and perceived supports are evident when the principal has the same educational background as the teacher and when time permits discussions about the teacher's needs and accomplishments (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2001). Furthermore, the challenges of supervising staff members who may provide services in inclusive community programs and to parents in their homes means trusting the EC staff to be accountable for their unsupervised time. Few principals are prepared to supervise staff in multiple off-campus locations, and few have the necessary training to understand these practices for young children with disabilities (Brotherson et al., 2001; Garwood & Mori, 1985).

Community size did not appear to influence teachers' perceptions of administrative supports or challenges. A number of teachers in both large and small communities reported support and understanding from adminis-

trators, whereas other teachers reported less satisfaction. Teachers from smaller communities, however, reported less teacher isolation, smoother transitions to and coordination with kindergarten programs, and greater coordination with community preschools than did teachers in larger, urban communities. The nature of a small community, with its smaller number of children and community programs, may account for this perception of community connectedness. Furthermore, in small communities it may be easier for administrators to know what resources are available and to know citizens better. Networking with the few available nonschool agencies is probably also simpler. Small communities may challenge EC administrators, however, in terms of understanding the unique needs of such a small population of preschool-age children and their families (Grady & Krumm, 1998).

Call for Teacher–Administrator Collaboration

The results of the present study support the idea that administrator competencies should include the following: (a) an understanding of EC-specific rules and regulations, (b) competence in interpersonal and staff development skills, and (c) awareness of recommended practices in early childhood programs (Garwood & Mori, 1985; Johnson et al., 1992; Lieber et al., 1997; Lieber et al., 2000). Furthermore administrators and EC teachers should form alliances to help meet the needs of their communities' children and families (Brotherson et al., 2001; Gallagher et al., 1992).

Specifically, school principals and other administrators of EC programs might consider the following suggestions.

1. *Request and seek continuing education on EC issues/ supervision through either EC or school administration professional organizations.* Publications such as the following may be particularly helpful: the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), Division for Early Childhood's (DEC) *Recommended Practices* (Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000), the *Administrator's Essentials* (Smith, 2000), the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) *Developmentally Appropriate Practices in Early Childhood Programs* (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) and Head Start's program performance standards (Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 1999).
2. *Petition institutions of higher education to include in school administration certification programs coursework/practicums in the supervision of EC programs* (Johnson et al., 1992; Lieber et al., 1997). Credit and noncredit workshops and courses that are available in distance-education and self-instructional formats conducive to both rural and urban EC administrators are sorely needed.
3. *Provide opportunities for administrators and EC teachers to network regularly with community agencies regarding the needs of families and schools.* Staff members should

be encouraged to discuss with families the inclusion of their childcare providers, social workers, home-healthcare nurses, and/or ministers in individual program planning meetings (e.g., IFSP or IEP) so that the strengths and needs of the whole child and family are considered and addressed when attempting to outline individual programs of service.

4. *Engage EC teachers in discussions concerning revision of EC staff development opportunities, expectations, and performance evaluation forms and procedures.* Administrators need to understand the purpose and expected outcomes of the service models used (e.g., homebased, community-based, half-day, full-day, parent groups), the continuing education needs of first-year and tenured EC teachers, and the teachers' perceptions of factors that constitute quality EC services. The unique needs of EC teachers often require inservices and professional conferences that differ from those for elementary school teachers. In turn, administrators need to explain to teachers their expectations regarding quality teacher performance. Administrators and teachers should aim to cooperatively develop standards that meet the expectations of their professions.
5. *Promote coordination of staff development, space, supplies, and curricula between EC prekindergarten teachers and kindergarten teachers.* EC administrators—especially principals—will benefit from engaging kindergarten teachers in discussions with prekindergarten teachers regarding shared philosophies, staff development needs, and program challenges (Firlik, 2003). Aiming to position EC programs physically near kindergarten programs whenever possible may facilitate social and work relationships that could result in advancing both programs' goals and objectives for developmentally appropriate practices, inclusion, successful transitions, and family-centered services.

In addition, EC teachers employed in public schools might consider the following:

1. *Stay abreast of nationally recommended practices in EC programs by reading and participating in conferences through state and national professional organizations.* NAEYC or CEC/DEC offer useful publications and conferences that describe recent research findings and functional applications of recommended practices in classroom and home-based settings. Publications on recommended practices for inclusive quality special education (Sandall et al., 2000) and developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) should be referenced regularly and shared with program administrators.
2. *Recognize EC professional expertise and work to keep administrators and colleagues up to date on recommended practices.* Teachers with membership in EC profes-

- sional organizations should share articles, books, and information about upcoming workshops and conferences with colleagues who are not members. Regularly scheduled meetings during children's lunchtime, during children's nap-time, or in after-work study groups may be used to discuss recent training or readings and to invite administrators to discuss timely EC issues.
3. *Recognize the professional responsibility to advocate for quality programs for children and families.* Teachers should not assume that administrators are fully informed on the issues, practices, and needs of quality EC programs (Brotherson et al, 2001; Gallagher et al., 1992). Teachers should arrange for regularly scheduled discussions with the administrator and should feel comfortable in asking for space, supplies, and schedules. These requests should include a prepared rationale for the request that considers recommended practice guidelines, and possible costs, time, and other resources that may play into an administrator's responses. Teachers should invite brainstorming and mutual problem-solving sessions with the administrator before assuming there will be no support or demanding elaborate models.
 4. *Work with school administrators to design pertinent staff development activities for EC teachers, professional staff members, and colleagues.* Teachers are encouraged to seek input about priority training needs or shared interests from kindergarten teachers, other public school-employed EC teachers in their building or district, and non-public school EC teachers in the community. The small number of EC professionals in public schools means EC staff are often required to attend less than applicable staff development activities with elementary education teachers. EC teachers should propose relevant inservice topics of interest and possible speakers from within and outside the district to administrators. They also may provide information about the number of teachers and staff members interested in upcoming training. Administrators could explore available training grants from local foundations or state departments that could be used to support staff development activities pertinent to EC personnel in the school and in the larger community.
 5. *Assist administrators in redesigning forms and procedures for performance evaluation of EC teachers in home-based and/or preschool classrooms.* Administrators should provide teachers with the items that are district-mandated for all teacher evaluations; teachers in turn should seek to understand the purpose and frequency of performance evaluations in their districts. Teachers should review EC recommended practices and standards and suggest items, rating scales, and procedures for evaluating the EC teacher's performance in home-based, com-

munity-based, and school-based preschool programs. The value of using videotapes, audiotapes, parent reports, surveys, or interviews with child-care providers—as well as live, participatory observations with children and families—as a means of collecting data that could reflect on a teacher's performance should be discussed with supervisors.

6. *Petition institutions of higher education to include in both school administration and EC certification programs coursework/practicums in administrative issues affiliated with EC programs* (Johnson et al., 1992). Colleges and professional organizations should be encouraged to offer workshops and courses on EC administration that can be easily accessed by employed EC teachers as well as school administrators. Teachers should seek an understanding of the school administrators' perspectives through such continuing education efforts as well as through discussions with immediate supervisors.

Conclusions

As teachers recognize their importance in the design and administration of quality EC programs, they will be of great assistance to school administrators in ensuring provision of quality services to the children and families in their communities. Teachers and administrators can forge a campaign to offer quality early childhood education and intervention for prekindergarten populations. The current data suggest that in Nebraska there exists administrative support for EC programs, a recognition that young children and families are in need of special quality services in the community and public schools, and an awareness that more can be done to coordinate schoolrun EC efforts with those of various community agencies. No one professional can assume full responsibility for all aspects of quality EC programs, however.

The findings in the present study raise questions regarding the extent to which EC teachers perceive the quality of their EC administration and their own roles in public school programs for infants, toddlers, and preschool children. Future research is needed to clarify how ECSE teachers may differ from other EC program educators and how teachers in infant programs versus teachers in preschool-age programs differ in their needs and perceived roles in administering public school EC programs. Furthermore, the avenues and barriers to productive EC teacher-administrator collaboration need to be explored in order to identify strategies for advancing this necessary teamwork in public school EC programs. Finally, the call for pertinent training for EC administrators (Brotherson et al., 2001) begs the question of how best to provide it. Are university courses, professional conference sessions, regional/state workshops, or Web sites or listservs the most efficient and productive ways for states and professional organizations to meet the needs of these school administrators?

Quality EC programs require personnel who can provide program management and leadership; inspiration; and knowledge of recommended practices, laws, and child development. If they work together, teachers and administrators can achieve the mutual goals of addressing the needs of young children and families at greatest risk for later school failure and preparing schools for the diverse populations of children and families seeking a public school education.

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