Explicating the Program Theory of a Pre-Kindergarten Family Program

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to identify the elements of the program theory in the family program of Edmonton Public School Board's Pre-kindergarten program. Specifically, the aim of this inquiry was to describe: (a) the goals of the family program; (b) the strategies, activities, and events that are involved in the family program; (c) how the strategies, activities, and events relate to the goals; and (d) any necessary background or training required by the staff to effectively achieve the program goals. A qualitative descriptive approach was used in the investigation. The research was completed using bioecological and critical realist theories, and took a community-based, constructivist approach. Data were collected from Alberta Education documents, Edmonton Public School Board documents, and participant perspectives. Semi-structured individual interviews were completed with 11 school-family liaison workers. In addition, I conducted one focus group with nine participants that included teachers, occupational therapists, and speech-language pathologists. Nine pre-kindergarten sites were represented by the research participants.

In this research, I identified four themes: (a) a disconnect between the perception of program goals and specific program requirements, (b) a lack of guidance or framework to implement the program, (c) the importance of relationships, and (d) ideas to improve the family program. Findings show that the goals of the staff were consistent with Alberta Education's (2006) standards for early childhood development and their family-oriented program document (2018). However, the staff strongly expressed that Alberta Education's requirements that all family-oriented programming sessions include the child was a barrier to reaching their goals for the families they work with. Although the families in the pre-kindergarten program cut across socio-economic status, cultures, and personal experiences, the current requirements limited the

ability of staff to respond effectively to the range of needs and abilities. Participants indicated that this requirement limited their ability to provide programming that was meaningful, purposeful, and beneficial to the families and instead created a mentality of providing programming simply to “check the box”.

Based on this research, I provide recommendations for the pre-kindergarten family program. These include a larger focus on social-emotional skills for both children and parents, and the implementation of ongoing evaluation to determine more precisely what is working for whom and why, with the goal of continuous improvement to increase positive outcomes for families and children.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Julia Roy. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Proposal to Explicate the Program Theory in a Pre-Kindergarten Family Program”, No. Pro00087881, 2018.

"You don't have to see the whole staircase,

Just take the first step."

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Explicating the Program Theory of a Pre-Kindergarten Family Program

Chapter 1: Introduction

Edmonton Public School Board's Pre-Kindergarten Program serves preschool-aged children with varying degrees of delays or disabilities. As a school-family liaison in Edmonton Public School Board's pre-kindergarten program, I work with the families of the children in the program. All the children in the program have a diagnosis of a severe or mild/moderate delay or disorder. My intent, as I work with the families, which I assume is the same as my colleagues', is that I am making things better for them in some way. But how do my colleagues and I know that what we are doing is actually helping families? How do we know we are making a difference? Are some things we are doing helpful, while others are not? Are there certain families for whom the program makes the most difference? The least? How do we determine this? To answer these questions, we first need to know if we all share the same assumptions about what we should be doing and why we are doing it. We must have a clear idea about what we are trying to achieve. We need to clarify and state what our assumptions are about our roles as school-family liaisons and our specific objectives. In other words, we need to have a clear and explicit program theory. Currently, a program theory for the pre-kindergarten family program does not exist. In this thesis, I outline a study that identifies and describes the goals of the family program, the activities that are involved in the family program, how the activities relate to the goals, and the type of training or background school-family liaisons require to successfully carry-out the activities in order to achieve the goals of the program.

To provide the context for this study, I describe the role of school-family liaisons in pre-kindergarten, and explain why the family program in pre-kindergarten is important, including how families are impacted when they have a child with a disability, the benefits of consistent

support across environments, and factors, such as parent[1] and program characteristics that can effect outcomes. I then outline the theoretical approaches used in this study, followed by the research design, including how I recruited participants, how I collected and analysed the data, my role in the research, and ethical considerations. First, though I explain what program theory is.

Through the data obtained from the interviews and focus group, four main themes were identified. The themes were: (a) the disconnect between the perception of program goals and specific program requirements, (b) lack of guidance or framework, (c) the importance of relationships, and (d) ideas to improve the family program. Connections between the themes and Alberta Education and Edmonton Public School Board documents were drawn. A proposed program theory based on the current data was discussed. Recommendations for the family program were made, limitations of the research, and recommendations for future research were given.

What is Program Theory?

Program theory, also known as theory of change, is a detailed set of beliefs about how programs or interventions operate to affect outcomes (Barker, 2018). Program theory "focus[es] on the "main active ingredients" that are presumed to lead to the desired outcomes, and the key conditions under which they are believed to operate" (Donaldson, 2007, p. 23). It explains how a program works and how the different elements of the program work together; it describes how a program is meant to operate (Clapham, Manning, Williams, O'Brien, & Sutherland, 2017).

[1] In order to simplify things for the reader, I will be using the term *parent(s)* to refer to parents and guardians. I acknowledge that besides parents, caregivers in pre-kindergarten may be grandparents, aunts or uncles, foster parents or other.

Program theory should inform how the program inputs support the activities that produce the intended outcomes, and it creates a foundation upon which evaluation of the program can be based (Clapham et al., 2017). The evaluation can then start to answer questions about what parts of the program are working for whom and why.

As recommended by the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard (Barker, 2018), program theory should be program-specific, rather than encompass the goals of the entire organization. The theory should be clear and concise enough to discuss in a short conversation with three areas of focus: *strategies*, *targets*, and *outcomes*. The strategies are the activities or the actions taken in order to achieve the desired outcomes. The targets are the knowledge, skills, behaviours, and/or beliefs that are directly targeted for change by the strategies, and in which one would expect to see immediate and large impacts. In a program that works with parents, child targets are not always necessary because the change in the child occurs through the parents (Mazzucchelli & Sanders, 2011; Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013; Trivette & Dunst, 2005; Zand et al., 2018). The outcomes are the ultimate goals of the program, both short- and long-term, and are important in and of themselves, rather than a step toward something else. A final important aspect of a program theory is *moderators*. These are factors that could affect who benefits the most and who benefits the least and can help to explain individual differences in response to the program. Examples of moderators include participation, temperament, history of early adversity, and diagnosis. Including moderators is important to be able to pinpoint for whom the program is working and why.

According to Wilder Research (2009), program theory needs to be based on good "evidence about what makes programs successful and how people really change" (p.1). It should draw on behavioural or social science concepts, prior research, implicit or unstated theories of

those most familiar with the program, observation of the program, and documentation of program operations (Donaldson, 2007). The Center for Theory of Change (2017) explains that to explicate a program's theory, it is helpful to start by identifying the long-term goals that the program hopes to achieve and then work back step-by-step until you get to the program activities. Do the activities logically lead to the identified long-term outcomes? What are the necessary in-between steps? What assumptions are held about participants and their involvement in the activities?

An example of a program theory in elementary school is: trained teachers provide literacy instruction to students → students gain knowledge of literacy skills → students practice literacy skills with teacher feedback → students' literacy skills continue to grow and develop according to grade level. The theory has the necessary elements (trained teachers, practice, and feedback) that lead to the desired outcomes (literacy skills at grade level). The strategies are the teacher's instruction and feedback and the students' practice, the target is the students' knowledge of literacy, and the outcome is that the students are able to read. Moderators that could affect students' literacy abilities are previous exposure to books and print, and the presence of developmental and/or language delays or disorders (Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 2001; Davides, de Jpng, Bus, Huijbregts & Swabb 2011).

As Funnell and Rogers (2011) explain, if the program theory is not defined, it can be difficult to interpret the evaluation results, however carefully an evaluation is done, because there is not a clear expression of what the program is intending to do. The program theory is the basis for the evaluation: "it identifies indicators of success and specifies the details of [what] is expected to change and how much" (Center for Theory of Change, 2017). It is needed to distinguish between whether the program itself is not working or if it was simply not

implemented properly. In a program that shows benefits, having a program theory helps to adapt a beneficial intervention to new situations, because the precise mechanisms of change can be identified (Funnell & Rogers, 2011).

As recommended by the Center for the Developing Child at Harvard (Barker, 2018), the program theory should be a living, active document that is discussed, tested, reflected on, and changed as needed on an ongoing basis. Each staff member should have a clear understanding of the program theory and be able to provide input and suggestions in order to contribute to its regular refinements. Having a program theory that closely represents the program activities helps to ensure that there is not a mismatch between the program goals and the evaluation. Those working in the program can contribute valuable insight to what the program goals are.

In contrast, front-line workers or practitioners in a program without a clear program theory may feel aimless and without a clear sense of purpose. This can contribute to gaps between the implicit theory and the practice (Chandler & Williamson, 2013). For some, it may feel as if the activities they have been instructed to perform do not align with what they see as the purpose of the program. Others with more autonomy in their role may come up with their own understanding of the specific program goals and how to best achieve them. This can result in each practitioner working toward different objectives, reducing their potential impact, or worse, working in opposition to each other. Even if all are working towards the same goals, a lack of a well-defined theory can lead to an evaluation with uninformative results (Gugiu & Rodríguez-Campos, 2007).

Context of the Study

The role of school-family liaisons in pre-kindergarten.

I have worked as a school-family liaison in Edmonton Public School Board's pre-kindergarten program since 2012. My job as a school-family liaison includes spending time in the classroom getting to know the children, attending meetings with other school staff to discuss children's goals and appropriate strategies; completing home visits to discuss reports, answering parent questions and sharing strategies and activities or other resources; planning and/or presenting parent information sessions on topics such as positive parenting and how to help facilitate language development; helping parents prepare for individual program plan meetings; and helping with the transition to the child's next school. These responsibilities fit into three general categories: family-oriented programming sessions, family support, and parent education (as found in my job description on the Edmonton Public School Board virtual private network, Staffzone). School-family liaisons work as part of a multi-disciplinary team that includes teachers, educational assistants, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists. Families in the pre-kindergarten are required to complete, on average, 11 family-oriented programming sessions or visits per year.[2] Not meeting this number puts the program at risk of losing funding. There are 10 pre-kindergarten hub sites in Edmonton Public School Board, nine of which have at least one school-family liaison (Edmonton Public School

[2] For the 2019-2020 schoolyear, the family-oriented programming sessions requirement changed from 11 sessions per family per year to nine, as decided by Edmonton Public School Board. Additionally, most sites have worked under the assumption that the family-oriented programming sessions were averaged between families, allowing some flexibility to adjust the number as required by families. This has now been changed (or clarified) to be that every family must participate in a minimum of nine sessions per year.

Board, 2018). Hub sites are schools with pre-kindergarten classrooms and house the offices for the speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and school family liaisons, but also service pre-kindergarten classrooms in other schools. These pre-kindergarten classes in other schools are known as satellite classrooms.

The backgrounds of school-family liaisons currently include teachers, nurses' aides, educational assistants, social workers, and early childcare workers. There is no basic training or framework for school-family liaisons, newly hired or otherwise. Everyone is free to construct their programming and their time with parents as they, or their assistant principal, see fit. In some ways this flexibility is needed, as every child and family situation is unique. As school-family liaisons, we need to be able to adapt to each child's and family's circumstance as situations arise. However, considering the wide range of backgrounds and education levels, it would be surprising if our implicit concept of program theory was cohesive. It would be even more surprising if we all kept current on the latest evidence about what practices, approaches and programs work for what type of families and children and why. Many individual school-family liaisons indicate that they struggle to know what the purpose is for many of the home visits that do not have a pre-set agenda (such as explaining the family program at the beginning of the year or reviewing the individual program plan later in the year). The role of the school-family liaison is likely important but may be much more effective with a clear framework. In addition to the need for a framework to inform the content of home visits or parent sessions, is the need for a better understanding of how to do them. *How* we interact with families can be just as important as what we do with them (Trivette, Dunst, & Hamby, 2010). There is a growing understanding in the existing literature of the elements that are needed for family programming to be beneficial, as opposed to neutral or even harmful. For example, McWilliam (2010) speaks of the importance of

a family-centred approach that involves the co-creation of knowledge between the family and home visitor as they work together to analyze, problem solve and guide the direction of programming. Rush and Sheldon (2011) outline elements of coaching as an effective help-giving strategy, including building on what the parents already know, being non-directive, goal-based, reflective, and as hands-on as needed. As discussed in the next section, family programming in preschool programs is an important and powerful piece for improving long-term outcomes in families and their children, when done effectively.

Why family programming in pre-kindergarten is important.

As expressed in Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological model, all children are shaped by their environment, and during the first several years of life their home is a key environment. If the focus is on what happens in the preschool classroom to the exclusion of the home, many children may miss out on the help needed to reach their potential. Bronfenbrenner (1976) stressed that each environment that an individual experiences must be understood to be interdependent. Rosa and Tudge (2013) emphasize this point by explaining that "what happens or fails to happen in any given environment depends to a large extent on events and relationships in other related environments" (p. 247).

Families of children with disabilities face challenges above and beyond what other families of young children face. Having a better understanding of the issues families in the pre-kindergarten family program are dealing with can help us better support them, and in turn, their children. When children enter the classroom, they do not leave the effects of their home experiences at the door. How each immediate environment a child experiences interacts with other environments needs to be considered. Below I discuss some of the issues faced by families

in the pre-kindergarten program, including financial difficulties, problems finding childcare, social isolation, parenting issues, and health problems.

Child disability and family impacts.

Although many families of children with disabilities are doing well and many of those who are struggling report that their child has been a positive addition to their families, having a child with a disability can bring considerable challenges (Breitkreuz, Wunderli, Savage, & McConnell, 2014). I review some common challenges faced by families of children with disabilities including financial hardships (Statistics Canada, 2008), difficulty finding appropriate supports (Wiart, Kehler, Rempel, & Tough, 2014), social isolation (Woodgate, Ateah, & Secco, 2008), and how child emotional and behaviour problems interact with parental mental health (Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012). Each of these factors can contribute to parental stress and depression, leading to more negative outcomes for the family as a whole (Olsson & Hwang, 2001).

Finances.

According to Statistics Canada's most recent Participation and Limitation Survey (2008), the average income of families of children with a disability was nearly $10,000 less than that of families without disability. In addition, parents of children with a disability were more likely to fall below the low-income cut-off. This is largely due to the effect that having a child with a disability has on the parents' ability to maintain employment: nearly 40 per cent of parents reduced their hours of work, more than 35 per cent adjusted their hours, over 25 per cent did not take a job available to them, more than 20 per cent quit their jobs, and another 20 per cent turned down a promotion. This impacted mothers' employment disproportionately at 64 per cent

compared to fathers at just 8 per cent (Statistics Canada, 2008). This pattern was also seen in Breitkruez, et al.'s 2014 study looking at resilience in families of children with disabilities: in 42 per cent of the 538 families surveyed, mothers left the workforce in order to care for the children. In Sweden, families with children with autism were found to decrease their hours of work and have increased expenses related to the disability (Jarbrink, 2007). Breitkreuz et al. (2014) also found that there are out-of-pocket expenses that are incurred by Albertan families caring for a child with a disability that can make it difficult to make ends meet difficult even if they are later reimbursed. A study from the UK similarly found that families with children with disabilities required more money to achieve the same standard of living as compared to families without a child with a disability (Solmi, Melnychuk, & Morris, 2017).

Childcare.

Even when finances are not a concern, finding appropriate supports can be difficult for families of children with a disability. In the Participation and Limitation Survey (Statistics Canada, 2008), over a quarter of the parents surveyed had been refused a childcare service or program. A 2014 Alberta study by Wiart, Kehler, Rempel, and Tough found that, of the 318 centres surveyed, more than a third had refused children with special needs. Of the 25 day-homes surveyed, one-third had refused. Sixty-six percent gave the reason of no space, nearly 35 per cent said the child required more care than they could give, over a quarter said their staff did not have adequate training, a fifth said the physical environment was not accessible for the child, and 16 percent said they had inadequate access to supports (Wiart, Kehler, Rempel, & Tough, 2014). In Breitkruez et al.'s 2014 study on the social ecology of resilience, many families found the process of accessing services "long, convoluted and confusing"(p. 355) and led to feelings of "frustration and exhaustion" (p. 356).

Social supports.

In addition to having to "fight for services and supports" for their children, many families of children with disabilities reported stress stemming from social isolation and lack of social supports on top of the aforementioned financial difficulties (Breitkreuz et al., 2014, p. 359). In a study by Woodgate, Ateah, and Secco (2008) that examined the experience of families of children on the autism spectrum, parents reported feelings of isolation resulting from four key factors: lack of understanding from general society; being excluded from "normal" daily activities; feeling disconnected from their child, their spouse, and their extended family; and inadequate support from agencies. Courcy and des Rivières (2017) found that some parents of children with disabilities isolate themselves from others due to guilt associated with having a child with a disability and/or the perception that their experiences and concerns will not be understood by others. These results support the findings that families of children on the autism spectrum tend to participate in fewer social and recreational outings than families of typically developing children (Rao & Beidel, 2009). Many families in Breitkruez et al.'s (2014) study elaborated on these ideas. They felt socially isolated because of difficulties managing their child's behaviour when out in public, and because of limited financial resources. The fact that these families faced behavioural challenges with their children is not surprising given that children with developmental disabilities are more likely to have emotional and behavioural problems compared to typically developing children (Baker, Blacher, Crnic, & Edelbrock, 2002; Baker, Neece, Fenning, Crnic, & Blacher, 2010; Dekker, Koot, Ende, & Verhulst, 2002; Einfeld & Tonge, 1996; Emerson & Einfeld, 2010).

Child behaviour and parental mental health.

Financial challenges, difficulties securing childcare, lack of social support, and isolation all contribute to considerable stress for many families of children with disabilities. Baker et al. (2002) have shown that parents of children with developmental delays have higher levels of stress than parents of children without developmental delays, which is related, in part, to the behaviour difficulties of the child. Parenting stress and child behaviour problems play an iterative, mutually reinforcing role with each other; preceding and following each other for both parents of children without disabilities and those with (Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012). The more stressed parents feel, the less effective they are in handling behaviour problems, and the more behaviour problems a child exhibit. The more behaviour problems a child exhibits, the higher the parents' stress levels. Mothers of children on the autism spectrum have higher levels of parental stress than mothers of children with other developmental delays, which is attributed to the higher levels of problem behaviours seen in children on the autism spectrum (Estes et al., 2009). With higher levels of child behaviour problems often comes lower maternal self-efficacy (the belief that one is capable of handling a task or situation), which is associated with higher levels of maternal anxiety and depression (Hastings & Brown, 2002). Many parents of children with autism also have high levels of guilt which is correlated with higher parenting stress and lower levels of agency (Kuhn & Carter, 2006). Nealy, O'Hare, Powers, and Swick (2012) also report that mothers of children on the spectrum have increased stress, worry, and guilt. For many, these issues are severe enough to warrant seeking professional help, but many cannot financially afford to do so. Mothers of children with intellectual disabilities are at a higher risk of developing depression, and of those, mothers of children on the autism spectrum are at the highest risk; feeling helpless and/or ineffective can contribute to depression (Olsson & Hwang, 2001).

Compounding stress.

Parents report that receiving the diagnosis of their child's disability was the most stressful time related to raising a child with a disability (Baxter, Cummins, & Polak, 1995), particularly the time between receiving the diagnosis and receiving services (Rivard, Terroux, Parent-Boursier, & Mercier, 2014). Ethnic minority families may experience even higher rates of parental stress when raising a child with a developmental delay, due to the additional stress of having to adapt to a new culture (Luu & Neece, 2019). High levels of stress do not just create unpleasant feelings; individuals with higher levels of stress (as measured by cortisol levels) tend to show worse cognitive functioning generally, with specific decreases in "tasks of visual perception, executive function, and attention" (Echouffo-Tcheugui et al., 2018, p. e1967). Decreases in these areas can have negative impacts on the ability of parents to effectively engage with their children, especially those whose children have challenging behavioural and/or emotional issues. Ongoing stress can also lead to depression, which may decrease the likelihood of an individual participating and /or engaging in interventions or programs that could potentially be beneficial (Olsson & Hwang, 2001), meaning that some families who could most benefit from interventions, may be least likely to access them.

Taken together, families of children with disabilities and their members experience numerous challenges to their well-being. In particular, and of relevance to school-family liaisons who work with many families before, during and after their child's diagnosis, the time around receiving a diagnosis is particularly difficult for many families. Additionally, families who have children on the autism spectrum, and/or who are new to Canada are more likely to struggle. The make-up of a pre-kindergarten classroom can include children with a wide range of disabilities from many different cultures. The trend, mirroring the increases in visible minorities seen in Alberta (Alberta Government, 2011) and of higher rates of autism (CDC, 2019) seems to be

moving in the direction of higher numbers of children with autism and from increasingly diverse countries in each class. Equipping school-family liaisons with skills to effectively help these families is more important than ever.

The importance of support at school and home.

It is now well established that high-quality preschools have positive effects on children's development. The benefits seen in children can include higher academic achievement, improved social-emotional skills, a healthier lifestyle and less risky behaviour (Bauchmüller, Gørtz, & Rasmussen, 2014; Heckman, 2006; McCoy et al., 2017; Shonkoff & Levitt, 2010). Often overlooked is the fact that the preschool programs that are typically regarded as the gold-standard, like the Perry Preschool Project (Schweinhart, 2013), included a family component, such as regular home visits by the teacher. Unfortunately, many early education or preschool programs treat the family component as an afterthought (if it exists at all). In a meta-analysis by Grindal et al. (2016) that examined the differential impacts of various parenting programs, the researchers concluded that although home visits in addition to preschool *can* increase children's cognitive and pre-academic skills, most early childhood programs are not using techniques that are effective enough in changing the parents' behaviours. They attribute this in part to the "low level of attention typically directed toward the parenting education component" (p. 245). In this study, effective home visits were ones that used modeling and practice and occurred at least once a month. Similarly, Bierman, Heinrichs, Welsh, Nix, and Gest (2017) found that adding family-centered home programming is correlated with an increase in grade two academic outcomes, when the home programming that is used matches the pre-kindergarten curriculum.

A pivotal study by Hart and Risley (1995) illustrates the importance of considering both the home environment and the pre-school environment for children that pre-kindergarten staff at

Edmonton Public School Board are trying to help. Hart and Risley (1995) showed that trends in children's speech, vocabulary growth, and style of interaction were established by the end of their third year of life. Those trends were predictive of grade three vocabulary, language tests, and reading comprehension scores. Crucially, these language patterns were attributed to the language use and style of the adults in the home; attending a language-rich preschool was not enough to change their trajectory. Likewise, if the children attending Edmonton Public School Board's pre-kindergarten program are only receiving the help and supports they need in one environment and not the other (i.e., at school and not at home), they are less likely to reap the full benefits possible in these early years.

Hart and Risley (1995) estimated that children from the most language-rich homes were hearing, on average, 30 million more words than children from the most language-poor homes, as well as more affirmations and encouragements and fewer prohibitions and discouragements. This has come to be known by many as the "30 million-word gap". Hart and Risely (1995) attributed this difference to socioeconomic status (SES), but subsequent studies have challenged that conclusion. In one such study by Rindermann and Baumeister (2015), researchers reanalyzed studies looking at SES and child development, including the Hart and Risley study. Rindermann and Baumeister (2015) found that the mechanisms that cause differences in child outcomes are related to "speaking more and more different words and better and more differently structured sentences" (p. 137). This is associated with the parents' educational behaviour (which is not necessarily tied to parents' educational achievement), and not the parents' global SES.[3]

[3] Global SES is a general measure of social standing, usually including some combination of income or wealth, educational status, and occupation, that does not "allow for [an] understanding [of] possible causal mechanisms" (p. 138) that may affect outcomes (Rindermann & Baumeister, 2015).

This clarification is important to note: global SES is not a reliable indicator of who should or should not receive services, because it is not a reliable indicator of who needs support. The Hart and Risley study and those that followed highlight the importance of the home environment on a child's developmental outcomes. Pre-kindergarten on its own cannot be viewed as a panacea against poor child outcomes.

Much research exists that shows that supportive environments can lead to better outcomes for children (Sameroff, 2010; Shonkoff, 2010; Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013; Rinderman & Baumeister, 2015), and that family support programs can help families to be able to provide a more supportive environment for their children (Kim, Schulz, Hahlweg, & Zimmermann, 2018; McConnell, Breitkreuz, & Savage, 2013; Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000; Trivette, & Dunst, 2005). As the next two sections show, when looking at past studies, or undertaking new ones, it is important to be precise about what type of intervention is most effective for what types of people, and for what specific outcomes. The following sections explore how both program and family characteristics can affect child outcomes.

Program characteristics that can impact family outcomes.

In a study by McConnell, Breitkreuz, and Savage (2013), the two main mediators of positive parent and child outcomes were (1) having social support and a sense of community, and (2) parent training. The researchers surveyed 923 Alberta parents accessing family support services in 2009 through 20 different community-based providers. They found that parents who reported that their needs were being met had lower levels of parenting stress and more positive parent-child interactions; positive parent-child interactions were in turn related to fewer child difficulties. As stated by McConnell et al. (2013), "supporting parents is often the most effective way of supporting children" (p. 449). Programs that are designed to support parents in gaining

the skills they need for effective parenting, as well as to give parents the opportunity to establish or increase their social supports, will tend to show better outcomes than those without these features. As McConnell et al. (2013) state, "interventions that strengthen parents' social relationships and create opportunities for informal learning should be valued alongside of evidence-based parenting training interventions" (p. 465). Parents who feel supported, accepted, and understood have lower stress levels, which enable them to interact more positively with their children.

Another study found that a group parenting intervention that focused on positive parent-child interaction and parental discipline showed effects a full ten years after the intervention, when the children were in early adolescence (Kim, Schulz, Hahlweg, & Zimmermann, 2018). The effects were seen in the children's externalizing behaviours (often used as a social-emotional measure) and well-being (as indicated by physical well-being, emotional well-being, and self-esteem), even though parents were the only point of contact in the intervention.

For parents of children with developmental delays or behavioural problems, peer support parent groups can benefit both parents and children. Rivard, Terroux, Parent-Boursier, and Mercier (2014) found that informal supports (family and friends) were an effective coping mechanism and resulted in lower stress levels among families with a child on the autism spectrum. One meta-analysis found that parent groups lead by professional staff have greater effects on the social emotional development of children with developmental delays or behavioural problems than do home visits (Layzer, Goodson, Bernstein, & Price, 2001). This study found that for parents of children with special needs, providing an "opportunity for peer support, [has] greater effects on parents' attitudes towards and knowledge of childrearing and child development" (Layzer et al., 2001, p. A5-3). Trivette and Dunst (2005) found that parent

support programs that have emotional, educational and/or economic development as their primary goal delivered in group settings have a larger effect on children's social and emotional development than do home visits. When parents in another study were asked about what is helpful in parenting programs, they said, "acquisition of knowledge, skills, and understanding, and together with feelings of acceptance and support from other parents in the parenting group" (Kane, Wood, & Barlow, 2007, p. 791). Having knowledge about their children's development and disabilities is important and having an opportunity to discuss issues with other parents in similar circumstances also helps parents in ways that benefits their children.

Program benefits and parent participation.

Research shows that children's early life experiences, including the quality of responsive, supportive relationships, the level of stress experienced, and the level of access to developmentally appropriate, stimulating environments impacts their developmental trajectory (Bronfenbrenner, 2009; Rindermann & Baumeister, 2015; Sameroff, 2010; Shonkoff, 2010; Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013). As Shonkoff and Fisher (2013) outlined, nurturing, mutually responsive relationships are critical to healthy child development. Children from stable and supportive environments are more likely to have better cognitive (Jeynes, 2005), behavioural (Hoeve et al., 2012; Karreman, 2006), mental (McLeod, Wood, & Weisz, 2007; McLeod, Wood, & Weisz, 2007), and physical outcomes (Bell & Belsky, 2008), when compared to children from unpredictable and unsupportive environments, with effects that can last into adulthood (Shonkoff, 2010). The growing literature on the long-term impacts of childhood neglect, abuse, and/or uncertainty supports the view that family support needs to be a priority across government organizations (Felitti et al., 1998; Herzog & Schmahl, 2018; Liming & Grube, 2018). What happens in childhood "gets under our skin" and can affect us for our lifetime (Fox, Levitt, & Iii,

2010). Through decades of research, there is proof of concept that high quality early childhood programs can result in improved child outcomes (Campbell et al., 2012; McCoy et al., 2017; Reynolds, Temple, Ou, Arteaga & White, 2011; Schweinhart, 2013; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013; Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

McConnell et al. (2013) found that certain parent populations are less likely to access family supports and/or be helped by them. Parents who were low-income, unemployed, English language learners, those with disability or chronic health conditions, or parents of a child with a disability and/or chronic health conditions were less likely to access family support services and/or be helped by them. Similarly, Mendez (2010) found parents with higher levels of depressive symptoms and lower incomes were less likely to attend on-site family sessions. In these situations, home visits may be a more suitable option. Studies have shown that depressive symptoms decreased in mothers who received home visits that included a mental health curriculum. Importantly, lower scores on maternal depression scales are associated with improved child outcomes (Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000). These studies highlight the importance of continuing to ask questions of who is being helped, who isn't, and why, in order to identify interventions that work for harder-to-reach groups. Having a way to identify which families may be less likely to attend group sessions and why could help to develop programs to fit specific family needs, overcoming more barriers to participation.

Summary.

The specific mechanism(s) involved in creating improved child outcomes may be: providing a consistent and reliably responsive environment (Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013); helping families strengthen their responsiveness (Rindermann & Baumeister, 2015); addressing parental needs (including parents' own trauma) (Felitti et al., 1998); strengthening families' social

support networks (Layzer et al., 2001; McConnell et al., 2013); teaching positive parenting strategies (Kim, Schulz, Hahlweg, & Zimmermann, 2018); and/or teaching child development in order for families to have age-appropriate expectations for their children (Layzer et al., 2001, Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013). The mechanisms of change are likely to be different for different families in different contexts which may at least partly explain the varying outcomes among different studies. Having a clear understanding of how an intervention may affect change, and for whom, is important in order to deliberately and thoughtfully design a program, as well as to evaluate the program's effectiveness.

When goals are ambiguously defined, and approaches and programs exist without a guiding framework, it is difficult to determine whether an intervention is helping and, if it is helping, to know what aspect(s) of the intervention may be contributing to the change (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Gugiu & Rodríguez-Campos, 2007). Worse, with ambiguously defined goals, opportunities to support families in learning skills and strategies to facilitate long-term healthy development and educational achievement in their children may be lost. Explicitly defining the program theory in Edmonton Public School Board's pre-kindergarten family program is the first step needed to begin to more effectively work to support families and children. The program theory can be used to guide training requirements, approaches and content of home visits, and choice of parent sessions. An evaluation can be built from the program theory to determine what is working well for families and areas for improvement. The following sections of this thesis outline the methods and outcomes for explicating the program theory in Edmonton Public School Board's pre-kindergarten family programming.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this inquiry is to explicate the program theory for school-family liaisons working with the parents of children with disabilities at the pre-kindergarten program sites within Edmonton Public School Board. At this stage in the research, the program theory is generally defined as the main goals and activities of the program, and how they are connected. In this study I used a qualitative approach, specifically qualitative description, through conducting interviews with school-family liaisons, and a focus group with other program staff (i.e., teachers, administration and other specialist staff). Interviews and focus groups can help determine the level of agreement (or lack thereof) among individuals or groups, but also whether any implicit or espoused theories that exist are in line with the practices. As Patton (2015) explains, "the resulting analysis can include comparing the stated ideals (espoused theory) with the real priorities (theory-in-use) to help all concerned understand the reasons and implications of discrepancies" (p. 201). The aim of this qualitative inquiry is to identify and describe: (a) the goals of the family program; (b) the strategies, activities, and events that are involved in the family program; (c) how the strategies, activities, and events relate to the goals; and (d) any necessary background or training required by the school-family liaisons to effectively achieve the program goals.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Approach

Bioecological Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological model provides a framework to look at how the family is influenced by the environment and how that affects the child. According to Bronfenbrenner's model, when examining development, the focus must be on both the individual child and the family. The bioecological model states that human development exists within a series of interrelated, nested systems. At the center is the microsystem which contains all the immediate environments, predominantly the family, but can also include daycare and school, among others. Development occurs within the contexts of these microsystems. The family is the earliest and most significant. In addition to the immediate environment, the microsystem also includes the child with his or her specific characteristics, tendencies, genetics, and physiology. As much as the environment affects the child, each child with their unique characteristics also affects his or her environment.

Bronfenbrenner (2005) discusses *developmentally instigative characteristics* which are elements of the social and physical environment that "invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with and activity in the immediate environment" (p. 97). These developmentally instigative characteristics include personal qualities like fussiness or attractiveness that can increase or decrease the likelihood of others wanting to interact with the individual. Also included are skills gained through development like mutual gaze, control over vocalizations and movements, and the increasing awareness of one's own power to achieve goals, all of which can increase a child's ability to interact with others and the environment.

These increasingly complex interactions with others and the environment are what propels development, and are what Bronfenbrenner calls, *proximal processes*. Proximal processes are "enduring forms of interaction in the immediate environment" (p. 6), that occur regularly over an extended period (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Bronfenbrenner argued that these proximal processes are the "primary engines of development" (p. 6). They are iterative; later interactions build upon earlier ones. The proximal processes interact (affect and are affected by) with the child's personal genetics and characteristics, the environment that the child is in, and the historical period in which the child is living.

The next level, surrounding the microsystem, is the mesosystem. The mesosystem has all the interactions of the microsystem, but is across settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1996). The mesosystem entails the interrelations between all the different environments that exist in a microsystem, for example, the relationship between a preschool and the family. Surrounding the mesosystem is the exosystem, which indirectly impacts the child (e.g., the parents' work environments). The macrosystem is next, involving culture, government, and policy and impacts all the other levels. The final component to this model is the chronosystem which represents several components of time, including time as it relates to developmental stages, phases of family development, and historical time.

The focus of this investigation is at the level of the mesosystem, specifically how two proximal environments, the home and school, interact and affect the child in the center of the system. Underpinning the research with this model encourages a fuller conceptualization of how a child impacts and is impacted by his or her environment. Bronfenbrenner (1996) stressed that each environment a child lives in must be understood to be interdependent. As Rosa and Tudge (2013) write in their overview of Bronfenbrenner's theory, events and relationships in one

environment may impact events and relationships in other environments. This assertion suggests that children have a much better chance of doing well at school if they have a supportive and responsive home environment. Bioecological theory assumes that stronger and more consistent relationships within the mesosystem will result in proximal processes that drive the engines of development in a unified direction, resulting in better outcomes for the child.

Bronfenbrenner (1996) postulated several specific hypotheses about the mesosystem that can affect a child's developmental potential. One hypothesis is that any setting (i.e., "a place where people can readily engage in face-to-face interaction" (Bronfenbrenner, 1996, p. 22)) has greater developmental potential if the child is not the only link between settings. An example of this is rather than the child being the solitary link between home and school, a parent is also involved in the school setting in some way. Alternatively, a school staff member known to the child visits the home and interacts with the child and parent(s). When there is active involvement in two settings by more than just the child, and the child is aware of the interaction and can observe it, the child's sense of security may be increased, and it may "reinforce the developing person's initiative" (p. 211). Bronfenbrenner termed two people who interact in more than one setting a *transcontextual dyad* which in the above examples would include the child and parent as one transcontextual dyad, and the child and staff member as another. The more settings the transcontextual dyad experiences, as well as the more transcontextual dyads a child is a part of, the greater the child's developmental potential.

Another of Bronfrenbrenner's hypotheses states that the settings in the mesosystem have greater developmental potential if the demands, expectations, goals, and activities are compatible between settings. Ensuring adequate communication between home and school is important to allow for consistent strategies and expectations for the child. A child who can make requests or

protests verbally (rather than through gestures or screaming) but is only expected to do so in one setting, will likely make developmental gains slower than a child for whom the expectations are similar between settings. A *supportive link* (e.g., the link between the child's parent and teacher, or parent and school-family liaison), increases the developmental potential of a child if the link encourages the "growth of mutual trust, positive orientation, goal consensus between settings and an evolving balance of power" (Bronfenbrenner, 1996, p. 214) between the parent and staff member. If parental capacity and motivation is undermined, it can negatively affect development (Bronfenbrenner, 1996). A lack of self-efficacy, or a belief in one's abilities, is known to have negative effects on motivation and outcomes (Bandura & Locke, 2003).

This is important to note: simply having communication between the parent and school does not automatically increase the child's developmental potential. Viewing the parent as simply an extension of the child to be instructed and taught can result in patronizing and demeaning interactions. Interactions that are collaborative and reciprocal tend to occur when the parent is viewed as an autonomous and whole individual in their own right (Bronfenbrenner, 1996). Although school staff are highly knowledgeable in their respective areas of expertise, parents are highly knowledgeable about their child, and undermining their capacity, however unintentionally it may be, will only serve to hurt the child. Providing help to families in areas in which the family does not see the need for help, and/or providing supports or resources without active involvement from the family can lead to negative results (Dunst & Trivette, 2009.) Additionally, Dunst, Hamby, and Brookfield (2007) found that increased amounts of contact by professionals with a child can decrease family functioning (which impacts child outcomes), whereas more professionals in contact with the parents can increase it. Based on these studies and the proposition of Bronfenbrenner's discussed above (as well as personal experience), it

follows that developing a trusting, and reciprocal relationship where both the parent and school staff members are working together to plan and strategize will motivate and increase the confidence of the parent. Many parents of children in pre-kindergarten that I have worked with felt they have failed in someway and struggle to understand what they did wrong and why they required extra help with their child, a finding also supported by Courcy and des Rivieres (2017) and Rivard, Terroux, Parent-Bousier and Mercier (2014). It is important for school staff to be sensitive to these issues in order to be a truly supportive link that will enhance a child's developmental potential.

Bronfenbrenner (1996) explains that development is enhanced when information about one setting is made available in another setting, both prior to the first experience in the new setting (e.g., parent and child go to the school to meet the teacher and see the classroom before the first day of preschool), and on an ongoing basis (e.g., the child has an object from home, or a picture of their family that stays at school, and/or pictures of classmates and staff that stay at home). Bronfenbrenner also discusses the effect that both the ease of communication and the mode of communication between settings can have on a child's developmental potential. For example, face-to-face communication between parents and school staff is more likely to have higher developmental potential than telephone calls, which would be higher than notes written back-and-forth, which would be higher than monthly newsletters sent home.

Another aspect of Bronfenbrenner's theory that is relevant to my study is that *indirect linkages* can enhance the developmental potential of the mesosystem. An example of an indirect linkage would be parents of children in the program getting together and hearing comments about the program from each other. Based on reports from parents I have heard from, it can be

quite powerful to hear from other parents about how a specific strategy learned through the program has helped them or how the program in general has been for them.

Critical Realist Approach

In addition to a bioecological perspective, I am taking a critical realist view of this research. As outlined by Clark, Lissel, and Davis (2008), critical realism is a moderate position that takes the beneficial aspects of positivism (that knowledge of the world can be built through systematic research) and of relativism (that human experience affects our perception of the world). In describing this moderate view Clark, et al. (2008) explain that "it does not reduce the world to unknowable chaos or a positivistic universal order, nor does it place objective truth value on the perspectives of human beings or remove the influence and importance of human perspectives" (p. E68). Instead critical realism holds that objective truths exist, and that individuals interpret and experience the world through the filter of their previous experiences. Critical realism aligns nicely with the bioecological model in that it views the world as a series of systems that start at the individual level, and moves to social and structural levels, all of which interact with the others. The world is seen as neither chaotic nor ordered, but complex and somewhat patterned. Complexity exists within and between all the systems which interact to affect an outcome.

Establishing a critical realist approach early in the research process sets up later stages to be able to answer the questions of what is working for whom, in what contexts and why (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). A critical realist evaluation acknowledges context, focuses on complex causes, and is prescriptively useful; the primary unit of study in a critical realist evaluation is a program, an intervention, or a policy (Clark, Lissel, & Davis, 2008). Outcomes are understood to be caused by both individual agency and structural factors and events, as well as the complex

interplay between the two. To understand the *how* and the *why*, events need to be considered in context, including the *mechanisms* underlying the effects.

The outcome of a program cannot be stated in broad strokes. As Clark et al. (2008) point out: "the power of the program is therefore not inherent in the program, people, or places, but is the ways the program works (mechanism) for people in different contexts" (p. E75). Once the program theory has been explicated, a plan to evaluate the program can be formed to start to answer what is or isn't working for whom and why. The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016) nicely summarizes the objective for this research with the following statement:

> The ultimate success of a child-centered or adult-focused program in achieving population-level impact depends upon the ability to learn what works (and doesn't) for whom, when, in what context(s)—and why. This degree of specificity requires a precise theory of change, well-defined intervention materials that are tied explicitly to the targets defined there, and an evaluation plan that maps directly onto the theory of change. (p.35)

Community-Based, Constructivist Approach

The intent of this research is to establish a clear program theory (i.e., theory of change), which requires identifying the perspectives of the participants in the program. As Creswell (2014) notes, a constructivist approach acknowledges that participants interpret their environment from their position and experience in the world; the meaning they give to their interpretation of any situation is constructed based on prior experiences, culture and personal characteristics. Research from a constructivist perspective asks broad questions so that the "participants can construct meaning of a situation" (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). The goal of a

constructivist approach is to generate theory out of participants' perspectives. Critical realism "retains the view that human knowledge is socially produced" (Clark, MacIntyre, & Cruikshank, 2007, p. 525) allowing a constructivist approach to fit easily within a critical realism model. Once the program theory has been explicated and the evaluation of the program begins, the critical realist model will move beyond a constructivist approach to include measurable outcomes and existing knowledge. At this point a mixed-methods approach will be required to adequately evaluate the program. A mixed-methods approach "encompasses the measurement of outcomes while recognizing the complexity of the multiple factors influencing outcomes" (Clark, MacIntyre, & Cruikshank, 2007, p. 533). As Clark et al. (2007) explain, a critical realist evaluation is:

> attractive to clinicians and funding bodies (who can see conventional indicators of outcomes used), useful to service developers (who can be provided with prescriptive, locally relevant findings and explanations of what works for different populations) and appealing to researchers/theorists (who can develop knowledge beyond that relating to effectiveness that is ontologically based). (p. 533)

A community-based approach primarily seeks the views of the participants for whom the program is intending to benefit (Patton, 2017). Using this community-based, critical realist approach will elicit the perspectives of those involved in the program, including school-family liaisons, teachers, speech-language pathologists, and occupational therapists. It is important to hear the perspectives and views of those involved in the daily activities of the program. Their input can help to create a program informed by on-the-ground realities in order to make a lasting positive difference.

A community-based approach can be beneficial to the intended users, and also to the front-line workers (e.g., the school-family liaisons). School-family liaisons are an employee group that is often overlooked and generally not well represented within Edmonton Public School Board. They have neither a union like the teachers and support staff, nor a professional college like the specialist staff (e.g., speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists). Based on my experience as a school-family liaison, their direct supervisors are assistant principals, who often have little to no experience with home visits, and limited insight into providing assessment or support in the work of school-family liaisons. School-family liaisons often develop close working relationships with the families in the program and are therefore, uniquely situated to add to the development of program theory. For a program theory to be an effective foundation for building an evaluation, it must be relevant to the primary users.

Chapter 3: Methods

The use of a qualitative research design is suitable for this inquiry because of the exploratory nature of the study (Creswell, 2014). I collected data from multiple sources (Alberta Education documents, Edmonton Public School Board documents, school-family liaisons, and other program staff) in order to both increase validity and to create a more holistic view of the program. Throughout the research, the focus was on learning the meaning that the stakeholders hold of the program. As a qualitative researcher, I was the key instrument, meaning I generated the data through the questions asked and my interpretation of that data, rather than through an instrument such as a standardized survey. The design was emergent, meaning that although a plan existed, I maintained flexibility to react as information or situations present themselves. The data were analyzed abductively as I referenced and compared the emergent themes and ideas to existing theories and findings, in order to work towards creating an evidence-based, theoretically supported program theory. Although the term *abductive* is not as commonly used in research as *inductive* or *deductive*, it better explains the process "that blends inductive and deductive reasoning" (Mayan, 2009, p. 87). An abductive approach uses existing theoretical concepts to underpin the research and guide the questions and allows for new ideas to emerge in order to explore the relationship between the new ideas and existing research and theories (Deterding & Waters, 2018).

The qualitative approach that I used can best be described as qualitative description. Sandelowski (2000) explained that many researchers have used qualitative description while calling it something else (i.e., phenomenology, narrative study, grounded theory, etc.) in order to appear more "epistemological[ly] credibl[e]" (p. 334). Qualitative description draws from naturalistic inquiry in that it observes and describes without any manipulation of variables. It

stays close to the surface of the data and uses everyday language. Because of the low-inference descriptions used in qualitative description, there should be little to no disagreement that the events took place as stated, as well as to the meaning attributed to those events, resulting in descriptive and interpretive validity. Since my goal in this research is to "comprehensively and accurately" (p. 339) represent the content of the interviews and focus groups, without a deep interpretation of the meanings underlying the participants' statements, this approach fits this research well (Sandelowski, 2000).

Recruitment

To arrange the interviews with the school-family liaisons at sites other than the one I work at, I emailed each school-family liaison directly with an explanation of the study and requested an interview at their school (see Appendix B for the school-family liaison recruitment email). I also talked to the school-family liaisons as a group at one of the cohort meetings, which made it more personal, as well as gave them a chance to ask questions about the research in person.

To recruit other staff members for the staff focus group, a letter highlighting the relevance and purpose was emailed to the administrative assistants of each pre-kindergarten hub schools (see Appendix D for the staff recruitment letter). I asked them to send the email to their teachers, assistant principals and exempt staff (excluding school-family liaisons). The letter informed them that Edmonton Public School Board had approved of this study and they are welcome to participate but do not have to[4].

[4] I did not include educational assistants in this study, despite their valuable role in the pre-kindergarten program. In my experience working in the program, educational assistants have

Data Collection

The data collected in this study came from two general sources: (a) Alberta Education documents and Edmonton Public School Board program documents, and (b) participant perspectives. In the following sections, I will discuss the Alberta Education documents and the Edmonton Public School Board documents that relate to the pre-kindergarten family programming, and the data gathered from the participants. The amount of documentation about family-oriented programming available from both Alberta Education and Edmonton Public School Board is limited. Alberta Education has a total of three pages from the two documents cited below. Edmonton Public School Board (2018) has their three district priorities that apply to all programs across the district and are stated with each priority's goals in about a dozen paragraphs. The school board's early years philosophical foundation statement covers one page (Edmonton Public School Board, 2015), and there is some on-line information for parents about family programming that lists in a few paragraphs the general goals, program delivery for kindergarten and pre-kindergarten families (Edmonton Public School Board, 2013).

All participant data were gathered through semi-structured interviews; some individual, one in a group setting. The school-family liaison interviews each took place in a one-on-one setting, while the interview with the other key stakeholders occurred in a focus group. I conducted 11 school-family liaison interviews and one focus group with other staff members.

limited interactions with families, however I am now aware that many sites have educational assistants complete home visits.

Focus group and semi-structured interviews.

For both the individual interviews and focus group, I used a semi-structured approach. Semi-structured interviews are ideal for both group and individual situations to find out opinions, feelings, interpretations – things that cannot be observed (Merriam, 2014). Semi-structured interviews allow for pre-planning but remain fluid enough to be able to react flexibly to potentially informative conversational paths. They allow the interviewer to improvise follow-up questions as needed and give space for participants' unique responses, in a way that more structured interviews or surveys cannot (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016).

Focus group.

Focus groups are essentially interviews with several people at a time. Qualitative researchers can use the "group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group" (Morgan, 1997, p. 2). There are both strengths and limitations to using focus groups. One strength is that they are an efficient and cost-effective way to hear diverse perspectives (Morgan, 1997). Additionally, the interactions among the participants can facilitate deep conversations, meaning that the various comments and perspectives of several participants can encourage a more in-depth exploration of a given topic compared to what might be explored in a single interview (Patton, 2015). For topics that participants have not thought carefully about, focus groups can lead to more productive discussions, when compared to individual interviews (Morgan, 1997). Silence or avoidance of some topics can be telling, and focus groups tend to be enjoyed by participants (Patton, 2015). The conversations in focus groups can highlight areas of differences of opinion and areas of consensus (Morgan, 1997).

One limitation worth noting, is that often one or two people may dominate the conversation, not allowing all participants to fully express their views (Patton, 2015). As the facilitator, I planned to first set the expectation that I would like to hear everyone's perspective, and then manage the group to ensure that happens. Another limitation is that in a group confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, so all participants need to be aware of that before the conversation begins. Despite these limitations, focus groups were the best choice of data collection method for school staff because of the ability of focus groups to facilitate deeper conversations. The familiarity of staff to the family program is more limited than for school-family liaisons and I thought the focus group discussion may jog some memories of issues or events that perhaps would not be remembered in a one-on-one interview. This in fact happened throughout the focus group I ran. One participant even said, "can I just add something? You jogged my memory."

I had anticipated the focus group with other staff members (teachers, assistant principals, speech-language pathologists, and occupational therapists) to be the most difficult to arrange, since some participants may not have seen the relevance to them, and their schedules tend to be quite full. Although it took some time to receive all the responses from those who were interested in participating, this process was less difficult than anticipated. Many of the participants were quite happy to be involved. The location of this focus group was predetermined to be held at Duggan, where I work, since it is fairly easy to access from most areas of the city and I had permission from my principal to use a meeting space. I decided a Monday would be best to meet since children do not come to school on Mondays. The date that was chosen (February 25th, 2019) was the one that worked the best for at least six people representing the largest number of schools and staff groups. To help facilitate this, I had created a Doodle Poll

and sent it to each interested staff member. At the time of the focus group, I explained the purpose to the group and had a consent form for each participant to review and sign (see Appendix E for the staff focus group consent form). A semi-structured interview protocol was used for notes and reflection after the group (see Appendix F for the staff focus group interview protocol). The focus group was audio recorded for later transcription.

Nine individuals from six different schools participated in the focus group. Four were occupational therapists from three schools, three were speech-language pathologists from two schools, and two were teachers from two schools. The number of years in pre-kindergarten in their current roles range from five to 15 years, with an average of 7.75 years. All were female.

Individual interviews.

Individual interviewing was an appropriate research method to use with school-family liaisons since their jobs are predominantly family-related so it can be assumed that they have a deeper understanding of the issues and events relating to the family program compared to other staff members. Additionally, sometimes participants may not feel comfortable expressing opposing views in a group setting (Patton, 2015), especially if there are strong personalities present. I wanted the school-family liaisons to feel as comfortable as possible to openly share their thoughts and opinions, and one-on-one interviews are a good way to achieve that.

I had planned to interview at least one school-family liaison from at least five of the 10 pre-kindergarten hub sites, ideally finishing with a total of 10 interviews. It was important to hear the perspective of school-family liaisons from various sites because each site has their own way of structuring and implementing family programming. In the end, I interviewed 11 school-family liaisons from all nine of the sites that have school-family liaisons (there is one pre-

kindergarten site that does not employ any school-family liaisons). Of the school-family liaisons interviewed, three had been working in their current role between 1-3 years, two between 4-6 years, one between 7-9 years, and five for more than 12 years. The most common relevant prior experience was as an educational assistant or speech-language assistant. Three had a previous role as a family support worker, two had been in nursing, two mentioned being a parent (though most are), one had been a preschool teacher, one had been in social work, one had been a home educator, and one had been an early learning consultant. Two of the school-family liaisons had a degree and five had a diploma. All were female.

Within the site I work at there were four school-family liaisons, including myself (one has since retired). Two had been in the position for over 20 years, and one had been in it for less than three years. I started the interviews with one new and one experienced school-family liaison from my site. This was a good way to start to gather information and also helped me to tailor the interview protocol by acting as pilot cases to help me see if I had missed anything or needed to reword any questions (see Appendix A for the school-family liaison interview protocol). As it turned out, the questions I had planned worked well for the two school-family liaisons from my site, but not as well for some school-family liaisons from other sites. What I had not anticipated was the fact that the family programs at some of the sites were structured so differently than what I was familiar with, that I had to work to understand their systems and adapt my questions to fit them. Fortunately, a semi-structured interview is made to be flexible and spontaneous, and follow-up questions became very important. At each of the interviews, the study was explained again with a consent form requiring a signature in order to proceed (see Appendix C for school-family liaison study consent form). I had my interview protocol to guide my questioning, to take

brief notes on during the interview, and to write post-interview reflections (Patton, 2015). The interview itself was recorded on an audio-recording device for later transcription.

Data Analysis Procedures

I had planned to transcribe the interview data as interviews were completed so that modifications could be made to the interview protocol as necessary throughout the process of interviewing, reflecting on and transcribing the interviews. This is a common procedure in qualitative research that seeks to understand the unique perspectives of individuals, as opposed to quantitative research that requires the use of identical instruments (Creswell, 2014). I was not able to transcribe each interview before completing another interview with a school-family liaison simply because of scheduling difficulties. I was limited by my work schedule to complete interviews mainly on Thursdays and Fridays, and also by the interviewees' schedules. On several days I completed two or three interviews, which did not leave adequate time for transcription in between. What ended up happening was that I would transcribe several in a row, doing my best to complete one set before moving on to the next set of interviews. My first two interviews were on November 1st, and my last was on December 19th.

Once the interviews were completed and transcribed, I used a flexible-coding approach to analyze the data, as described by Deterding and Waters (2018). This approach offers a practical approach to qualitative data analysis which acknowledges the features of modern tools, such as N-Vivo, that allow for increased flexibility when coding interviews. The first step of my analysis was to index the transcripts with the four areas I planned to describe: (a) the goals of the family program; (b) the strategies, activities, and events that are involved in the family program; (c) how the strategies, activities and events relate to the goals; and (d) any necessary background or training required by the school-family liaisons to effectively achieve the program goals. This

allowed me to organize the sections of the transcripts that are relevant to each of these areas, and then apply "more fine-grained codes to subsections of the interviews" (Deterding & Waters, 2018, p. 8). For this part of the analysis I used N-Vivo on one of my supervisor's computers at the university.

This approach of starting with large coding and working down diverges from a more commonly used grounded theory approach which starts coding with the smallest parts of the data (sentences, phrases, or words), then combines and merges the codes to create larger codes and themes (Deterding & Waters, 2018). A grounded theory approach can be useful when using a purely inductive approach in which there is no preconceived idea about the themes or ideas that will be emerging. The flexible-coding approach was a more practical and better fit since I had specific questions that I was looking to answer and had theoretical models underpinning the research, which lent to using an abductive approach.

Once I organized the data into the four areas, I compared and contrasted any codes that emerged within the four areas of inquiry. I did this by coding each of the four areas by hand and then creating a colour-coded chart to be able to visualize the codes created and where they might converge and diverge across and within the four groups. I used this to then combine the data within each theme and then read and re-read through these documents in order to identify the prevalent broad themes. Next, I compared these themes to the Alberta Education Standards and the stated philosophy and priorities of Edmonton Public School Board. I examined where the themes lined up and where they diverged, and why that may be. I used all this as a step towards creating a cohesive program theory that can help guide family programming and approaches to home visits and parent sessions, by comparing and aligning the various perspectives with each

other, as well as with ideas from bioecological model, critical realist perspective, and community-based constructivist approach.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher is the key instrument to generate data in qualitative research, it is common practice to reflect on one's identity as a qualitative researcher in relation to those being researched (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, Kerstetter, 2012, Muhammad et al., 2015). As indicated by Muhammad et al. (2015), we each bring different identities to our complete self. Some of these identities have to do with race, gender, and culture, and others are related to things like our occupation, our parental status and our education. How salient we make each of these different identities (consciously or unconsciously) at a given time can change based on the situation and the people around us.

When a researcher shares a highly salient aspect of their identity with the group being studied, the researcher is considered an *insider* to that group (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, Kerstetter, 2012, Muhammad et al., 2015). An example would be a researcher who has children studying issues affecting parents. Being an insider allows for a starting point into the group given the shared commonality; there is a sense of understanding and knowing how things are, even before the interview begins (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Being an insider can also reduce the power imbalance often found in the researcher-participant relationship. On the other hand, being an insider can increase the risk of bias since the experiences or assumptions of the researcher are so close to the participants' that it can be difficult to tease apart the researcher's views from that of the participants' (Kerstetter, 2012).

Being an outsider to a group may lend a more objective, neutral perspective, although outsiders can have more difficulty finding access to participants (Kerstetter, 2012). As Dwyer and Buckle (2009) discuss, whether a researcher is an insider or an outsider of the group in question is neither good nor bad in itself. What is important is that the researcher is aware of their position and conscious of biases that may arise from that position, and work to mitigate them.

Most researchers are positioned relative to their participants in a way Dwyer and Buckle (2009) term the *space between*. We cannot be fully inside or outside of the groups occupied by the research participants. Insider/outsider status should not be viewed as a binary distinction, but as two ends of a spectrum. The space between refers to all the space between the dichotomous ends of the spectrum. As an example, I am an insider to the group occupied by mothers, also to the group occupied by mothers of children with disabilities. However, I am an outsider to the group occupied by mothers of children with autism, or Down syndrome, or of mothers of children with disabilities whose first language is not English. We can almost always find areas of commonality and areas of difference. The important thing for researchers to remember is to be aware of the areas of commonality and difference, and to reflect on and be cognizant of their potential impact on the research (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

As a researcher, I highlighted my role as an Edmonton Public School Board employee in order to create connections with other employees who I would like to have as participants in my research. With their knowledge of me as an Edmonton Public School Board insider, participants could assume that I knew how things work within the pre-kindergarten program and need not spend a lot of time explaining it to me. As an insider, this likely worked in my favour as it may have increased their level of comfort talking to me about issues and experiences they have

encountered. However, I needed to remain cognizant of the fact that I was an outsider to many, since I have only worked in one specific program (Waverley/Duggan), and I did not have a complete understanding of the different ways other schools run their programs. As a school-family liaison, I have an insiders' perspective in relation to the school-family liaison group. We share the common experiences of working with families and children, although the differences of working in different schools remain. Additionally, as a school-family liaison, I am an outsider to the other staff groups; I do not share the experiences common to teachers, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, or assistant principals that those group members share.

As a researcher, I was aware that I would likely notice themes that align with my own experiences more quickly than those that do not, so I worked to stay alert for those that did not throughout the data collection and analysis process. In order to do that I wrote field notes immediately after each interview and the focus group, making note of key impressions, areas of commonality, areas of divergence, important points raised, what resonated with me and why. As discussed, I anticipated that my position as a school-family liaison might have influenced the researcher-participant relationship. For certain participants, specifically other school-family liaisons, this might have equalized the power differential that can exist between researcher and participant, which can be positive, leading to more relaxed and open conversations. For other staff who know me, or simply know my role as a school-family liaison, the researcher/participant relationship may have uncomfortably shifted the existing power dynamics between us. For some, changing the relationship from co-workers or colleagues to interviewer/interviewee might have been uncomfortable. I found that in the first interviews I did feel slightly awkward at the start. This was likely due to a combination of doing something new and of a change in the dynamics of close coworkers. As the interview progressed each of us gradually became more comfortable

with the dynamic. I was concerned that some participants might have felt that I was "playing outside of my lane" and resented the imposition. I assumed that those who felt that way would choose not to participate. Although I did not encounter this reaction from any participants, several of the school-family liaisons I interviewed were quite guarded at the start of the interviews but seemed to warm up as the interviews progressed. A few told me that they did not know what kind of questions to expect, and one mentioned her concern that the interview could somehow jeopardize her job. Before each interview and focus group began, I explained that as a school-family liaison, I have my experiences and perspectives, and I realize each person will have their own, which is precisely why it is important to hear other people's perspectives as well.

When it came to the staff focus group, I was careful to have clarity and comprehensiveness in the introduction of both myself and the research study and process, as well as in the wording of the interview and focus group questions. This was done to help the participants better understand the purpose of the research and potential risks to them. The focus group participants seemed to be comfortable with the dynamic and the process and engaged in the conversation easily. I was able to facilitate the discussion to allow each participant to be heard.

Ethical Considerations

Before contacting anybody about participating in the study, I received ethical consent from the Research Ethics Board 1 (REB1) which is specifically for research involving interviews and focus groups. Part of the REB1 application includes completing the ethics application through Research Ethics and Management Online (REMO). I also received approval through the University's Cooperative Activities Program (CAP) which is required by Edmonton Public

School Board for all research through the University of Alberta. I also had to contact the principals of each of the nine schools to get their permission before contacting their staff.

Each of the participants signed an informed consent form before their interview or focus group began. I reviewed it with them to ensure they understood what was involved, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study. I assured them that their names or any other identifying information would not be used. I informed them that although I will maintain confidentiality, I could not promise the same from everyone else in the focus groups, however I did ask that everyone maintain confidentiality. They were informed that once the focus group began, I was not able to remove their data. If anyone did not consent at that point, they would have been asked to leave before the discussion began. Everybody did consent and participated. They were informed that they were helping to create a program theory that can be used to evaluate and improve the program for years to come.

Chapter 4: Findings

Below, I present the data from the Alberta Education and Edmonton Public School Board documents, followed by themes that I identified through the analysis of the interviews with program staff. Within each theme are the findings from the focus group with teachers, speech-language pathologists, and occupational therapists,[5] followed by the findings from the interviews with school-family liaisons. I discuss areas of similarity and difference between the two groups as well as whether they are consistent with Alberta Education and Edmonton Public School Board documents. Instead of integrating the findings from the individual interviews and the focus group, I keep them separate. Although there is some repetition of findings between the groups, it is important to clearly see how each group came to many of the same conclusions, as well as the areas in which they diverged. Using the questions from the interview protocol found in Appendix A and Appendix F, I spoke with the participants to find out their perspectives on the program theory. Knowing that they would not be familiar with the terminology and concepts used in program theory, I used language they could relate to that would shed light on their perspectives of various aspects of the program theory. I analyzed their comments and perspectives and connected them to the program theory-related areas of inquiry of this research. The themes that emerged were: (a) *the disconnect between perception of program goals and specific program requirements*, (b) *the lack of guidance or framework for staff working with families*, (c) *the importance of relationships*, and (d) *ideas to improve the family program*.

As discussed in the methods section, nine individuals were involved in the focus group. They included teachers, occupational therapists, and speech-language pathologists from six

[5] Throughout the results and discussion, I will periodically refer to the speech-language pathologists and occupational therapists as a group as *therapists.*

different schools. Eleven school-family liaisons participated in the interviews representing at least once each of the nine schools that have school-family liaisons.

Organizational Documents

Alberta Education documents.

Within Alberta Education's Standards for the Provision of Early Childhood Special Education (2006) there is a section titled *Family-Oriented Decision Making*. Within this section, the importance of drawing on parent knowledge and expertise is discussed, along with fact that "educators help parents facilitate their children's development" (Alberta Education, 2006, p. 14). The document goes on to state that appropriate programming "reduces the potential dependency and enhances parents' confidence in their ability to meet the needs of their children. Educators understand that a parent's primary role is nurturing and care giving", and therefore appropriate expectations for parents should be kept (Alberta Education, 2006, p.14). The document also discusses the fact that families have different "linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds," and that it is important to consider those factors as well as family routines when planning specific activities that will involve the family (Alberta Education, 2006, p. 14).

In Alberta Education's (2018) *Early Childhood Services Family-Oriented Programming* document, the stated purpose of the family program is to "consult with parents/guardians and provide coaching, information, resources, skills and strategies to help the child's development". It specifies that all family programming must take place outside of programming hours (i.e., not while the child is in school), and that each 45- to 90-minute session must include the child, a parent, and a member of the learning team. This is referred to as a 1:1:1 delivery model. The

family program is optional for the family, and the "number, setting and structure of sessions must be determined in consultation with parents/guardians" (Alberta Education, 2018, p. 1).

Edmonton Public School Board documents.

The Edmonton Public School Board documents came from three sources. The first is a strategic plan (Edmonton Public School Board, 2018) that focuses on three district priorities. The second is the school board's Early Years philosophical foundation policy statement (2015), and the third is general information for parents about the family program (2013).

Edmonton Public School Board's district priorities acknowledge the importance of family programming. The first priority is to "foster growth and success for every student by supporting their journey from early learning through high school completion and beyond" (Edmonton Public School Board, 2018, p. 2). The first goal of priority 1 is "an excellent start to learning" (Edmonton Public School Board, 2018, p. 2). The third priority, to "enhance public education through communication, engagement, and partnership" has goals advocating for "families as partners" and "supports for the whole child" (Edmonton Public School Board, 2018, p. 2). These goals directly support the value of school-family liaisons in our work with families to help children in areas that directly and indirectly relate to success in school.

Within the philosophical foundation policy statement, the Edmonton Public School Board "recognize[s] the importance of family as the child's first teacher" and believes that "child- and family-centered early learning opportunities that promote creativity contribute to school readiness and long-term educational success" (Edmonton Public School Board, 2015, p. 1). The Board document also states that the "early years are critically important in providing a foundation for learning" (p. 1), that appropriate play-based learning include a whole-child focus,

and that responsive interactions are important (Edmonton Public School Board, 2015). They also believe in the importance of research and evaluation, stating that "differing approaches must be tracked to identify the most successful practices" to "promote innovative practice in the early years which is essential effective early years programming" (Edmonton Public School Board, 2015, p. 1).

The information for parents states three goals of the family program: (a) "engage in healthy and developmentally appropriate learning with your child"; (b) "build on and apply the skills your child learns at school at home and in the community"; and (c) "learn together and practice strategies that support your child's unique learning needs" (Edmonton Public School Board, 2013). The program delivery states that both group and individual sessions are built around the child's individualized program plan and are facilitated by an Inclusive Learning team[6] (Edmonton Public School Board, 2013).

By making the existing implicit program theory explicit, I aimed to either show how the pre-kindergarten family program is facilitating and upholding these philosophies and priorities or show where improvements in the program could be made in order to move closer to reaching these objectives. These goals and priorities should serve as a framework for a more precise program theory specific to the pre-kindergarten family program.

[6] Inclusive Learning is involved in kindergarten, not pre-kindergarten, a distinction not made on the website.

The Disconnect Between Perception of Program Goals and Specific Program Requirements

A prominent theme throughout the discussions and interviews was the disconnect between what staff were trying to achieve as they worked with families and what the program requirements allowed for. The focus group participants and the school-family liaisons agreed that the one staff to one child to one parent (1:1:1) criterion stated in Alberta Education's (2015) documents was appropriate for meeting the needs for some families. However, many families needed other types of programming for some or all the time that their child was in pre-kindergarten. Participants in this study reported challenges responding effectively to the various needs of families that extended beyond the goals of the individual program plans.

Below I document the findings from the focus group and the school-family liaisons within the theme of the disconnect between perception of program goals and specific program requirements. Within this theme two areas emerged: family needs were more extensive than the program requirements allowed for, and staff struggled to provide meaningful family-oriented programming sessions while meeting funding requirements.

Focus group.

Extensive and diverse family needs.

The families that the participants work with had a range of needs, many that went beyond what the program requirements allow for. Below, I document how some of the participants tried to assess the needs of the families in the program. I also document how participants described the benefit of being able to work with families in their homes, the families' informational needs, the need for emotional support, and how different sites try to balance the various needs identified within their program.

Determining needs.

To find out what families needed, some sites' staff asked the families directly at the beginning of the year. Clara, a therapist, said that the school-family liaisons would go to all the homes at the beginning of the year to complete a questionnaire with the families to "highlight for us where the child is struggling" so that the team would know what needed to be worked on. Other members of the team would then take turns completing home visits with each family. Participants in the focus group who completed home visits discussed how being in the home and meeting with the family gave the team a more complete picture of the child and the supports needed, both at home and at school. In relation to supports at home, Harriet, a therapist, spoke about how being in the home enabled the staff to know what resources they had or may need and allowed for more appropriate recommendations. She said:

> If I don't go into their home I don't really realize that they have no toys or how they don't have the financial means to get some of the things I've been suggesting, so it gives you a jumping off spot to really help them in the most effective way.

Home visits allowed for the opportunity to see a more complete picture of the child, which could better inform the support and strategies used by the school team. Clara spoke about how seeing a child in their home environment helped to pinpoint what may have been influencing that child's behaviour at school. She said:

> I think we're easy to jump to looking at parenting. And we think, oh, well, there's probably no expectations at home, so some of those things- and then you're in the home and you're like, oh! There are lots of expectations and this little one is just able to manage much more at home in a quieter environment with less academic expectations.

Supporting Bronfenbrenner's idea that the home environment of the child will impact the child across environments (Rosa & Tudge, 2013), Florence, a therapist, said:

> I really like the idea of going through priorities for your child, but I think even adding, what are priorities for your family, because then if you've got a family where, really, [the] priority is we don't know if we're going to make rent next month.

This discussion about the importance of home visits to get a clearer picture of the child and their environment is supported in the Edmonton Public School Board's (2018) district priorities in their goal of providing supports for the whole child. If a family is struggling to meet their basic needs, having someone like a school-family liaison who can help the family connect to resources will make a bigger difference in the life of the child as well as the rest of the family, compared to working on a more child-specific goal.

Need for information sharing.

Focus group participants indicated that families needed information relevant to their child and family. The group discussed a range of topics that they have shared with the families in their program including helping parents understand their child's development, strategies that have worked well for their child at school, and how to use those pieces of information to advocate for their child. General information about advocating for their child and their rights as parents were also discussed as an important goal of the family program.

A few of the participants talked about how some of the information sessions offered have, in an effort to be relevant to all the families, ended up being too broad in scope and have likely been helpful to very few. Discussing ways to better differentiate group sessions to make them more relevant to families' needs, Eleanor, a therapist suggested offering various sessions

and only inviting specific families to the sessions that are most relevant to them. Building on this, Florence added the idea of letting parents have more control of what topics to attend and in what order. She said:

> I like the idea of the parents having a lot of choice in it, so even if you did the same three things on a Monday and would then do it again on a Monday in two months, then they could prioritize. So, sleep is my first thing that I want to work on, and then if they had a couple follow-up visits, and that's going better, okay, now, let's look a speech.

Need for emotional support.

In addition to informational needs, the group participants discussed the necessity of the family program to provide emotional support, recognizing that for many families, having a child qualify for pre-kindergarten could be a difficult adjustment. Ida, a teacher, brought up the idea that families of children with disabilities often needed help understanding and accepting what the disability will mean for their child and family. Referring to family support as a purpose of the family program, she said:

> … [having a child in pre-kindergarten is] often that first growing awareness that the child has some difficulty or some developmental delay that's not going to be fixed, and I think it's very crucial to have somebody working with the family, helping to guide them to resources and to help the child adopt some of the strategies that maybe we are using at school.

Balancing different needs.

Some of the conversation was focused on how some sites tried to balance families who required more support with those who did not. There were families who did not attend many

sessions, while other families attended more than required. Some sites took the average of the sessions among the families, so that, as Clara said, “it kind of just evens out.”

Ida, supporting a critical realist perspective to programming, brought up the idea of structuring the program so that families can be supported as their needs indicate. When a family is coping well, “or if they have a lot of family support here, and they’ve accepted things”, staff should be able to be flexible to decrease the time with them, in order to better help those families who are struggling. Currently Alberta Education requirements do not allow the number of visits to be averaged across families.

Staff struggle to provide meaningful family-oriented programming sessions while meeting funding requirements.

Limiting structure and administration.

A large part of the conversation centred on the struggles that participants have had providing meaningful programming sessions. The difficulties came from the inherent limitations of when, where, and how sessions could be provided, the limitations created by the Alberta Education criteria, and additional limitations that were sometimes added by school administrators.

The inherent limitations of providing programming existed across sites but varied depending on how each site organized their family program. Some programs were quite large with only one or two school-family liaisons responsible for a hub and several satellite sites. Others had several school-family liaisons at one site who were more directly involved with families. In sites where there was limited school-family liaison involvement in home visits, teachers, assistants and therapists did most of the visits. These sites typically offered group

information sessions one evening a month, as well as had “home-visit days” when most of the pre-kindergarten staff were completing visits. They also offered family-oriented programming sessions as small-group community outings, and for whom it was appropriate, short-term periods of weekly sessions in a specific topic facilitated by a therapist. At other sites, the school-family liaisons did most of the family-oriented programming sessions, leaving the teachers and therapists to do visits only as specific needs arose, such as when a child was learning a specific communication system, or if the parents had questions that required a therapist to answer fully.

A portion of the discussion within the focus group centred on assessing how to schedule and organize family-oriented programming sessions on a weekly, monthly and yearly basis, and how to balance home visits with group sessions. With limited time, staff and resources, addressing all the areas of need with all the families was difficult. Amelia, a teacher, expressed that even with every team member completing home visits, staff still felt they were “spread thin” trying to ensure “11 visits a kiddo.” Part of this issue related to how to order the sessions in the calendar with the limited time available for family programs. Deciding what session to offer first when there were several important topics to cover was a shared struggle. Addressing an issue late in the year may have been fine for some families, but other families may have had significant difficulty in that area and needed it addressed earlier on. Different families had different struggles and priorities, complicating the issue of scheduling.

The participants discussed various solutions their sites had arranged including shifting hours of work one Monday a month to 11 am to 7 pm or getting permission to run an extra group during the week and specifically inviting only the families for whom that information was relevant. To run a group session required adequate space in the school and staff available to look after the children (both program children and siblings) while their parents were in the session.

This required careful planning to ensure everyone still had adequate time for other job responsibilities, like staff meetings, team meetings, prep time, cohort meetings, district-wide professional development, and home visits. These other responsibilities all tended to be scheduled on Mondays, since children do not come to school that day. Evening group sessions created extra costs because of the food and staffing required. Supper was typically provided at evening sessions to make it more feasible for parents to attend. For those sites that did not shift their start time, staff facilitating the parent session and helping with childcare worked beyond their regular hours, which required overtime pay.

A significant component of the struggle to provide meaningful family-oriented programming sessions that met funding requirements were the limits staff had on what they could do with families and when. The group discussed the idea that if family-oriented programming sessions were to be beneficial and meaningful to families, the professionals must be able to use their professional judgement when working with them. As teachers, speech-language pathologists, and occupational therapists, all were well-educated and had their own governing bodies that held them to professional standards. Participants indicated that not being allowed to decide what was beneficial and meaningful to the families and children they work with undermined their skills and education. For the participants in this discussion, the issue of not being able to choose what kind of family-oriented programming sessions would be most beneficial for a family, in terms of who was present and the topic of the session, was a major source of frustration.

The group also discussed the difficulty of trying to fit home visits in within the limited time that they were allowed to do them. Many of the participants were only able to do home visits on a Monday, which was also the day for meetings and prep time. Other participants

explained that they could do visits on days other than Monday, but they needed to get special permission to do so. Grace, a therapist, said that she was allowed to do visits "anytime", but then effectively negating that assertion added that it would have to be "after work. There's no way we could go during the day."

I linked this conversation about when visits could be done to a point made earlier about being able to use professional autonomy. Harriet agreed that, in addition to being able to manage time, being able to decide which family should be seen and by whom, was part of using their professional judgement. She explained that at her site, each child was required to have at least one visit from one of the therapists. She said that often:

> It gets down at the end, well who? One of us didn't go out, who's going to go? Well, I'm like well I don't really even have fine motor goals. It gets to this, what is the purpose or goal? Just for funding, right?

When home visits were completed simply to check a box rather than to help families in some meaningful way, it was easy to see why some people saw the family program as simply a source of funding. Adding to this, Harriet wondered how the current structure of family-oriented programming sessions came to be in the first place, who determined the number of minutes required, and "why is it tied to funding?"

Florence, a therapist, discussed the fact that just because a staff member spent time with a child and parent, did not mean that anything meaningful had occurred. She argued that one way to move away from home visits that are not purposeful or meaningful would be to not exclusively have the 1:1:1 model outside of classroom programming time be tied to funding. She suggested to instead "come up with some other outcome-based measure." The perspectives of the

participants suggest that allowing staff to focus on providing programming that is meaningful and beneficial to all families would be a step to making positive, family-centred changes.

Family-oriented programming sessions without children can be meaningful.

Continuing with the idea of moving towards more meaningful family-oriented programming sessions, the group members discussed the requirement from Alberta Education that the child must always be present for it to be eligible for funding. They spoke about the fact that some visits or group sessions that do not include the child can be very meaningful, purposeful and beneficial to the parents, and by extension to the child. Regarding completing sessions when the child is not present, Bessie, a therapist, said:

> …but it's actually more meaningful than a lot of things that are counted. Where it's like, no, this is what the family actually needs and it's not appropriate for the kid to be there.

She also argued that it was sometimes more helpful for the parents to receive the necessary information first, without the children present, and then they could apply what they had learned at home with their children. However, she added that sometimes administrators, obviously seeing the value of targeting just the parents, would never-the-less require the children to attend group sessions even if they are in different room, so that they could make the sessions "count".

Some research findings provide support for these participants' perspectives. For example, programs such as Triple P teach parents through talking through different scenarios, watching videos of other parents modeling recommended strategies, and allowing parents the time to think about and plan how these new strategies would fit with their families. None of this is done with the child present but is effective in changing parents' behaviours and child outcomes (Kim, Schulz, Hahlweg, & Zimmermann, 2018). Shonkoff and Fisher (2013) discuss the importance of

teaching caregivers core competencies to improve child outcomes in early childhood programs; parenting programs such as Triple P have been shown to do that and have positive long-term child outcomes (Kim, et al., 2018).

Another area of contention discussed by the group was the fact that discussing a child's individual program plan with a parent was not considered eligible for funding. Since the discussion typically involved a parent and a staff member, it did not fulfill the 1:1:1 ratio required by Alberta Education (2018), even though specific strategies to help the child were introduced and explained. Participants considered it to be inappropriate to include the child in a discussion of their disability, delay, areas of need, and/or strategies. Participants indicated that having a child listen to a discussion that is often focused on deficits is not beneficial to the child, even if the intent is to help the child grow and learn.

Parents not engaged or ready.

Another significant area of discussion around the difficulty of providing meaningful programming within the existing criteria was that often parents did not see the benefit of engaging in family-oriented programming sessions, did not have a clear idea of what was expected of them during the sessions, or were not in a place where they were ready to engage with the topic that was being presented to them. Some families attended every session whether it was relevant to their family or not. Whether the family was under-engaging or over-engaging (as seen when families attended sessions that were not relevant to their or their child's needs), it was clear that the program staff were not effectively communicating the purpose of the sessions, and/or were not involving families sufficiently to understand what their needs were.

The participants in the focus group discussed instances where, for whatever reason, the parent was not participating during the home visit. Amelia and Bessie both recounted visits where the parent was watching videos on their phones and would not engage with the staff member. Amelia, expressing some frustrations and disbelief said:

> I have literally been at a visit in the home, where I was demonstrating a game that we were doing with the child, and dad was watching a video on his phone, and I know he was watching a video because he had the sound on.

Whether the reason this father was not participating in the visit was due to not understanding the purpose of it, to not knowing what was expected of him, or to not seeing the relevance to him at that time, the result was that he likely did not benefit in any way from the visit. Bessie shared a story of a visit where the reason for not engaging was more obvious. She went to a home where the grandmother was the caregiver. The grandmother was overwhelmed and made it clear anything that Bessie had to show her was beyond her capability with everything she already had to deal with. Bessie was able to empathize and decrease the woman's defensiveness somewhat but expressed concern that showing this woman strategies related to the child's individual program plan goals was not what was most needed at that time. Bessie said:

> …you could see she was worried that I was there to put more on her plate, when she was already feeling overwhelmed. And I'm at a school in the north where a lot of our families, like they're worrying about where their next meal is coming from and there's trauma… There's so much going on with these kids, that sometimes it's hard to know if - we're not necessarily the person they need to be seeing yet.

This issue of completing home visits related to individual program plan goals when it does not seem to be beneficial or what the family needs at the moment was a concern for many in the group. Florence asked, "if that's where the family's at, is that really fair to be saying, oh, you need to do this because we get money for it?" The focus group members were uneasy about the idea of having someone show up at a families' house to complete a visit whether or not a family is interested and saw this as an area for improvement in the program. As Florence said, it "gets back to the point of what's the purpose of FOPS [family-oriented programming sessions]."

Alberta Education's (2018) Early Childhood Services Family-Oriented Programming document clearly states that the family program is optional. Several members of the focus group discussed the difficulty they had ensuring families attended the required number of sessions. One participant said that they encouraged families who could not commit at the start of the year to find another program. However, as several participants commented, not accepting a child into pre-kindergarten because the family could not manage to attend the family program would be unethical. Ultimately, if a family decided not to attend any sessions, there was nothing the program could do to mandate their attendance. Clara added that since the program was school based, not home-based, they were really only qualifying to be in the school program. She said, "that FOP [family-oriented programming sessions] piece is just a little additional piece, to get some more funding."

Comments such as the family program being "just a little additional piece" to get more funding exemplify the lack of understanding by many staff members in the program that the family program was an important piece of a how a preschool could lead to improved outcomes for the children and families (Bauchmüller, Gørtz, & Rasmussen, 2014; Bierman, Heinrichs, Welsh, Nix, and Gest, 2017; Grindal et al., 2016; Heckman, 2006; McCoy et al., 2017;

Schweinhart, 2013; Shonkoff & Levitt, 2010). Both the pre-kindergarten program for children and the family program for parents were optional. The difference is that most families see the benefit of their child attending pre-kindergarten, whereas some do not see the benefit of participating in the family program. Families were not required to register their children in the program, and if the child stopped attending at any point, there was nothing the program could do to mandate their attendance. Participants comments suggest that instead of trying to derive ways to enforce parents' attendance of family sessions, the program should be focused on tailoring the program to better meet families' needs. Responding to and meeting families' needs along with clearer communication about how the program could benefit them, would likely result in better attendance.

School-family liaison interviews.

Within the theme of the disconnect between the perception of program goals and specific program requirements, the school family liaisons stated that families in the program needed more than what the program requirements currently recognized and that staff struggled to provide meaningful family-oriented programming for families within those requirements. Participants shared that the families they worked with needed information about their children's individualized program plan goals and opportunities to practice related strategies. Families also needed support in areas outside of individualized program plan goals. The school-family liaisons explained that the existing funding criteria and the current program organization were limiting their ability to provide meaningful programming to families. These points will be expanded in the following sections.

Many families in the program need more than what is currently recognized.

Similar to the participants in the focus group, the school-family liaisons identified different family needs that they tried to target. Most school-family liaisons, aligning with Alberta Education (2018) requirements, first identified informational needs as relating to the children's individual program plan goal. As the conversations progressed, however, additional needs were stated which included support around other parenting issues, helping families access resources, and other family supports.

Opportunity to provide information and practice around individual program plan.

The stated goal that most school-family liaisons that I interviewed had for the families they work with had to do with parent learning. The fact that the children in the program were spending a limited amount of time at the school, but a lot of time with their families, came up in nearly every interview. Louisa said, "if the parents can get the support they need to help achieve the goals the child's working on, it makes the most sense." Likewise, Maya stated:

> With family-oriented programming, it gives parents an opportunity to really help facilitate the areas of growth that the child needs. So those are the IPP [individual program plan] goals that we're targeting, but an IPP goal is specific for the child of course, but we can work on those goals anywhere.

These school-family liaisons were supporting Bronfenbrenner's hypothesis that within the mesosystem, the more consistent the strategies and activities between settings, the greater the child's developmental potential (Bronfenbrenner, 1996). Several school-family liaisons stated that building children's skills was a goal of the family program or what they looked for as an indicator that the program was making a difference. Toni, consistent with Bronfebrenner's

(1996) bioecological theory, said, “we know that kids experience the most success when their needs are being supported across environments.” She continued with an example of the importance of being consistent across settings to improve child outcomes:

> So, toilet training will be affected if school’s doing it, daycare’s doing it, and home’s doing it. And kids are in all these different environments these days, so I think that’s why [the family program] exists, to see the most success in the kids’ growth.

The school-family liaisons viewed family-oriented programming sessions as a way to deliver information to parents, to practice with their children and to clarify or expand upon points made in earlier sessions, aligning with Alberta Education’s stated purpose of the family program (Alberta Education, 2018). Related to these objectives, Susan said:

> I feel that going out on home visits and providing FOPS [family-oriented programming sessions] that we do, especially home visits and stuff, they’re specific to the child and their goals and stuff. We can have teaching moments with the family and provide supports in their home and in their community.

Referring to the follow-ups she provided families after group sessions, Octavia said,

> We’re building on the stuff that they learn in the school FOPS [family-oriented programming sessions] and then following them throughout the month and checking in and making sure that the information is still relevant and useful.

Several school-family liaisons discussed modelling as the main method of teaching the parents strategies for interacting with their children. Peggy talked about how she “bring[s] specific activities to target specific goals on the IPP [individual program plan], and … model

using language and an activity." She explained further: "I model and then they're watching me, and …I explain *why* I'm doing stuff."

Quisha talked about making the goals she worked on with families achievable. She said when she works with families she talks about:

> …how I can incorporate working specific goals into [families'] everyday world. That's usually my focus. When I go, I don't usually go super prepared for visits, because I think that if we go too prepared, then parents don't see it as something they can achieve, and for me, that's the focus, to show them how they too can work on these goals without spending a lot of time and having to create anything or going out and buying anything new or unfamiliar. They can incorporate our goals into their everyday life.

Several mentioned skill building as a goal for those parents who needed more than just information: "so, if they know what's going on they can practice those skills at home and they can work with their child in the time that they're not here, which is more often."

The idea of building parent capacity and confidence "in working with whatever qualified their child in the program" came out a lot in the interviews. For example, Katherine discussed tailoring strategies to support the child's individual program plan goals to each parent. She said:

> We're trying to present stuff that is directly related to the IPP [individual program plan]… so we take the goal and we build the strategies and practice the strategies whether it's through supporting what the parents' needs are through the [group] sessions that we're presenting, or on a home visit, definitely directly related to the IPP goals.

As discussed by Bronfenbrenner (1996), undermining parental capacity and motivation can negatively affect the development of the child. Participants in this study indicated that as school-

family liaisons work with parents, it is critical that they work supportively and collaboratively with them. Katherine said she strived toward "making [the parents] more confident and more comfortable with their skills and their skill level."

Beyond individual program plan goals.

As most of the interviews progressed, the goal of increasing parents' confidence and skills to work on their child's individual program plan goals was increasingly acknowledged as the "goal in theory", or what the goal would be once other family issues and needs had been addressed. Individual program plan goals are child-focused and typically centre around areas like improving communication, improving play and/or social skills, increasing participation in classroom routines, and improving fine motor skills. All the school-family liaisons felt that for many parents, learning had to start with more general parenting, child development, and advocacy goals. Others stated that areas of support needed by families included supports for families with disability and what it means to the child and the family. Katherine spoke about meeting families where they were at, "and then supporting them in the areas that they may need. So, it may not be directly classroom based, and it almost never is at the beginning." A consensus existed that it was not helpful or appropriate to address individual program plan goals until some of these foundational supports were in place. As Jane put it:

They're going through all these things, but the IPP [individual program plan] says that I have to come in and I need to work with speech with you in your home. To me, that makes no sense at all. We have to start over here, working on all those other things, and connecting them with other resources, before we can even touch IPP goals, because they're struggling and so, what's more important?

The idea that other issues might need to be prioritized over individual program plan goals was seen in Toni's comment that the family program should be:

> …build[ing] capacity in the parents to support their child's development. So, starting with the basics: sleep, feeding – toileting I don't even think as a priority at the beginning - I think sleep is first, and then nutrition is second, behaviour is like, the last thing on the pyramid, because those things need to be in place.

Susan, referring to the support needed for parents new to navigating the school system for a child with a disability said:

> It's a whole new journey for them coming in and they're learning stuff right from scratch and they don't have the direction and they don't know which way to go. So, just kind of helping to guide them in giving them resources. And I guess it's part of teaching them how to be advocates, so that they can continue on once they leave the program.

The idea of helping parents to be good advocates for their children as a goal of the parent program was discussed in most of the interviews. Maya said:

> We're there to catch the children and the families, we're there as a safety net to help them through that process, and to help them learn how to advocate. We've got two years at most with most of these children. And I think that our job is to really teach [parents] how to advocate, and how to go through the system and find out how best to reach them.

Katherine discussed the importance of empowering the parents and of being cognizant of not making parents dependent on staff, but to teach them the importance of advocating for their children and how to do it. The idea of empowering parents is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory that a link between school staff and the parent can increase the

developmental potential of the child when the parental capacity is not undermined (Bronfenbrenner, 1996). Research shows that helping parents to see the areas in which they are already helping their children, as well as providing them with information and coaching and guiding them as they make decisions will help to build their capacity (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2017).

In addition to teaching parents to be strong advocates for their children, there were also discussions focused on helping parents learn skills to effectively interact with and parent their children, which is not a typical individual program plan goal since the goals tend to be more child-focused. For many families in the program this looked different than families with typically developing children. Susan expressed this by saying:

> So, part of what I feel is it's not only teaching the families to be advocates, but also teaching them how to parent their child and to know how to communicate with them and teach them because a lot of them are learning in a different way.

Providing family supports.

Participants also identified other areas where parents needed support including coming to terms with having a child with a disability and navigating the education, health, and social support systems in Edmonton. Many families in the program were at the beginning stages of determining their child's specific delay or disability, and many school-family liaisons spent a lot of time supporting families through the process of acknowledging that and the difficult feelings that may follow. As Toni said:

> Our role is to basically support – sometimes support families through the assessment/diagnostic process as parents are learning about their child's disability. Or to

> help sort of get families to a place of readiness to pursue assessment, for the difficult, more challenging families with more complex kids.

Helping families through these times required sensitivity and a careful presentation of relevant information, so that the families felt supported and not overwhelmed. Nellie expressed her hope that the families she worked with "don't feel like they're alone in their journey if they have a child with a disability" and that she wanted them to know that "in Canada it is okay to have a child with a disability". The idea of supporting families through difficult periods was echoed by other school-family liaisons. Susan said that although this piece was not included on their individual program plan, it was, "… a huge part of supporting that family in going through their journey, and I feel like that's a big thing for us to support with."

Other areas of family support mentioned included "more social-worky things – just helping the with basic needs". Maya gave an example of the type of family support she provided families:

> Sometimes I've had parents where they couldn't pay their bills. So again, we go down to Alberta Works and I teach them how to navigate the system. You know, it's tricky. Some parents you can give them the information and they can follow through with it, and some parents you really need to be there to guide them through it.

Toni questioned the benefit of sessions directly relating to the individual program plan for some families who were struggling with meeting their basic needs when she said, "the truth is, they can't focus on their child's development if they're too worried on shelter and food and safety and all those things." Most of the school-family liaisons that I spoke with shared the idea that helping families meet their basic needs was needed before strategies for individual program

plan goals could be targeted, and should also count as family-oriented programming sessions as they were foundational to working on individual program plan goals.

The importance of providing support to families in areas related to basic needs or social supports was a large part of many of the interviews I completed. As Toni said:

> It is information sharing, but it's a means to support basic needs, so that has to count for something. It has to be in place before we can focus on IPP [individual program plan] goals.

Maya, recalling specific families she has worked with, said:

> Depending on what the family needs, we may not even get to an IPP [individual program plan] goal, because some of the homes that I've been into, they are at risk. You know some of them have – are in an abusive relationship. I've helped moms who've been in those situations find housing.

At many sites, a large proportion of the families are struggling to make ends meet. Jane discussed how unrealistic it was to try to work on individual program plan goals when a family was in the middle of a difficult situation. She said, "we can't just go into a family that's in crisis. Like financially they're struggling, emotionally they're struggling." Toni shared that in her experience, "so much of the need has been parents asking for resources to meet basic needs." Later, referring to the predominant needs of families in the program, she said:

> I think it's morphing into more social-needs, which has not really been identified or recognized by Edmonton Public. At least in certain areas of the city. And I think too, I would say, it's probably because there isn't an understanding that there's a link between home and school and we need to be able to support both environments.

Maya, while discussing supports like finding housing, applying for Family Supports for Children with Disabilities, help with behaviour difficulties, or how to apply for the disability tax credit said, “but those are all things that are not related to the IPP [individual program plan], really, and that’s what’s a little bit frustrating, but that’s what’s so important I think.” These school-family liaisons highlighted the important connection between “supports for the whole child” (Edmonton Public School Board, 2018, p.2) and giving children “an excellent start to learning” (Edmonton Public School Board, 2018, p.2). If families’ most salient needs are not met, it is much more difficult to make progress with other goals the program may have for the child.

Parental mental health problems have been shown to negatively affect child outcomes with parental stress as a mediator; having the ability to support parents in ways that can reduce stress is important (Fredriksen, von Soest, Smith, & Moe, 2019). Discussing the importance of being able to meet with the parent when the child was not around, Susan said, “sometimes they just need to be able to talk, and it has nothing to do with the child. There’s a lot of mental health out there and it impacts their life and impacts their child.” Nellie said, “I find if they don’t have that support, I find other things, you know, mental health or other issues can come up.”

Although helping families access social supports and meet their basic needs goes a long way to decreasing their stress-levels, Maya was the only school-family liaison who explicitly discussed the possibility that the family program was helping families and children by decreasing family stress. Her comment was, “cause a less-stressed mom is going to make for a less-stressed child. Absolutely. And there’s a lot of stress in families now.” Others talked about it indirectly, as seen in the efforts to provide general family supports, or as examples of how things were not handled well.

Rosa spoke about how imposing classroom expectations onto the family when they were struggling in other areas could make parents "just feel bad. They feel like bad parents." When parents were made to feel bad about their capabilities with their child, their parental capacity and motivation has been undermined. According to Bronfenbrenner (1996), undermining parental capacity and motivation can negatively affect child development. Rosa explained how she tried to reduce that pressure and thereby decrease some of the stress the family was feeling:

> I said, it's great if you want to do some of the activities, the fine motor and I think it's awesome if you can do that, but you also need to be a parent. And you cannot have the same kind of routines and schedules that we have. It's impossible, and I would never expect you to do that. You need to just enjoy your child, right?

Similarly, Katherine spoke about the importance of "being knowledgeable about going into someone's home and opening that door and acknowledging the parents' needs, not putting our education agenda on them."

Another way that the family program may inadvertently increase parents' stress-level is by pressuring a family to act before they are ready. Several school-family liaisons spoke about the pressure they have felt from the school team to cajole a family into making a decision about further assessment, when the school-family liaisons knew the family was already feeling stressed and not ready. As Susan said,

> Sometimes the big difference is that [other school staff] see the kids at school only, and they don't know always the dynamics of the family or what the family is going through, so their expectations are sometimes - sometimes their judgement on the families…

Regarding the team's expectations of families' readiness, she said,

> If the family's not ready to hear that, or they're not there, just try to be empathetic to that, and recognize that and just kind of guide them through it slowly. You can't jump on them.

Toni echoed this when she said,

> The other one I find really challenging is when there's an immediate need to refer a child to the IPAS [Infant and Preschool Assessment Service] clinic. When families can be brand-new to Canada, the child's got at least two years of pre-k programming in front of them, and the first conversation is the team want[ing] us to tell the parent how they think the child has autism. And we know that it's not an effective way to build rapport or gain trust. It's when a family feels targeted.

To illustrate the necessity of the family program to be supportive, non-judgemental, and to meet parents where they are, Toni spoke about a negative experience she had related to the lack of empathy teams sometimes show families. She relayed a specific example of how a family was asked to come into the school to discuss their child's aggressive behaviours. Every member of the child's team was present and, from Toni's perspective, were all "just coming at them". She empathized with the parents who were "coming in knowing [their] child's not doing well, so [they're] already coming in with this feeling of guilt." Toni said one of the team members then told the parents their child "needs to go have an assessment because we think he has autism." The parents, feeling attacked, immediately rejected the idea of assessment and left the meeting. The team then judged them for not being receptive to their concerns. This example shows how even if everything that is said is true, if the information is not conveyed in a supportive, and caring manner, it can be unhelpful and damaging. This meeting resulted in the parents saying about one of the therapists, "I don't want to work with her or talk to her again". The team was

further from their goal of the child receiving additional assessments, and instead of the family program being a source of support, this family found the program a source of added stress. This is an example of how not encouraging the "growth of mutual trust" (Bronfenbrenner, 1996) between the parents and staff members can potentially undermine parent capacity and interfere with the child's developmental potential.

Staff struggle to provide meaningful family-oriented programming sessions while meeting funding requirements.

Continuing in the theme of the disconnect between the perception and requirement of program goals, is the fact that staff struggled to provide meaningful family-oriented programming sessions while meeting funding requirements. Like the staff in the focus group, the school-family liaisons that I interviewed thought that the criteria for funding as set out by Alberta Education was too limiting, and that some aspects of how sites organized the program restricted their ability to provide meaningful programming.

Funding criteria are too limiting.

Consistent with the views of the participants in the focus group, most of the school-family liaisons I spoke to also found the guidelines restrictive and thought that they interfered with providing more meaningful sessions. Toni stated that "there's all these rules about when we can be having these conversations with parents. It's so important that we *have* them," referring to the fact that according to Alberta Education's (2018) *Early Childhood Services Family-Oriented Programming* document, family-oriented programming sessions must occur outside of the child's class times. Susan said:

> It would be nice if it wasn't so like- like sometimes it makes it challenging, [that] the child has to be there or whatever. Well, sometimes the things you talk about the child shouldn't be hearing.

Other school-family liaisons were regretfully not running programs they knew would be beneficial to families because the programs were not eligible for funding and could not be fit into their schedules without taking time away from other funding-eligible activities. One example of this was seen in this statement:

> …even with parenting programs, like Triple P, I can't. I'm told by our admin if I want to do it and want to teach families it, then that has to be on my own time, because there's no other time to do it in because that's not considered family-oriented programming sessions. Which is very, very, very devastating.

The Alberta Education (2018) policies that created these difficulties in running meaningful programming for families would appear to run contrary to Alberta Education's Standards for the Provision of Early Childhood Special Education (2006). These standards state that parents should be helped in facilitating their children's development, and that programming should help to increase confidence in their parenting abilities. Sessions like Triple P, Parent Café, among others do those things by introducing child development concepts and parenting strategies, and through encouraging group discussions and self-reflection (Kim, Schulz, Hahlweg, & Zimmerman, 2018; Layzer, Goodson, Berstein, & Price, 2001; McConnell, Breitkreuz, & Savage, 2013; Rivard, Terroux, Parent-Boursier, & Mercier, 2014).

The frustration shared by most of the school-family liaisons I spoke with was that the sessions that qualify for funding were not necessarily the sessions that were the most meaningful

or beneficial for families and their children. Jane, expressing this frustration in relation to the meaningful, but not fundable, conversations she has had with parents said:

> I can keep notes to say that I've been talking with them, but if I don't have that FOPS [family-oriented programming sessions] paper signed that says that I visited you, and we worked on an IPP [individual program plan] goal, or we did something that had to do with a parent session, or whatever, then it doesn't count. But I think it does count.

Another concern was the difficulty of allowing some families the time to understand the purpose of home visits, by talking with them in the school if they drop-off and pick-up their child, talking over the phone or texting with them first. Determining the number of visits a family will need at the outset of the year, as recommended by Alberta Education (2018) disregarded the fact that each family brought their own school experiences with them which can colour their perspectives of the pre-kindergarten program. As Katherine said, staff need to "respect the fact that everybody has a different history and just recognize why there might be hesitation or refusal." Some parents have likely had negative school experiences and may require significant time to build trust. Other parents may have the view that parents and schools do not interact unless there is a problem, and therefore might take a while before they see the value of the family program. As acknowledged through a constructivist approach, each person will "construct [their own] meaning of a situation" (Creswell, 2014, p. 8) through the lens of their past experiences which will influence how they interpret their current situation. As program staff strive to meet families where they currently are and include families as partners, as recommended by Edmonton Public School Board (2018), participants' concerns suggest that it is important to be aware that parents will bring different understandings of what the family program means to them.

Many school-family liaisons also struggled with the fact that at many sites, all families must be involved with the same number of family-oriented programming sessions, regardless of their actual needs. Regarding this difficulty, Susan said, “there’s some families that need more support than others, but you still have to do so many home visits for each family.” Jane observed that some families may not want to have someone in their home, saying that they “just aren’t interested in having those visits. And I think we should respect that actually.” She added that while staff should respect their preference to not participate in the program, staff should still work on the relationship with parents who may eventually come to understand the value of the program.

Maya expressed her frustration that the current structure of the family program at her site limited her ability to build the relationship needed to be able to find out each families’ areas of need. Maya completed three home visits for each family on her caseload, while the rest of the sessions were completed by other staff or through group family-oriented programming sessions. She recognized the flexibility that was required when providing programming for different families to meet their different needs when she said:

> In some ways I wish we would go back to [school-family liaisons] doing those 12 visits, you know, but then again, not all families needed it either, right? Because there are some families who are fine with coming in to do those programming sessions and who do very well with them, and they take what they need from it.

Toni explained how different families felt differently about schools, which affected their willingness to interact with staff:

> But for the families who are a little more isolated, who are a little lower functioning, who have more social needs, they're not reaching out to make friends with the teachers. They're not bringing in gifts at Christmas time, they're not, you know, they're feeling more intimidated by the system than welcomed by the system. So those are the families that I end up working with usually, because we recognize the need for that good rapport to be in place. But I think it's a challenge for families to even feel like, what's the point of the visit? I think they do have that question sometimes, like why are you here? What are we doing? Who are you?

Toni had effectively described the need to engage families individually and to meet them where they are at, not where it is convenient to the program for them to be.

In the above examples, Jane, Maya, and Toni were articulating the need to be able to differentiate programming for families and not assume that all families will require the same programming structure or content. Some families can come to a session, learn the information, and apply it effectively within their family without additional support from school staff, whereas others need a more hands-on approach that fits the 1:1:1 model. Being able to identify what works for whom, in what context, and why is the reason a critical realist approach is needed.

Discussing the program, Parent Café, one school-family liaison commented:

> It's so valuable and yet not everyone's doing it. Why? Because you can't count it as a FOPS [family-oriented programming session]. Which is frustrating, because people don't want to do it if you can't count it, and that's not necessarily a great attitude to have.

Toni said she wished that they could start "losing some of that rigidity around what we can do and when we can do it, because it's got to work for parents, and it's important information."

When I asked Maya if she was confident that she was able to help meet the objectives she had for her families with the knowledge and training she had, after a pause she said, “yes, but I don’t have the time to do it, nor do I have the backing to do it.”

A related frustration was the inconsistency of what school administrators allowed as family-oriented programming sessions. Several school-family liaisons expressed confusion about why field-trip type events or school bar-b-ques planned by the school administration would count even when there were no intentional, specific objectives targeted, whereas parent information sessions with specific parent and child objectives did not count simply because the child was not present. In some of these situations, the administration at certain sites may have considered some sessions eligible for funding, when in fact, they were not. Either way, several school-family liaisons were confused about the reasoning behind what has been allowed at their site.

The question of what counted as a family-oriented programming session led some school-family liaisons to think that the individuals making those decisions were disconnected from the reality of the on-the-ground experiences. Katherine spoke of the importance of the front-line workers to be able to share what is working and what is not. A community-based approach ensures that the perspectives of the intended users as well as the front-line workers are included in the decisions made about programming so that families and staff working with families are better supported.

Restrictive program organization and administration.

The school-family liaisons discussed the different sessions that they had offered to families, but despite their apparent value (as indicated by families to school-family liaisons),

acknowledged the difficulty of making all of them fit into the criteria set out by Alberta Education. Some school-family liaisons discussed the degree of autonomy they have in deciding how to allocate their time at work, and how that effects their ability to provide meaningful family-oriented programming sessions.

The school-family liaisons that I spoke with discussed 32 different group sessions topics that they have offered to families. Included were sessions directly related to occupational therapy, speech-language pathology, general parenting, some had to do with school events, and others were a family activity or field trip-type session. (See appendix G for complete list of sessions.)

Some of the sessions were parent-only and required help from other staff for childcare, while for others, the children and parents stayed together throughout. When the children stayed with the parents, additional staff were often involved in order to maintain 1:1:1 ratio required by Alberta Education (2018). Other sessions met this requirement by having parents join the child after the session to practice what they learned. Other times a staff member would follow-up on a later home visit, in which case the original group session did not meet the requirement, only the follow-up home visit did. In all these cases, the family-oriented programming sessions were required to be run outside of classroom time, which left Mondays, evenings, or running two sessions on a school day and ensuring parents attend while their child is not in school. This last option makes it difficult if extra staff are needed to support with childcare and/or maintaining the 1:1:1 ratio as the staff are busy working with children in the classrooms.

Several school-family liaisons shared how many of the family-oriented programming sessions could be clearly connected to individual program plan goals, others had clear objectives unrelated to the individual program plan, whereas others were more ambiguous in their

objectives. *Helping your child with speech sounds* and the fine motor session could easily be related to children's individual program plan. Some helped the parents strengthen their interactions with their children (e.g., Triple P and Parent Café). Others, like swimming, or a field trip to Prairie Gardens, were a bit more ambiguous in their relevance to the individual program plan, although arguments could be made that they do relate; as several school-family liaisons inferred, facilitating language development can be worked on anywhere.

Other sessions were clear in their objectives to provide families with information or strategies that they need and want (e.g., strategies and practice for going to the movies, information about summer programs, or accessing the disability tax credit), or to help them develop their informal social supports (e.g., classroom potlucks, or Parent Cafés). These objectives were important, but with the current requirements were difficult to justify as qualifying toward the required number of family-oriented programming sessions, since they did not fulfill the 1:1:1 ratio requirement, and could not be related, even indirectly to most children's individual program plans. Most of the school-family liaisons saw the importance of including different types of sessions and felt frustrated that they could not be considered part of the funded program. This frustration was seen in Susan's comment: "I feel like sometimes with the government guidelines of FOPS [family-oriented programming sessions] and home visits and stuff, like sometimes they're very restrictive, and it's not necessarily what families need."

Another issue affecting the school-family liaison's ability to provide meaningful programming was the level of autonomy each school-family liaison had. In some sites school-family liaisons are required by their administration to spend a certain amount of time each week in the classroom with the children. Time spent in the classroom means less time with families, further focusing the remaining time spent with families only on programming that meets funding

criteria. This required time in the classroom was a point of contention by some and highly valued by others. Maya's perspective on this requirement was:

> Now we're mandated to spend more and more and more time in the classroom, and that puts extra pressure on me, because the team wants me in the classroom because that's my job. But is it really my job? Is it my job to spend time in the classroom or is it to gain resources?

Maya acknowledged the importance of spending some time in the class in order to get to know the children and be able to speak to their families from an informed position but wanted more flexibility to be able to decide for herself how much time and when. Susan was also struggling to find the time to fit everything in, but to her, giving up classroom time was not an option since, "an integral part of this position is having those relationships with kids." Describing the challenge she had getting everything done, Susan still thought it was important to be in classroom with the kids. She added that she felt that her classroom teams were relying on her to be there to help in the class and did not want to let them down.

Octavia was the only school-family liaison I spoke with that predominately worked directly with families who thought that she does have enough flexibility to respond to the needs of the families. As the sole school-family liaison in a large program, her caseload varied throughout the year. She said:

> Actually from- sometimes I'll have 10 or 12, sometimes I'll have more, sometimes I'll have less. It depends on who's here, what's happening, who needs help. So, I may help a family for a short period of time, and then – and then I'm done with that, and maybe [I will] check-in [with the family], but the need isn't there anymore.

She felt confident in her ability to decide, along with her team members, which families were requiring her support, and then to be able to step back when the families had the resources or information they needed.

The challenge facing most school-family liaisons seemed to be finding time to fit in both what was needed to meet funding requirements, what their administration required of them, and what families actually needed. Quisha, commenting on trying to do all that is needed, said:

> Sometimes it is super busy and because there are so many diverse things that we do on any given day, sometimes it's very challenging to make sure that I'm not dropping any of the plates that are spinning in the air.

Some of the school-family liaisons identified areas that they saw as important to providing better programming for families but did not have time for. These included time for staff mentorship and training, more time to do group family-oriented programming sessions, and time for finding resources for families, including time for relationship-building with other organizations and agencies in the community. Discussing the parent program, Circle of Security, Toni said:

> If I had more time, I would love to run that group. Next year, I hope. I would love to try to factor that in. But it's challenging based on what I'm doing right now.

Section summary and conclusion.

Overall, the perspectives of the staff in the focus group and the school-family liaisons were consistent with one another. The tension between what counted as a family-oriented programming session and what was understood to be beneficial for families was clear throughout the focus group and interviews and highlights the apparent disconnect between the implicit goals

and the directives of the program. Where thinking of the staff diverged from Alberta Education's statements was in the requirement that all programming must be provided in a 1:1:1 setting, outside of school hours.

Virtually all the participants felt limited by the requirement that the child always needed to be present for the session to count and felt that this requirement often interfered with their ability to have purposeful and meaningful sessions. For many families, meeting while the child was in school eliminated the need for childcare and enabled the parents and staff to discuss issues that were inappropriate or potentially detrimental to the child if they were to hear.

Both groups also shared the challenges in meeting family needs that arose from Alberta Education policies about when family programming must take place, who should be there, and what it should be about. For some families, the current circumstances of their life put some of the topics related to their child's individual program plan on the backburner for a time. They may have needed support finding and accessing additional resources and services, before they could readily engage in the 1:1:1 delivery model. Until they felt safe and stable with their basic needs met, school-family liaisons and other staff found that families had difficulty focusing effectively on the 'extras' that staff were bringing to them.

However, there was a portion of families in the program for whom the 1:1:1 structure was exactly what they needed. These families were sufficiently handling other aspects of life and had the time, energy, and cognitive bandwidth to focus on learning strategies and techniques relevant to their child. They recognized that they could use some help in areas related to their child's individual program plan goals. They were aware of the areas that needed additional skills and strategies, and they understood the benefit of modeling, coaching and practice, and were open to engaging in that process.

Still other families were in a place in their lives where they were stable and settled. They were successfully handling daily life and were confident in their ability to successfully parent their child. These families could attend group information sessions, participate in the discussions, and walk away with new information that they could successfully apply to the relevant situation. Some school-family liaisons said that families in this type of situation may benefit from follow-up conversations that allow them to reflect and problem solve. For these families the 1:1:1 may have been unnecessary and may have felt intrusive and patronizing, potentially undermining their parental self-efficacy.

It is important to note that family situations were not static; unforeseen situations that required the support of a school-family liaison or other staff member could arise at anytime. While one family may have needed the 1:1:1 structure at a certain time or to learn a specific skill or strategy, they may have been fine to attend an information session at another time or for a different topic. Most of the research participants indicated that each family's programming should be approached in a more individualized way. Treating every family in the program as if their situations and readiness to engage and learn are the same and unchanging is short-sighted and unhelpful. The criterion that a staff member, parent, and child must complete a certain number of minutes together is no guarantee that the time spent will be meaningful or beneficial to anyone. As Florence succinctly said, when discussing the idea of family-oriented programming not being directly tied to funding, "you can get a lot of minutes and not do any good."

Another challenge that program staff had with Alberta Education's policy was the requirement that the number of visits each family requires should be determined at the beginning of the year as stated in Alberta Education's 2016 family-oriented programming document.

Although the 2018 version of the family-oriented programming document on Alberta Education's website no longer explicitly states "prior to the outset of the program" (Alberta Education, 2016, p. 1), it does say the "number, setting and structure of sessions must be determined in consultation with parents/guardians" (Alberta Education, 2018, p. 1). Including parents in determining the elements of the sessions is good practice and is something that should be done on an ongoing basis, not just at the beginning of the year (McWilliam, 2010). However, the funding for the programming is determined at the beginning of the year and is based on how many visits each family will receive that year. Families new to the program are often overwhelmed with everything they need to do and learn, and at the same time, they are dealing with acknowledging their child's delay or disability, perhaps for the first time. As indicated by some of the school-family liaisons, expecting families to understand the full potential of the family program and then decide how much they will participate before there is any opportunity for a relationship to be built is not realistic.

There was one notable difference between the focus group and the individual interviews. The participants in the focus group were very open in sharing their struggles working with families who were not engaged, and of the importance of staff being well-trained in knowing what makes visits meaningful. The school-family liaisons were more focused on how the structure of the program interfered with providing meaningful programming. This difference in focus was likely for two main reasons. The first may have been due to a reluctance of school-family liaisons to admit uncertainty in a position that already feels undervalued and not wanting to show any weakness that could potentially be exploited. Several school-family liaisons were hesitant to speak with me because they did not want to say anything that might jeopardize their position. For the other school professionals in the focus group, working with families was not as

central to their job descriptions as it was for school-family liaisons, and therefore critiquing it may have felt less risky.

The second reason may have been that of the 11 school-family liaisons interviewed, five had been in the position for more than 12 years, some of those approaching or surpassing the 20-year mark. These individuals likely did not share their struggles engaging families simply because they likely had very few to share. By now, they would have figured out how to work with families effectively in various situations and were probably quite confident in their abilities, as indicated by not being able to identify any needs that would help them in their work with families.

Lack of Guidance or Framework for Staff Working with Families

The second theme identified within both the focus group and the individual interviews was the need for some sort of guidance or framework for the staff who work with families. There was a sense that everyone was left to do the best they could without any practical guidance or support.

Focus group.

The participants in the focus group discussed the lack of training about how to do home visits, how stressed many new and experienced staff were about completing them, and how some kind of mentorship program would benefit new staff and give some direction in what home visits should look like. In addition to a sense of learning on the go, the teachers, occupational therapists, and speech-language pathologists identified several specific training topics and characteristics that were beneficial for those working with families, and how inconsistences across the district could lead to issues with planning for training and programming.

Staff unclear of the purpose.

The group talked about how there was currently nothing set up to help staff new to home visiting learn what to expect, what the visits were meant to accomplish, or how to complete them. They shared how many staff were not aware when they were hired that home visits would be a part of the job, and when they were eventually faced with it, they were anxious. As Clara, a therapist, shared, it was not only new staff who felt this way. She said that one of the older teachers she worked with thought home visits were "ridiculous, so she just leaves them until the very end and just burns through them in a couple days, but then it's at the end of the school year, so how effective is that?"

It would seem that many staff did not see the relevance or the importance of the home program to pre-kindergarten. A consideration raised by the group was that many of the staff completing home visits did not know what it was that made a visit meaningful or purposeful nor how to do that. Bessie spoke about how some teachers or educational assistants were unsure of their strategies and became "overwhelmed with the responsibility of the home visit" and then viewed the visits as "a complete waste of time." They could complete activities with the child but did not see the bigger purpose of "trying to teach the family how they could use this at home." There may have been a lack of awareness that those preschool programs that have shown positive effects on children's development have included a quality family program (Bierman, Heinrichs, Welsh, Nix, and Gest, 2017; Grindal et al., 2016).

Bessie, a therapist, explained how difficult it can be for new staff to be expected to start home visits without any guidance:

> Sometimes I think for new staff, almost if there were some sort of mentorship program. I remember being a first-year [therapist] and you're sent on a visit, and it's just sort of like <*look of bewilderment*> and not given any guidance about what this is supposed to look like? I haven't even seen one, what am I doing? And kind of figuring this out on the go, and this year with some of my less experienced staff, I feel like they should be partnered with a stronger staff member and not having to do things independently yet, until they get more of a sense of what the ideal looks like.

The staff in the focus group discussed how, over time, staff providing home visits learned through trial-and-error what worked and what did not. Amelia, a teacher, noted that, "I think you learn what questions to ask." She explained that she eventually determined what questions she needed to ask and was able to share this information with a new speech-language assistant who also did home visits. This speech-language assistant was fortunate in that she had someone to learn from, but most new staff do not get that opportunity. The participants felt that it is neither efficient nor fair to new staff, nor is it to the families' benefit to expect each individual home visitor to learn what questions to ask and how to complete visits on an individual trial-and-error basis. Regarding training new staff on how to complete home visits, Clara said, "there's really nothing."

The lack of training for those working with families resulted in a lot of uncertainty and variation in how home visits should be handled. In order to rectify this, some individuals have tried to create some type of standard that the other staff at their site could use as a guide. Bessie discussed how she and others at her site have tried to help staff new to home visitation, by creating a document of what a home visit could look like. She later explained how she tried to help the staff she worked with complete meaningful visits by creating notes for each child about

what they should be targeting during the home visit. She acknowledged that they needed more than she could provide when she said, "it's a lot and I feel like they need some support and education too, before they're actually leading effective home visits." Bessie continued:

> I can often easily fill 45 to 90 minutes where some of them are like, "oh, my gosh, this is way too long". Because they're not confident or unsure what the purpose is and they feel like, "ugh, I'm just killing time" or [they are] just watching their watch instead of being effective.

When staff were unclear of the purpose of the program, it is difficult to effectively communicate the purpose to families. As Clara said:

> One of the things we need to do a better job at is communicating with parents about that, what that FOP [family-oriented programming sessions] piece looks like, even at the beginning, in the registration, I don't know, at some point, and then we also do that so that they have an understanding about what is the point of these FOPS and that they can really be benefiting.

Recommended training and knowledge.

I asked the group about what specific professional development or training would be beneficial for school-family liaisons. Amelia, reflecting on the need for supports outside the individual program plan, responded by saying, "it would be really nice if they were social workers 'cause that's what I find that a lot of our families need. They need access to a lot of different agency supports."

This led to a discussion about the types of agencies or programs that school-family liaisons should be familiar with. Some of the agencies and programs mentioned were the

Multicultural Health Brokers, Family Support for Children with Disabilities, the Food Bank, and things like knowledge of good pediatric dentists. Other courses or areas of knowledge deemed important were Triple P, Circle of Security, Hanen's Teacher Talk, several aspects related to play, how to establish personal and professional boundaries, adult education practices, interviewing skills, and coaching skills. The ideas listed reflect the objectives of Alberta Education (2018) to "provide coaching, information, resources, skills and strategies to help the child's development" (p. 1).

Florence brought up a point related to the fact that *how* staff interact with parents is as important as *what* is being discussed. She stated:

> I think coaching. Coaching skills, basically. Because I think everybody's default when you don't have any training on how to do adult education, [is] I'll just go in and present this to you, like I'm the teacher and you're the student, and it doesn't set up the kind of relationship that I think we'd often like to have in our home visits, and with our families. But, that's a really tough thing to do effectively when you haven't been trained in it, which most of us haven't.

With this comment, Florence touched on the importance of not undermining parental self-efficacy as Bronfenbrenner discussed with his idea of having supportive links as part of his bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1996).

Another skill that the members of the focus group deemed important when working with families was flexibility. Discussing the need to be flexible, Harriet said:

> … [if] the mom looks like she's going to be crying, you might just have coffee with her and talk about what's going on, not about the fine motor skills you came out to talk

about. And if you're not comfortable, you wouldn't know that, you'd just keep going on your plan and leave, and that's not effective.

Being flexible when doing home visits, along with having the confidence that their team was okay with individuals responding flexibly to family needs was viewed as a necessary skill to work effectively with families. Speaking to that, Florence reflected on the importance of knowing that the administration and "your school team is behind you in doing that if that's what's really going to be best for that family. Everyone's going to be okay if you don't get this fine motor activity done today." In order to be a source of support and not stress for those completing visits, the whole team needs to understand the realities of working with families. This idea is supported by Alberta Education in their standards for the provision of early childhood special education statement that states "educators understand that a parent's primary role is nurturing and care giving" (2006, p. 14). Staff need to be flexible in their approach to know how to support parents in their primary nurturing and caregiving roles and to know how and when to adapt the skills and strategies used in the classroom in the home.

In addition to being flexible and responsive to the families' needs, the group discussed the importance of being non-judgemental when interacting with families and how some intercultural knowledge is necessary to allow for that to happen. Alberta Education (2006) discusses the importance of considering families "linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds" (p. 14) when planning activities, and the participants in the focus group echoed this. Amelia discussed not entering a home with "any preconceived notions", and the need to "suspend judgement because when you come in you don't know that back story."

Eleanor, a therapist, later added that part of being non-judgemental is recognizing that cultural differences may be coming into play. What staff might consider as second nature, may

be unusual to a family, and some investigation is needed to determine the right course of action. Harriet agreed and thought that accessing the Multicultural Health Brokers could be helpful. She said when staff do not know the cultural piece, "sometimes […] we don't even know what's wrong – like, what happened?

The relationship between the lack of a program framework and inconsistencies across the district.

The lack of consistency across the district within the family program was also discussed by the group as a part of the larger theme of the absence of guidance or framework for staff working with families. There were differences noted in how involved in the family program the various sites expect their therapists, teachers and support staff to be. Some sites had educational assistants and/or speech-language assistants providing home visits, which was seemingly determined by the specific role the school-family liaison played at each particular site.

Dorothy, a therapist, expressed a bit of caution with wanting more consistency in the program. She was worried that her wish for more consistency would lead to changes just for the sake of consistency and not be beneficial for the program. She said:

> I think – and maybe this is going to backfire for me saying this, but I would like to see more continuity across [pre-kindergarten] throughout Edmonton. Like every school does things so differently.

The group spoke about how their assistant principals have told them that they must do something a certain way, since all the other sites were doing it that way, only to find out later that only a few sites were operating that way. The group expressed the desire to discuss what is working well in all the sites and to be able to have a voice in the decisions that are being made.

However they were clear that making blanket changes across the district for the sake of uniformity was not what they had in mind. There were questions about how decisions about programming are made, what they are based on, and as Ida, a teacher, said, "who actually is making them?"

The differences among the programs seem to stem from how each site decided to hire and utilize school-family liaisons. The school-family liaisons' role impacted how involved with the family program the rest of the staff needed to be. With some school-family liaisons fulfilling mostly administrative duties, and others spending most of their time with home visits, it is difficult to see how they could be considered to have the same job. Ida was surprised about all differences she sees between the different family programs, in spite of "hearing that pre-kindergarten is striving to become sort of standardized across sites more."

Later, as she tried to sort out the reason for these differences, Ida asked, "so it's up to the administrators of each site to decide on what the SFL [school-family liaison] role looks like, is that correct?" Amelia answered, "I think so, and it's whatever skills they come with." It seemed to be that with the diverse backgrounds of the school-family liaisons and lack of basic training, their role within each site was determined by a combination of their experience and skills, and the program structure that the administrative team had decided on.

Florence brought up one issue these differences lead to: how to adequately plan for and provide training for school-family liaisons when the roles across the district are so different.

> I think that the differences across sites too, have got to make it hard for implementing anything like training on how to do these things effectively… I can't even imagine if I

> was an SFL [school-family liaison] and I'm going to move to this other job across the city and now my job is 100% different.

The fact that school-family liaisons came from wide array of backgrounds and had no foundational training when they started led to the participants' conclusion that how the school-family liaisons work and what they do will likely vary considerably, even with similar job descriptions.

School-family liaison interviews.

The school-family liaisons also shared that there was a lack of guidance in the work they have done with families. They did not have a reliable way of determining what differences they have made as they worked with families, and the daily activities of each individual school-family liaison varied drastically across the district. Many expressed a desire to more clearly know their purpose as they work with families, as well as for specific training, mentorship, and ongoing supports to help them as they work.

Staff unclear on the purpose of the family program.

Part of the lack of a clear purpose may be a result of the different ways school-family liaisons were utilized across the district. Alternatively, the different roles across the district may result from the lack of a clearly defined purpose. The fact that different sites require their school-family liaisons to fill different roles was expressed by Katherine who said, "we all carry the same title, but we do – we're doing very different work." She later wondered how decision-makers make decisions when it would seem that they do not know what all the school-family liaisons are doing. She continued: "our jobs are all different in different locations. If they're basing their decision on one [site], that doesn't mean that everybody else is doing that."

For a few school-family liaisons, most of their time was spent on administration and coordinating. These included planning and organizing family-oriented programming sessions; sending out invitations; tracking who had registered; keeping track of the number of family-oriented programming sessions each family had participated in; where each of the children on their caseload was going the following year; and contacting families to book visits or follow-up with various things. As Toni shared:

> I am coordinating schedules for 30 people basically. So, I'm, you know, I have templates, and I have time slots, and then I spend a ton of time calling families, emailing families, chatting with them when I'm seeing them, trying to get them booked for our scheduled home visit dates that are established.

She later pondered:

> What is our role? Is our role to liaison information from the consultants? Or is it to coordinate visits? I feel like I'm doing a ton of admin. Which isn't best suited to my skill set, actually.

Louisa had a similar role but was also responsible for making sure each classroom had adequate educational assistant coverage each day, as well as keeping track of the number of family-oriented program sessions attended by each family and tracking the family-oriented programming sessions for Alberta Education. When explaining her daily activities to me, Louisa continued this idea of difference between sites when she said:

> Some of the things I do are very similar to other school-family liaisons, some of the things I do are not very similar to other school-family liaisons, so that's kind of a bit of a challenge sometimes.

Quisha touched on the positive aspects of having these differences, but also the difficulty they brought to creating a clear program plan and relevant training. She said:

> Each site is different and our position looks different, and in some ways that's good, but it would be nice to have at least a little bit more continuity so that – especially for somebody new coming in would know what are the basic things that you're going to be doing in your job and how would you approach these things.

As discussed by the participants in the focus group, the differences in job duties are important factors to consider when finding appropriate training or courses for school-family liaisons.

Training, mentorship, and support needed.

In this section, I outline some training and courses the school-family liaisons I spoke with thought would be helpful for someone just starting out in the role. That is followed by the need for mentorship, knowledge that individual school-family liaisons have found to be helpful when working with families, how certain values and assumptions can impact their work, the importance of having the backing and support of other team members, and the importance of self-care.

Toni said that she knew home visits can be a great way to increase parent capacity, however she was not confident that many of the staff who carry out the visits had enough training to do this effectively. In her words:

> I think if we had more training for the people in our school who are doing home visits, as intentional, goal-focused activities, more time to plan and learn about how to carry that out, then we could be very effective.

The importance of relevant training for those working with families.

Most of the training that school-family liaisons have received happened because of their own initiative and desire to better help families, but it was difficult for new staff to know what training was needed when the scope of their job was not yet fully understood. As stated by Quisha, "you don't know what you don't know", meaning individuals new to the role do not yet understand the full scope of the role and cannot adequately select the relevant training. Whether the training that each school-family liaison sought out for herself was the most beneficial was hard to determine. The view that each school-family liaison must figure things out for herself was a common thread in these interviews. Starting a new role with such little guidance may be another part of the reason why there are such differences between sites. As Jane stated, "there isn't a consistent, *this is what needs to get done* or not even what needs to get done, but *this is what's best for families*." This leads to the questions of how do we determine what is best for families, and then how do we know if it is being implemented effectively?

Regarding staff, school-family liaisons or others, who are completing home visits, Toni expressed her view that home visits *can* be an effective way to help families, but only when staff are trained in how to do them:

> I think those families would meet those objectives better if the people doing the visits had more awareness and understanding around the purpose of the visit. The bigger picture, not just necessarily going to cut with scissors. Like, their understanding that the family needs to be the first teacher and that their role is to really engage that parent into that as much as they possibly can. So, more training, more time for – more time and more training, I think, for people that are doing it.

This idea that the family needs to be the first teacher is part of Edmonton Public School Board's Early Years philosophical foundation policy statement, along with learning opportunities that centre the child as well as the family (Edmonton Public School Board, 2015). Families as partners and supports for the whole child are also goals in the district's priorities (Edmonton Public School Board, 2018). Given that these philosophies and goals are foundational statements to the program and are two out of the ten district goals, it is surprising that more attention is not given to ensure that staff working with families are trained and supported to ensure they happen.

I asked the school-family liaisons about specific professional development or training they would recommend to a new school-family liaison or that they think would be or have been helpful to them and heard 25 different suggestions. Some of them were related to each other, but the fact that there were so many speaks to the breadth of this role, and perhaps the lack of clearly specified outcomes. Peggy discussed the importance of understanding family dynamics and issues commonly faced by parents of young children. She said that new staff sometimes were "not knowledgeable in family dynamics and family functioning, [they] have no clue" until they have children about what it can be like and how challenging it can be. She saw this lack of knowledge as a contributor to judgemental interactions with families that sometimes occurred.

The most frequently mentioned training was the Home Visitation training that the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association (AHVNA) runs. After that, Motivational Interviewing and Triple P were mentioned the most, along with training about mental health. Also mentioned were knowledge of family violence and the stages of change, and various aspects of child development and understanding common developmental disabilities. Other areas that were viewed as important were being culturally aware and culturally sensitive, training about what the

goals and focus of a home visit should be, and training about keeping oneself safe during home visits. See Appendix H for a complete record of all recommended training and professional development topics. Toni touched on several of these areas in her comments about a course she found beneficial when she started as a new home educator with a different organization:

> Really the highlight of all that training [was] to build parent capacity, and your job [was] to, as much as possible, have the parent engage with their child for that time that you're at the house. But then there was a lot of learning around why parents might not engage, culturally why that might not happen. Mental health, why that might not happen. So, there was more, bigger picture awareness around what might be happening.

The need for mentorship.

Several school-family liaisons described their start as "learning on the fly" or "flying by the seat of their pants" because no one was available to train or mentor them. Several described the difficulty of their first few years in the role as they tried to determine what was expected and needed of them. Peggy said, "I had a few breakdowns, 'cause it would have been nice to have a mentor to really help guide me." She told me how she took it upon herself to approach the administration and say, "I need to shadow somebody. I need to see - I need help. What do other school-family liaisons do, because I'm not feeling supported at all."

Mentorship was another component most of the school-family liaisons discussed as something that is needed for new school-family liaisons or other staff doing family-oriented programming, since "they don't really know what they're supposed to be doing on a home visit. There's no training offered." As Jane said:

> I don't think anybody should come into this role without somebody there to mentor them though, because when difficult cases pop up and stuff, you should have somebody to be able to go to get ideas, but also for support.

Reflecting on her experience starting out, Quisha said:

> I didn't know how I was going to do it. There was nobody here who could mentor me, and there was no time to ask anybody, so I had to learn on the fly, which in some ways was really valuable, but I think it would be great to have mentorship.

Quisha was able to surmise some things on her own, but says, "without that mentorship, like I say, you don't know what you don't know, right?" Toni said it would be valuable to have someone to show a new school-family liaison "how they do the basic stuff, like planning the calendar, who their contacts are, what community resources they're often referring families to."

Currently there is limited capacity to have mentorship, even within sites with more than one school-family liaison, due to the limited time available for extra activities, the lack of an existing framework, and perhaps also because of how second-nature it has become for many experienced school-family liaisons as they interact with families and arrange their daily activities. They may not even think to mention important aspects to new staff, since they no longer need to think about it; they just do it. Having mentors to guide new school-family liaisons as they learn how to organize their calendar, plan home visits and group sessions, and learn what the overall purpose of the family program is are all important aspects of the activities of a program theory that leads to intended outcomes (Clapham, Manning, Williams, O'Brien, & Sutherland, 2017).

Support from team.

Having the support of other members of the team was also identified as important for school-family liaisons. Susan commented that since she started, her caseload had "increased significantly. However, the supports for school-family liaisons has not really increased to compensate for the needs that are there." Maya stated that although she felt she had the skills to effectively help families she did not have the time nor the support from her administration to do it. As she said, "parenting is huge for a lot of parents, so it would be nice to at least be able to offer it," referring to her inability to run parenting courses since they did not count as family-oriented programming sessions. Quisha shared that her administration regularly asked her to justify her activities at work. She said:

> Something I definitely struggle with is again explaining when I'm asked, what do you do, is this truly a full-time job or whatever. I don't know how to quantify everything that we do. And that's difficult.

She was put in the difficult position of having to explain to her supervisor why what she was doing was worthy of a line in the budget. This is another example that showed the lack of understanding from other staff of the contribution that the family program can make to successful outcomes in children.

The idea that other staff in pre-kindergarten did not see the value in the family program was shared by other school-family liaisons. Jane shared how staff would complain about having to help with group family-oriented programming sessions or having to open their classroom for childcare. She said:

> I think it would be easier if we had everyone on the same page, [that] the FOPS [family-oriented programming session] is an expectation. This is something that we all have to do, and this is not – this isn't a choice to complain about and don't want to have to participate in.

Similarly, Rosa said she could use "more supports from the classroom. Often, I'll say, what do you want me to work on with the child and they'll say, 'oh just whatever'." Rosa works in a large program and could not reasonably be expected to keep track of how each child was doing with their goals. She found this lack of support from the classroom teams frustrating in that it made it more difficult for her to provide meaningful home visits.

Peggy brought up the idea of school-family liaisons being able to meet together with the intention of providing support to each other:

> I think if we had smaller group collaborative sessions with other SFLs (school-family liaisons), just to share ideas – 'cause you get into a routine, and you have this collection of activities that you do or things you say and, I think if you have somebody to bounce ideas off of, just to say something out loud and get that back-and-forth conversation going, it gives you new ideas, or gives you a different perspective, or it helps you tweak what you're already doing.

Currently, school-family liaisons from pre-kindergarten and Inclusive Learning (who have a different job description from those in pre-kindergarten) are able to meet together twice a year for two to three hours. Peggy's idea is to meet in smaller group settings to facilitate more productive conversations than can be achieved in a large group setting.

Values and assumptions.

The school-family liaisons I spoke with identified several helpful values and assumptions that should be incorporated into training for staff working with families, as well as some unhelpful ones that should be avoided. Jane said that one unhelpful assumption that some new school-family liaisons put on themselves was that they should have all the answers. As she said, it is important to:

> …help people to come to their own conclusions and their own answers. Just guiding them in the direction so that they can find the answer themselves, because really, they're the expert on their lives, their children, their home, their family.

Another was the assumption that every family from the same culture or background behaves the same way, or viewing a behaviour through our cultural lens and interpreting it to mean "that they just don't care and that's why they're doing this, when the reality is that they care so much." An example of this is viewing the tendency of parents of certain cultures or families to do everything for their child, such as spoon feeding or helping them get dressed when they are able to do it themselves. From the perspective that children need to learn independence, this behaviour is seen as restricting the child's development. From the parents' perspective, it is seen as a way that they show love and affection for their child.

Assumptions and values that were viewed by school-family liaisons as helpful were being respectful, supportive and non-judgemental. Katherine said, "respecting the fact that everybody has a different history and just recognizing why there might be hesitation or refusal." Quisha said:

> I think if you're going to make assumptions, they need to be assumptions that create openings not closing. And I mean by that, always assume that there's capacity there and you're going to learn something else, you're going to learn something from it, and people have capacity. It's easier, it's smarter, and it's less invasive for you to assume that people have enough skill for you to do that.
>
> She later said, "you have to assume everybody loves their kids, and their doing the best that they can do with what they have in that moment."

Section summary and conclusion.

The staff in the focus group and in the individual interviews were again consistent in their views that training was a critical need for pre-kindergarten staff working with families. Both groups felt that the status quo of learning on the fly, and the lack of consistency across the district were leading to reduced effectiveness of the program. There was also a lot of overlap in ideas about what training and knowledge would be beneficial, and many individuals in both groups saw the benefit of mentorship for new staff.

Importance of Relationships

The third theme that emerged from this research was the importance of building relationships. The teachers, occupational therapists, and speech-language pathologists in the focus group spoke briefly about how developing the staff-parent relationship was necessary to get buy-in from the parents they worked with. The school-family liaisons spent more time discussing relationships which centred around creating opportunities for families to develop informal relationships with each other, and similarly to the focus group participants, the importance of staff developing supportive relationships with the families.

Focus group.

Building relationships with families was discussed as important to work effectively with them. Amelia, a teacher, reflected this when she said:

> You really have to develop a strong relationship with that family in order to get them to buy into anything that you're doing. I think that's a very big piece for us, is that family relationship and setting that up.

Ida, a teacher, also thought that taking the time to connect with a family to build a relationship was a first step when working with families. She added, "they won't listen to you if they're defensive or offended, or anything."

Florence, a therapist, pointed out the need to listen responsively saying:

> I think strong communication with the family just building the relationship, but [also] asking what they want to get out of it… Whether it's talking about fine motor skills or talking about, like just building that relationship, and letting the parent know that it's okay, this is stressful, we hear you.

School-family liaison interviews.

Facilitating families' informal social supports by creating the time and space to allow families to interact and get to know one another was one aspect of the importance of relationships discussed by the school-family liaisons. Many school-family liaisons also discussed the importance of building rapport with the families in order to have a supportive relationship that would be conducive to effectively working together. This supportive, yet formal

relationship, was viewed as a fundamental starting point for making progress with the families' goals. I review both the informal and formal supports discussed in the interviews below.

Informal social supports.

One aspect of supporting families discussed by the school-family liaisons was in helping them to build informal supports. Jane said when she worked with families one of her goals for them was that they meet other families in the program to hear about their struggles and successes. Having an informal social support system is important for everyone, but for families with children with disabilities or delays it is especially important given their increased likelihood of being isolated and higher stress levels (Breitkreuz, Wunderli, Savage, & McConnell, 2014).

Several school-family liaisons also discussed how group information sessions have the added benefit, beyond the informational aspect of the session, of facilitating informal social supports for parents. Jane stated:

> I feel like it creates a really good sense of community for parents within our program. But then I think it also builds a lot of relationships for them going forward because we're not going to be here forever.

In one of the sites where the school-family liaison did mainly administrative work, the relationship between parent and school-family liaison, while seen as essential for many school-family liaisons, was nearly non-existent. However, the program seemed to be very purposeful in creating group family-oriented programming sessions that gave opportunities for families to build relationships with each other. Regarding these relationship-building sessions, Louisa said:

> … we do little potlucks for FOPS [family-oriented programming sessions] where they get to meet every[one] and have some ethnic contributions to that. But then families get to

> communicate and meet each other and maybe bond a little bit. And we've had a lot of kiddos who've had playdates now at somebody else's house, or moms that have little groups together in the library Monday mornings or something.

Formal social supports.

In addition to the importance of informal supports, most school-family liaisons, regardless of the structure of their family program, felt that establishing a good relationship between at least one staff member and the parent was critical to the effectiveness of the program. Jane said that one of her short-term goals was to:

> …help [families] feel comfortable in this program, help them understand they can trust us, and that we really do want to form a partnership with them. That this isn't us telling them what's best for their kid, that this is a partnership, and it's built on trust between us and them.

Maya also spoke about creating a trusting relationship when she said:

> Once the connection is made and they know who you are and they know that you're not a threat, I think that's a big thing, right? Or that you have no vested interest other than to help them, then it really does make for a better program and better relationship building."

Building "rapport with the parents, so that parents can actually feel comfortable in building the skills for their children" as Katherine said, was discussed by many as an important first step when working with families. Toni stated that once rapport has been established, then:

> …parents start to feel comfortable that we're the people who understand how to navigate the system, and they can rely on us for that. I think if it's done correctly it helps really draw awareness to the parent's role in teaching the child as well.

Several lamented increased caseloads and other obligations that interfered with their ability to effectively get to know the families they work with. Peggy explained:

> You don't have time for that relationship building, and I believe that that's so important. You can't expect parents to trust you with them, or giving them this information, if you don't first have a relationship with them.

I asked Toni, who primarily did administrative work organizing home visits for many staff, whether having different staff going out to home visits was as effective at creating the relationship that many school-family liaisons have said was essential. She paused, then said:

> That's questionable. Because sometimes - because we have 11 visits that we have to meet, and we have a ton of kids and not all the staff can work on Monday, and we sometimes put people with kids just to fill visit time. So, it might not even be an adult that's familiar to the family or the child, and I don't think that's great but it's to meet this number, which is not ideal at all. I think when families are engaged, when they're more high functioning families that are engaged with their child and wanting to know more about the school and what's going on, they are naturally better at building rapport with the classroom teams, so then it's okay, anybody can come over.

Susan, speaking about how caseloads used to be smaller which allowed more time to develop relationships said:

> … the relationship that you built, I felt, like you just got to know them more, they got to know you more, you just had a better foundation, better relationship. Whereas now, it's kind of spread out a little more because you're not going every month, because you

> physically can't, so you don't have that same bond with that same relationship kind of thing.

The idea that school-family liaisons no longer have the capacity to create those relationships was also reflected in Katherine's statement that the program needs to "… allow the time to build the relationship with families, because sometimes [the time] just doesn't seem to be there."

Susan had heard back from a few families who went from a site in which the relationship between families and staff was prioritized to one where it was not. She said:

> I know for our families we have had feedback from them saying how much they appreciate the home visits and they appreciate the FOPS [family-oriented programming sessions] and the time that the staff have put into those things and I've heard, with families moving and end up at a different location and they don't provide the same home visit structure… they miss that part of our school. It's that connection, I think.

As Toni summarized, "everything comes back to relationships."

Section summary and conclusion.

The school-family liaisons spent significantly more time on the topic of relationships, compared to participants in the focus group. This difference in attention likely stemmed from the more school-centric view of family programming taken by the teachers, speech-language pathologists, and occupational therapists. This perspective was not surprising considering that this staff group's work was focused in the school and their main objective was to help children in the classroom, whereas school-family liaisons were more focused on how things were going at home.

Ideas to Improve the Family Program

Occasionally throughout the interviews with the other staff and the school-family liaisons, someone made a direct recommendation to improve the program. These recommendations were explicitly stated as such, rather than stated as challenges or as answers to questions (e.g., what kind of training or professional development do you think are important for school-family liaisons?). In the focus group, those recommendations were the previously discussed issues of not having the 1:1:1 criterion tied to funding, and to more clearly communicating the purpose of the family program to families. One idea not yet discussed was determining a more efficient system for obtaining interpreter services. The school-family liaisons also recommended changes to the interpreter system as well as having decision-makers regularly check in with the front-line workers.

Focus group.

In addition to the challenge of effectively communicating to families what family-oriented programming is about and how it can be valuable, the participants in the focus group discussed the challenge of the language barrier that sometimes existed between staff and families. Many families with children in the pre-kindergarten program had a first language other than English. Many of the necessary discussions staff had with families were made more difficult when there was a language barrier and required the services of an interpreter. Within the focus group discussion, the issue of the reliability of the interpreters arose. Harriet, a therapist, made the comment that sometimes interpreters were not available when they were needed, or as Grace, a therapist, noted, that sometimes "they [would] make an appointment and [not] show up." The group then discussed how too often the interpreter would add things to the conversation that were not actually being said. Grace said:

> We have [a staff member] that speaks a lot of languages, and she can understand a lot of what's happening, and she's been able to break in and say, "no no no, we're not talking about that."

In addition to the difficulties that sometimes came with getting or using an interpreter, families have sometimes refused interpreter services. One of the reasons may be related to privacy, as shared by Amelia, a teacher, who said some families did not want to use interpreters, since they came from the same community, and did not want the interpreter to know (and potentially share) this aspect of their family's life.

School-family liaison interviews.

The school-family liaisons also suggested some changes around interpreter services. Toni brought up the extensive costs that have been associated with interpreters. She said:

> For the school to factor that into their budget becomes challenging because it takes away from the bottom-line service delivery that every other school has, but now you've got 50 or 70 thousand dollars here that needs to go to interpretation.

Nellie said staff at her site would sometimes use Google translate, but that it was not always accurate. She suggested that it would be helpful for Edmonton Public Schools to see which languages are most common at each site and provide documents and handbooks in those languages.

In addition to smoother interpreter services, a recommendation made was about ensuring that the people who make decisions in Edmonton Public Schools have a clear picture about what is happening in the family program in each of the sites. Katherine said:

> One thing would be for the decision-makers to come to the front line and talk to the people, talk to the workers, as to what works, what doesn't work, what would they like to see, even talking to parents and asking parents, 'ok, what worked for you, what didn't work for you?' and be genuine.

She later added that the decision-makers need to view "families as families, not as an extension of the classroom," reflecting Edmonton Public Schools (2015) early years statement of family-centered learning, and Alberta Education's (2006) acknowledgement that "a parent's primary role is nurturing and caregiving" (p. 14). Seeking out the perspectives of front-line workers would help to ensure that families needs are included when making decisions about programming.

Section summary and conclusion.

The recommendations to improve the family program made by the research participants include re-evaluating Alberta Education's funding criteria, which may mean looking at the efficacy of parent-staff intervention when the child is not present. Other recommendations have to do with communication with families, including better communication of the purpose of the program and improvements in traversing the language barrier. The last recommendation was that decision-makers in Edmonton Public Schools take the perspectives and experiences of front-line workers more into account when deciding on programming.

Conclusion

The resounding theme throughout the discussions with the staff in the focus groups and the interviews with the school-family liaisons was the struggle to complete family-oriented programming sessions that were purposeful and meaningful to families while still meeting

Alberta Education's funding requirements. Although, for some of the families in the program, Alberta Education's requirements were appropriate, for many families they were not. There was a disconnect between what staff think the goals of the family program should be, and how the current structure limits the strategies, activities, and events, leading many who participated in this research to feel they were not being as effective with families as they could be.

Another major obstacle to providing meaningful and purposeful programming was the lack of training and support given to those working with families. Each site, and in most cases each individual staff member was left to their own devices to determine what works and to seek out professional development (or not), which may or may not have been relevant. To effectively and efficiently work towards a unified purpose it should not be left to each new staff member who do not know what they do not know to learn what questions to ask and try to glean relevant information as they go (Olaniyna, & Ojo, 2008).

The findings suggest that there is a systemic lack of attention given to the pre-kindergarten family program, which may have an iterative relationship with individuals not recognizing the importance of the family program. A lack of recognition of the important role of the family program in family and child outcomes is not entirely surprising given that the program is based in a school system. It may be that school staff members are used to thinking about children as students within school, with minimal attention given to students outside of school. With a few exceptions, family involvement in schools is limited.

However, children in the pre-kindergarten program are not yet students. They are pre-students. In pre-kindergarten the hope is that children will learn skills that will increase their chances of success once they become students, but in the meantime, they are still not yet students. Research shows that preschool programs that have made significant improvements in

the lives of children did so with a significant family component, for example the Perry Preschool Program (Grindal et al., 2016; Schweinhart, 2013). Adding a quality family component to a school-based pre-kindergarten program within a large school district will require significant effort to shift from a focus that is nearly entirely on the classroom to one that also values family programming (Grindal et al., 2016). For children in pre-kindergarten, the family is still the greatest influence. Widening the view of program staff to include the child as they exist within their family is important for staff members' understanding of the value and impact the family program can have (Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012). Strengthening the supportive links between home and school within the mesosystem is essential if the program is to effectively help children reach their developmental potential (Bronfenbrenner, 1996). My findings suggest that the family program is an essential part of an effective pre-kindergarten program and should not be considered a "Cadillac program".

Explicating the connections between participant insights and government documents.

How Alberta Education documents relate to participant data.

In general, the goals of the staff that I spoke with were consistent with Alberta Education's (2006) standards for early childhood special education and their family-oriented programming document (2018). There was an awareness that staff working with families should be building parent confidence and should be helping parents facilitate their child's development without creating dependency. Staff do what they can to provide "coaching, information, resources, skills and strategies to help the child's development" (Alberta Education, 2018), although most have not received adequate training in these areas, most significantly, in coaching parents. The major point of divergence with Alberta Education was in what constitutes a family-

oriented programming session; namely the 1:1:1 model, outside of programming time exclusively focused on individual program plan goals. The staff I spoke with thought these criteria limited their ability to meet Alberta Education's standards.

Another of Alberta Education's (2006) standards is to consider and plan for the different languages, cultures and educational backgrounds of the families. Staff I spoke with recognized this as an area in which further training and support is needed. To be effective, the program as a whole needs to recognize "the importance of social, cultural, and economic environments in understanding the actions, choices, and outcomes of individuals and families" (Breitkreuz, Wunderli, Savage, & McConnell, 2014, p. 348). Further training in intercultural practice as well as a more effective system to access interpreters for visits and for translating documents is needed. As Harriet expressed, there is a need to learn more about "all the different cultures, so that we are set up for that. We're missing that piece sometimes when we go out, and we don't even know what's wrong." The participants in this study seemed aware of their limitations in these areas but were not in a position to make the necessary changes.

How Edmonton Public School Board documents relate to participant data.

Edmonton Public School Board's district priorities and philosophical foundation statement recognize the importance of the whole child (2018) and the importance of being family-centered (2016). The staff that I spoke with were trying to uphold the ideas of families as partners and of helping to ensure ongoing success through strong early learning (2018). The priorities espoused by the school board are important and necessary as guidelines towards making a difference to families and children. However, my findings show that staff working with families need clarity and guidance about what the terms mean and how to go about accomplishing it in pre-kindergarten.

Making the program beneficial to all families will require knowing more precisely what type of benefit the program is aiming for and using valid and reliable measurements to determine how close the program is getting to achieving those goals. Edmonton Public School Board's early years philosophical foundation statement supports this type of evaluation with their promotion of "innovative practice in the early years", and of tracking and identifying the most successful approaches (Edmonton Public School Board, 2015, p. 1). To evaluate what is beneficial for all families requires using a critical realist approach to drill down to the different subpopulations in pre-kindergarten to know what works for whom, and why, rather than simply looking at pre-kindergarten as a large undifferentiated group. What is beneficial for one subgroup may have negative effects for the other and looking at the outcomes of both groups together may lead to the conclusion that there is no effect whatsoever. Knowing why something may work for a particular group can also allow for generalizability in the future. The School Board recognizes that the early years are critically important, and that child- and family-centered early learning are necessary for long-term success (Edmonton Public School Board, 2015); these beliefs support the ultimate goal of this research which is to be certain that the activities and strategies of the family program are helping all families.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Based on participants' identification of the lack of a framework in the pre-kindergarten family program, I developed a program theory that incorporates participants' concerns and best practice as discussed from the literature, as presented in figure 1. As seen in the second theme of this research, *lack of guidance or framework to implement the program*, this is an area that participants indicated as inadequate. In this chapter I discuss the different aspects of the program theory starting with the goals of the family program as identified by the participants and as recommended in the literature. I discuss the strategies, activities, and events involved in the family program. This includes the types of activities completed in the family program as well as training for staff that is necessary to effectively implement the activities. I follow that with the types of training that could be most beneficial and why social-emotional development may be a good area to focus on. Next, I discuss targets which explain *how* the activities relate to the goals, or how the goals are achieved. The use of critical realism and community-based constructivist approach are discussed in light of the findings. I conclude with recommendations, limitations and areas of future research.

The purpose of this study was to explicate the program theory of the pre-kindergarten family program within Edmonton Public School Board. To do this, I examined Alberta Education and Edmonton Public School Board documents, and the perspectives of the program of pre-kindergarten staff. The aim of the research was to identify and describe the goals of the family program; the strategies, activities and events that are involved in the program; how or if they relate to the goals; and what type of training is necessary to effectively achieve those goals. This was done using a qualitative descriptive approach through individual interviews and a focus group using semi-structured interviews. The theories used as a framework for the research were

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, specifically looking at the mesosystem, as well as a critical realist approach, and a community-based constructivist approach. This framework enables a context-specific examination of the family-school connection to ultimately determine what parts of the program are working for whom and why. A community-based, constructivist approach also prioritizes the perspectives of front-line staff, while acknowledging that each person's experiences will influence their interpretation of the program. Ideally, the parents' perspectives will also be included in future research.

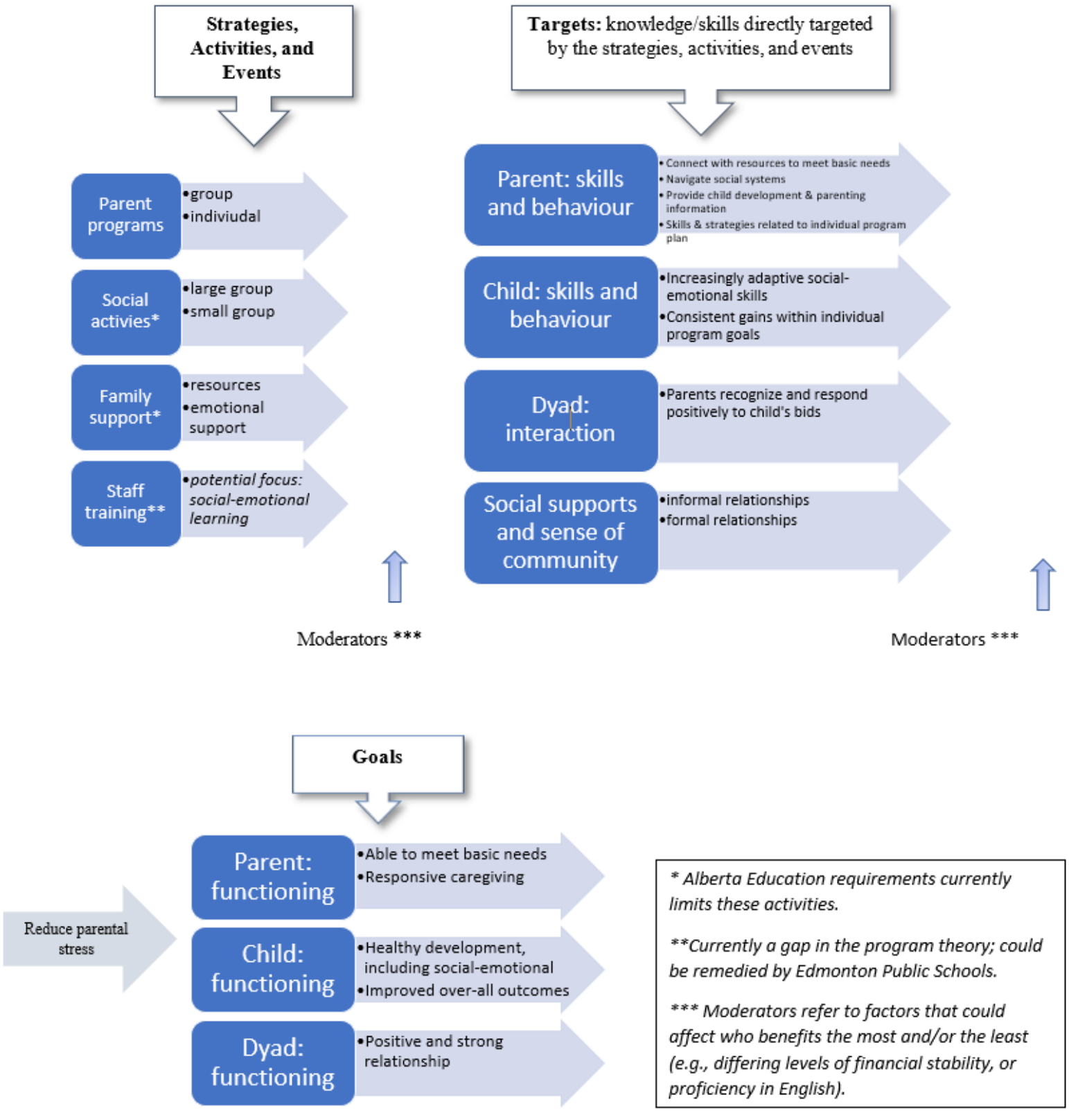
At the onset of the study, I was primarily interested in the school-family liaisons' experience at the front-line working with families and had considered the other staff perspectives of the family program as secondary. After completing some of the interviews, I realized that other staff groups also regularly worked directly with families. As a result, I broadened my focus from just the school-family liaisons to include all pre-kindergarten staff working with families. This shift occurred due to a better understanding that emerged through the process of interviewing, of how different sites run their family program, specifically the fact that many staff other than school-family liaisons are directly involved in the family program.

Explicating the Program Theory

The first step towards creating meaningful and continuous improvements that benefit all families in the program is to use the findings of this study to create a program theory to be used as a starting point for developing a program and evaluation plan. The program theory should be a living document that can be discussed, tested, reflected on and changed as needed (Barker, 2018). It should be simple enough to discuss in a short conversation, with changes made as identification of faulty assumptions are found, and as learning from evaluation occurs. The key is to first start at the end and identify what the family program's long-term goals are and then work

back logically through the medium- and short-term goals, to the knowledge and skills targeted, and then to the strategies and activities necessary to be able to effectively reach those targets. This process should involve relevant stakeholders at various levels of involvement including parents, school-family liaisons, other staff working with families, school administrators, higher-up decisions-makers within Edmonton Public School Board, and Alberta Education (Cargo & Mercer, 2008). Involving all these stakeholders in a community-based, constructivist approach makes the process messier, longer and more complicated, but because of the co-created knowledge, will add credibility to the outcome, help create a culture of evaluation, and will increase buy-in from staff for any changes that may result (Janzen et al., 2017). See figure 1 for a diagram of the proposed program theory. I consider this a *proposed* program theory because the perspectives of all the relevant stakeholders have not yet been heard.

Figure 1 Diagram of a Proposed Family-Oriented Program Theory



Program goals.

The answers to the research questions of this study informed the program theory. The first research question was to identify and describe the goals or intended outcomes of the family program. The overall goal, based on the data from the research participants, is to meet families where they currently are and provide help as needed with the intent of reducing levels of parental stress so that parents are able to interact responsively with their child. Reducing parental stress may come from meeting their basic needs, successfully navigating the school system or other social systems, and better understanding child development and parenting, having a social support system, and having skills and strategies directly related to their child's individual program plan goals. As shown in figure 1, the outcomes can be grouped into three main categories: parent functioning (parents are able to meet their families basic needs and show responsive caregiving), child functioning (healthy development, including social emotional), and the functioning of the parent-child dyad (the parent-child relationship is positive and strong). These goals align with much of Alberta Education's Standards for the Provision of Early Childhood Special Education (2006) and their Early Childhood Services Family-Oriented Programming (2018). However, as noted by the participants (so much so that it was the first theme), some requirements, such as the 1:1:1 delivery model, and the fact that family programming must take place outside of the child's classroom programming hours, impede staff members' abilities to effectively achieve the outcomes.

Strategies, activities, and events.

The second research question was to identify and describe the strategies, activities, and events that are involved in the family program. These form the first section in the program theory represented in figure 1. As indicated by the school-family liaisons and other school staff, the

strategies, activities, and events involved in the family program were parent programs, social activities, providing family support, and staff training. The parent programs were completed through individual home visits and group sessions. Social activities were either program-wide, large group sessions, or smaller classroom group activities. Family supports were usually provided on an individual basis and centred on accessing resources and/or providing emotional support. Staff training was indicated as another important aspect of the family program needed to effectively work with families. However, participants disclosed that there is nothing in place to guide staff working with families regarding what training would be most beneficial. The lack of guidance or framework to implement the program was a concern raised by the research participants and was identified as the second theme of this thesis. Below, I discuss areas of training research participants identified as valuable and the value of social-emotional learning as a potential area of specialized training for school-family liaisons.

Training that would lead to the goals.

The purpose of the fourth research question was to identify necessary background knowledge or training needed to effectively achieve the program goals. A program that works with families in what could be for many, one of the most sensitive and vulnerable times in their lives should likely not be leaving it up to staff to figure things out as they go (Baxter, Cummins, & Polak, 1995). As indicated by the research participants and in the literature, staff who work with families require a framework and support to work effectively, both so that families are benefiting, and so that staff can work safely and maintain healthy boundaries in what can be a challenging job, mentally and emotionally (Mavridis, Harkness, Super, & Liu, 2019).

Most of the school-family liaisons I spoke with placed great value on creating a safe and trusting relationship with families, and individuals in the focus group spoke about the importance

of listening to the family's priorities and of using a coaching model when interacting with families. However, many also shared concerns that not everyone who is working with families has the same understanding of the importance of relationships, of using a family centred approach, or of the value of using a coaching model. Additionally, simply having the understanding does not necessarily lead to the ability to effectively implement it. The question, *what type of training is required by those working in the family program?* resulted in many responses, all of which could be of benefit to staff. Based on the literature and the participant data, the type of training that should be a priority, is training that is about *how* to work with families. This would include coaching, family-centered practice, motivational interviewing, an introductory home visitation course, and training in intercultural practice.

Specializing school-family liaisons' training.

Since the trend across the district seems to increasingly be that teachers, educational assistants, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists are completing more home visits and group sessions related to their areas of expertise, it may be worth considering narrowing school-family liaisons' focus to family-centred topics. In addition to training that is about how to work with families, important training for school-family liaisons, as suggested by the research participants, could be related to family dynamics and processes; how to help a family who was or is dealing with abuse or trauma; positive parenting and the importance of and how to build a positive parent-child relationship including when a child has a disability; social-emotional development; and how to help parents strengthen their own social-emotional intelligence and how to facilitate it in their child. A strong parent-child relationship has been shown to lead to better child outcomes (Bernier, Beauchamp, Carlson, & Lalonde, 2015; Morley & Moran, 2011; Siller, Swanson, Gerber, Hutman, & Sigman, 2014). Parents'

learning positive parenting strategies have been shown to be associated with positive long-term outcomes for their children even when the parents are the only point of contact (Kim, Schulz, Hahlweg, & Zimmerman, 2018).

Based on findings demonstrating the link between social-emotional development and life outcomes (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000; Jones, Greenburg, & Crowley, 2015; Vergunst et al., 2019; Yoshikawa et al., 2013) , a promising avenue for those working in the family program could be to incorporate specific training for staff on facilitating social-emotional learning in a family-centered, parents-as-partners coaching model as recommended by family support experts such as Rush and Sheldon (2011) and McWilliam (2010). A key pillar of a child's healthy social-emotional development is having a strong relationship with their parents and could be a specific area of focus with the social-emotional realm (Bernier, Beauchamp, Carlson, & Lalonde, 2015; Morley & Moran, 2011; Siller, Swansen, Gerber, Hutman, & Sigman, 2014). Responding appropriately to a child's attentional bids and engaging in back-and-forth interactions are the proximal processes described by Bronfenbrenner (2005) and are what the Center of the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016) call "serve-and-return interactions". These back-and-forth interactions are important for all parents and children to engage in and family programming should highlight the importance of it to all parents.

However, some parents must work harder to effectively "read" their child's cues because of deficits in the child's social abilities caused by a disability (Howe, 2006; Seskin, Feliciano, & Tippy, 2010). As Susan, a school-family liaison said, some of these parents may need to learn "how to parent their child and to know how to communicate with them and teach them because a lot of them are learning in a different way." These parents may need direct help learning to

interpret their child's social bids in order to facilitate a healthy parent-child relationship that is associated with positive long-term outcomes (Siller et al., 2014).

If parents are aware of the importance of social-emotional development and are using skills and strategies that are compatible with those being used at the school, the proximal processes that drive development will be more unified, as postulated in Bronfenbrenner's (1996) bioecological theory. If the proximal processes are driving in a unified direction, then the child's developmental potential will be higher. Creating a program theory centred around social-emotional skills for parents and children that includes well-trained staff implementing specific activities and programs, with pre-identified goals may be a beneficial option for the family program. Below, I develop the arguments for focusing more of the family program on social-emotional development.

Social-emotional development as a key focus.

Social-emotional skills and long-term success.

When creating a program theory that logically connects the strategies of the program theory to the goals, one area to explore is that of social-emotional development. A concern regarding the early preschool programs, such as Perry Preschool and Abecedarian, was that many cognitive and intellectual gains the children in the programs made disappeared in elementary school (Smith & James, 1975). However, when the long-term outcomes of the preschool participants were measured, they showed distinct gains in personal and family life outcomes including high school graduation rates, years of education, crime, and teen pregnancies, in spite of low or no increases in cognitive and academic measurements (Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

Increased social-emotional development might explain these patterns. Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, and Zimbardo (2000) found that positive social skills in children (cooperation, helping, sharing, and consoling) were positively correlated with later academic achievement by reducing depression and problem behaviours, which interfere with academic activities. Jones, Greenberg and Crowley (2015) similarly found that kindergarten prosocial skills were predictive of on-time high school graduation, college completion, as well as better job security, and lower rates of crime and substance abuse. A recent Canadian study demonstrated a link between specific social-emotional measures in kindergarten, most notably inattention, and lower earnings in adulthood (Vergunst et al., 2019). These studies among others indicate that directly teaching social-emotional skills may be at least as important for long-term educational success as more traditional academic objectives. Yoshikawa et al. (2013) found that to create benefits that last, preschools should have continuity in direct social emotional teaching into elementary, be high quality, and support parents in "their psychological well-being; their parenting behaviours; and their economic security" (p. 10). They add that "intensifying and further specifying these components may increase the impact of preschool" (p. 10).

Social-emotional skills in children with disabilities.

Deliberately targeting social-emotional skills may be even more important to children with developmental disabilities than to their typically developing peers, since they are at greater risk of emotional and behavioural problems (Emerson, 2003; Tonge & Einfeld, 2000). Some of the social-emotional difficulties of children with disabilities or delays are directly associated with the disability or delay, but there are also environmental factors that interact with the children's behaviour to develop and maintain the difficulties (Baker et al., 2003; Tonge & Einfeld 2003). These are the *developmentally instigative characteristics* discussed in Bronfenbrenner's (2005)

bioecological theory. Developmentally instigative characteristics include elements of the social and physical environment that encourage or discourage interactions with others. These interactions build on previous ones, and gradually get more complex. For example, a child with a disability who may not be able to effectively control vocalizations or movements to initiate an interaction or make a request, may react with a frustrated outburst, evoking a more negative response from their caregiver, which, when repeated regularly, becomes the pattern of proximal processes. Although the nonadaptive pattern started because of a genetic or physiological reason, it was developed and maintained through social interactions with others. As children get older, it can become more difficult and costly to intervene compared to when they are young (Knapp, Comas-Herrera, Astin, Beecham, & Pendaries, 2005).

Social-emotional skills for parents.

Social-emotional learning is also important for parents. When parents are feeling stressed and do not have effective coping mechanisms, the whole family suffers (Echouffo-Tcheugui et al., 2018; Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012; Olsson & Hwang, 2001). Part of the family program should be directed towards teaching parents how to better regulate their own emotions and deal with stress in healthy ways, as well as towards creating opportunities for parents to build their informal social supports. A stronger informal support system can also help to decrease stress levels, enabling parents to interact more responsively with their children. As discussed by Breitkreuz, Wunderli, Savage, and McConnell (2014), many families who have children with disabilities feel trapped and isolated, which can lead to feelings of hopelessness, reducing their self-efficacy, leading to more child behaviour problems, which can then cycle into depression (Hastings & Brown, 2002; Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012; Olsson & Hwang, 2001). Having a supportive social network helps to mitigate the stress associated with the extra responsibilities

and worries that come with having a child with a delay or disability. Breitkreuz et al. (2014) found that other families who had children with disabilities were a great source of information and emotional support, and recommend that programs for families with children with disabilities should include "ways to enhance social support…to facilitate well-doing in families with disability" (p. 359).

Knowing about child development and having specific skills and strategies to parent effectively can increase parental self-efficacy and may lead to lower parental stress (Belcher et al., 2007; Raikes & Thompson, 2005). It may be especially important for parents of children with disabilities to learn about how their child's disability may affect their development, and how they can help their child continue to learn and develop. Breitkreuz et al., (2014) recommend that programs for families with children with disabilities include positive parenting programs and sessions that build parents' understanding of their child. Including a social-emotional component in the family program may further mitigate stressors in the parents' lives which can lead to more responsive caregiving. Responsive caregiving is a part of a positive parent-child relationships and improves overall outcomes for children (Bernier, Beauchamp, Carlson, & Lalonde, 2015; Morley & Moran, 2011; Siller, Swanson, Gerber, Hutman, & Sigman, 2014).

Targets: how the strategies, activities and events relate to the goals.

The third research question was to identify the targets and describe how the activities and strategies relate to the intended outcomes or goals. The targets can be seen in the second section of the program theory in figure 1. According to the participants in my study, an important aspect of parent and child outcomes was reducing parental stress levels. Lower stress levels enable parents to interact with their children more positively and responsively which increases positive child outcomes (Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012). Feeling financial strain, being unsure how to

handle or interact with one's child and feeling socially isolated all increase parental stress levels (Breitkreuz, Wunderlin, Savage & McConnell, 2014; Woodgate, Ateah, & Secco, 2008). McConnell, Breitkreuz, and Savage (2013) found that for parents of children with disabilities in Alberta, the two main mediators of positive parent and child outcomes were having social support and a sense of community, and parent training.

Any activity that reduces uncertainty about what is best for their child and increases parental knowledge and self-efficacy will help to decrease parental stress levels (Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012). The knowledge and skills targeted can be grouped into those of the parent, those of the child, and those related to the interaction between the two. The research participants in this study revealed that some parents may need information about resources to meet basic needs and navigate social systems. As indicated by the participants and by researchers such as McConnell, Breitkreuz, and Savage (2013), parent training can be an effective way to help parents increase their knowledge and skill as related to their children. This can include helping parents learn what is developmentally appropriate for their child; specific skills and strategies related to general parenting as well as to their child's specific needs; and how to interact positively with their child (Kim, Schulz, Hahlweg, & Zimmerman, 2018; Manning, Wainwright, & Bennet, 2011). These, in turn, can help children learn skills and strategies related to their individual program plan goals, as well as to their general development, including social-emotional development.

Related to social support and a sense of community was the third theme of my research: the importance of relationships. According to the research participants and the literature, one target of the family program should be to help facilitate the informal relationships between the parents in the family program by creating a community where parents can share their experiences and feel like they are not alone (McConnell, Breitkreuz, & Savage, 2013). The more formal

relationship between the staff and the families was also identified by the participants as an aspect of how the activities like home visits or small group sessions relate to the goals. Most of the school-family liaisons and many members of the focus group viewed developing a trusting and supportive relationship as an important first step in creating an effective working relationship with families.

As Bronfenbrenner's (1996) bioecological theory maintains, having a supportive link between a parent and staff member increases the developmental potential of the child. A supportive link means working together to decide what type of help is needed, what goals should be worked on, and how that should look (Bronfenbrenner, 1996; Dunst & Trivette, 2009). It means not viewing the family as simply an extension of the child, nor viewing the home as simply an extension of the classroom. Interacting with the parent as though they are someone to be taught how to do classroom-based activities in the home creates an unequal balance of power. This unequal dynamic can undermine parental capacity and motivation, which may negatively affect the child. Additionally, trying to help a family in an area that they do not see a need for help and/or without their active involvement can also undermine parental capacity and motivation (Dunst & Trivette, 2009). Instead, what is needed is a trusting parent-staff member relationship where both are contributing to the focus of the visits and the implementation of activities. Another aspect of creating a supportive link in the parent-staff formal relationship is ensuring that the parents are the main point of contact during home visits rather than the child. More contact by professionals with parents can strengthen family functioning, while more contact by professionals with children can decrease it (Dunst, Hamby, and Brookfield, 2007).

Using a Critical Realist Approach

Another important aspect of creating a program that is beneficial to all families is carefully evaluating what is working for whom, why and in what context. Very few programs work all the time (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Pawson and Tilley (1997) argue that a critical realist approach acknowledges that everything works in certain contexts with certain people under the right circumstances. Instead of just looking at whether a particular program is working, it is more helpful to look at the underlying conditions and contexts that need to be in place in order for it to be successful. It can also be helpful to look at what conditions and contexts were present across unsuccessful programs.

A critical realist perspective enables those planning for and working with families in pre-kindergarten to consider that although each child with program unit funding is developing more slowly or in a different way than is typical, *how* that delay or difference is interpreted by each family will be unique according to each families' life experiences and current circumstances. Although each family and child situation will be unique, general patterns will be evident that can help to plan and structure the program for different families. Previous research has already identified parent populations that tend to be harder to reach and who are less likely to benefit. One example is that parents with depressive symptoms are less likely to attend group sessions but benefit from home visits that include a mental health component (Mendez, 2010). Another harder-to-reach group are English language learners (McConnell et al., 2013). With the high numbers of English language learner families at many pre-kindergarten sites, it would be important to carefully consider how the program can be better tailored to benefit them.

Another group that may need special consideration is low-income families. Many families in the pre-kindergarten program have low-incomes. Stress due to financial insecurity has

been shown to exacerbate existing psychological conditions, is related to anxiety, depression, and social problems across age groups, and is indirectly related to delinquency and attention problems in children and teens (Santiago, Wadsworth, & Stump, 2011). Preschool programs that promote both child and parent learning have been shown to lead to positive changes in the lives of the families who participate. The family program in a preschool for low-income families in Alberta has demonstrated increases in parental self-efficacy (Benzies et al., 2011) and in children's receptive language for years after the program has ended (Mughal, Ginn, Perry, & Benzies, 2016). Recent research on the influential Perry Preschool program show that the positive changes also benefit the next generation (Heckman & Karapakula, 2019). Heckman and Karapakula (2019) have shown that the children of the low-income preschool participants in their study have improved outcomes in the areas of education, health, employment and crime.

Although low-income families are at higher risk of experiencing stressors that create environments not conducive to optimal child development, focusing solely on low-income families is a mistake. Research, including the Early Child Development Mapping Project (Alberta Government, 2014) completed in Alberta, show that the "largest overall number of children experiencing difficulties is found in the middle socioeconomic level communities" (p. 23). This is because the middle-income is the largest socioeconomic group, so although the *percentage* of children with difficulties may be higher in the low-income group, there is a greater *number* of children experiencing difficulties in middle-income group. While it is important to be aware of the additional stressors families living with low income may be experiencing, it is not advisable to exclude other families that may benefit.

The families in the pre-kindergarten program span the socio-economic spectrum, have a range of family structures, and come from a multitude of different cultures and personal

experiences. With the current guidelines from Alberta Education, an assumption is being made that all families are at the point where home visits with the 1:1:1 ratio are both needed and understood by the family. In reality, staff may need to spend time talking and developing relationships with some families before this type of home visit can be beneficial. The families may first need support with parenting strategies and/or understanding their child's disability and what it means to their family. Understanding the diversity of experiences that the families come with points to the need to use a critical realist approach. This approach ties directly to Edmonton Public School Board's (2015) early years philosophical foundation statement of promoting innovative practice through the use of research and assessment data. Tracking and identifying what works for whom and why will lead to continuous improvement and "encourage the most successful practices" (Edmonton Public School Board, 2015, p. 1).

Using a Community-Based, Constructivist Approach

Participants in both the focus group and the individual interviews discussed the importance of front-line staff providing input on what is working well, what is not, and being able to participate in some of the resulting decision-making. The benefit of using a community-based approach is twofold: the program is made better by basing decisions on better information, and staff are more likely to buy into the changes when they have been part of the decision-making process (Janzen et al., 2017). Implementing a community-based approach that includes the front-line workers would bring foundational knowledge about what is working, what is not working, and what changes should be made.

In addition to hearing from staff, the family program would benefit with more understanding of the various perspectives of the families in the pre-kindergarten program. Speaking with parents was something that I was not able to complete for this study, but is would

be important to do in future studies. To understand what is required of the program, it is important that the intended beneficiaries of the program, the families, have an opportunity to share their experiences, perceptions, and preferences (Creswell, 2014). Taking a constructivist approach allows the meaning of the families' involvement with the pre-kindergarten family program to be created by the families. This involves asking broad questions that generate conversations that go beyond the surface level of simply determining whether they liked the activities. Maintaining a fluid structure to the conversations with the families will allow the conversation to potentially go to areas of meaning that the facilitators may not have thought to explore.

Recommendations

Based on input from the participants in this research and the literature this research draws from, some recommendations for the family program in Edmonton Public Schools can be made. The first is to implement a training program for staff working with families that focuses on how this work should be approached and includes a mentorship program. Secondly, and related to the first recommendation, is to create a program handbook to give staff working with families an overview of what is required throughout the year, as well as details about how to achieve it. The third recommendation is to look at alternative funding criteria, and lastly, look to leaders in the field of family programming.

Implement a training program for staff working with families.

Once input on the proposed program theory from relevant stakeholders has been given, a training program targeting the skills, knowledge and activities needed by staff should be created. Programs whose staff are not well trained to work with families show limited impacts (Shonkoff

& Fisher, 2013). This was a concern brought up by the school-family liaisons as well as other staff in this study. Whatever the intended outcomes of the program, there is needed some immediate foundational knowledge that is important to the *how* of working with families. The importance of how to work with families is supported by Bronfenbrenner's (1996) bioecological theories related to creating consistent environments and being a supportive link with the parent. The staff-parent interaction should be relationship-focused, strength-based, working as co-contributors, rather than the top-down teacher-student model. This coaching-style of interacting is described in Rush and Sheldon's (2011) *Early Childhood Coaching Handbook*. It would be important to consider training all staff who work with families in coaching to better understand how to work with parents to help them facilitate their children's growth.

Many of the participants in this study suggested mentorship for staff new to working with families. Others felt that they personally needed a mentor when they started in order to feel supported and confident that they were on the right track. Mentorship has been found to be beneficial to employees and can increase self-confidence and job satisfaction in the mentees (Block, Claffey, Korow, & McCaffrey, 2005). However, it must be implemented thoughtfully with predetermined goals and structure to alleviate some of the demands mentorship can have on the mentors (Billet, 2003). As a training program is developed, attention should be given towards how to include an effective mentorship program.

Other important areas of knowledge for those working with families include motivational interviewing which involves avoiding confrontation, seeking to understand the families' motivations, listening empathetically, empowering the family, and making use of the stages of change model (Hall, Gibbie, & Lubman, 2012). Additional areas include understanding the principles of adult education (Kennedy, 2003), family-centered practice (McWilliam, 2010), and

how to practice in an intercultural way (Georgis, et al., 2017). It is important that these are not simply one-off training sessions that are quickly forgotten. Instead, Edmonton, Public School Board should examine how to build in supports and check-ins to help staff integrate these ways of operating into their practice in an ongoing way. Some of the supports created should include purposively set-aside time to meet with someone knowledgeable in the area of home visitation for debriefing and staff coaching.

Create a program handbook.

Another way to address the general lack of structure and guidance expressed by staff working with families would be to create a family-oriented program handbook that includes the program theory and the procedures that are involved in the family program. This involves information about required training, parent programs, and the daily, monthly, and yearly activities that lead to the desired outcomes. It would breakdown the overall goals and objectives for the year, what the tasks or objectives are for each month, and lists of the resources and other details that are needed to achieve each one. Having this level of specificity enables the question "what about this program works?" to be answered, rather than simply "does it work?" (Barker, 2018). Once it has been determined what about the program works, how it works, and for whom, new program sites and/or new staff can use the handbook as a policies and procedures manual and be confident that they are helping families.

Better communicate the family program to families.

When families do not understand the purpose or the expectations, they are less likely to engage effectively with the program. While it is true that the family program is optional for families, it is also true that pre-kindergarten is optional for children. The difference, as stated

earlier but worth repeating, is that families see the benefit of registering their child in pre-kindergarten. The program needs to dedicate resources to ensure that the family program *actually is* beneficial for all families. This will look different to different families. More attention also needs to be dedicated to considering how the benefits can be effectively communicated so that families will want to participate, just as they want their child to be registered in the program.

When considering how to more effectively communicate with families, the issue of language barriers, as discussed by the research participants, needs to be considered. A couple of places to start may be having a library of documents in multiple languages that staff can access to distribute to families and looking at ways to access reliable interpreters in ways that does not take away from the individual programs' bottom line. Additionally, many families involved in pre-kindergarten are new to Canada, which may add another layer of misunderstanding. The education system where they came from may be based on different assumptions and patterns, making learning the system here an additional step for them, and miscommunications more likely to occur (Georgis, Mejia, Kirova, & Gokiert, 2017). Being clear about what they can expect from the program and what the program's expectations of them is particularly important with these families.

Assess funding options other than current family programming requirements.

The clearest message heard from staff involved in this research was the difficulty achieving family-oriented programming sessions that are purposeful and meaningful to families while meeting Alberta Education's funding requirements. This led to many participants feeling that there were too many family-oriented programming sessions being completed for no reason other than to "check the box" to get funding. Although better training might help limit this by teaching methods and strategies for making home visits purposeful and meaningful, there are

certain situations in which the most beneficial and meaningful sessions fall outside of the funding criteria. According to the study participants, what many families need from the program includes: helping to meet their basic needs, increasing their social network, learning specific skills and strategies for interacting with their child, improving their relationship with their child, increasing parental self-efficacy, and reducing stress. All of these targets can improve child outcomes (Breitrkreuz et al. 2014; Echouffo-Tcheugui et al., 2018; McWilliam, 2010; Olsson & Hwang, 2001; Rush & Sheldon, 2011; Trivette, Dunst, & Hamby, 2010); therefore, they should all be important parts of the family program, not extras to include only if time allows. It will be necessary to create a dialogue with Alberta Education to discuss the existing research and the different options to either expand the criteria of what counts as a family-oriented programming session or find another measure for funding.

Look to leaders in the field.

Other organizations have already done substantial work in the area of family programming. As Edmonton Public School Board moves forward with creating programming that is beneficial to all families, they can look to other organizations that have ongoing research and development of family programs in preschools (often referred to as two-generation programs). For example, Harvard's Center on the Developing Child has integrated decades of research and created a flexible framework that can be used by organizations seeking to create better outcomes for the families and children in their program (Center on the Developing Child, 2019). Their innovative approach, built to support others in their work with families and young children, is aimed at identifying and encouraging successful practices, which is also a part of Edmonton Public School Board's philosophical foundation statement for the early years (Edmonton Public School Board, 2015). Karen Benzies and her research team at the University

of Calgary have researched the impacts a two-generation preschool program has had on both the parents and children, and the differential outcomes of specific groups (Benzies et al., 2011; Mughal, Ginn, Perry, & Benzies, 2016). Making use of the wisdom and expertise of experts like these, whose findings I have drawn on for this research, can move Edmonton Public School Board's pre-kindergarten family program in a more family-centred direction.

Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of this research was that I was not able to include the perspectives and experiences of parents or educational assistants. As the intended users, parents' voices need to be heard. If the program is going to be effective, it needs to benefit those who are using it. Another group that was missed in this research was educational assistants who work with the families. Although in the site that I work educational assistants have not worked with families, through this research I have learned that at many sites, they do. Additionally, because of changes being made to the structure of the family program at my site, educational assistants will now be expected to be directly involved with families.

As an area of future research, it is important that Edmonton Public School Board hear from the parents currently involved in the family program as well as those who were involved in recent years. The information gathered should be about the family program specifically, not the pre-kindergarten program in general, since the focus of pre-kindergarten tends to be on the child, and the focus of this research is on the family. It would also be helpful to have the perspectives of educational assistants who have already been involved working with families, as well as those just starting out. Those who have already been working with families can share the areas that they have struggled with as well as things that have been helpful to them. Those just starting out

can share their questions and uncertainties without having to rely on recollection of what it was like when they began.

A parent focus group would have the potential benefit of informing improvements to a program with a clearer purpose for those parents with children in pre-kindergarten since the parents are the intended users of the program (Patton, 2017). The parents would also benefit from an opportunity to share their perspective in a personable setting. Because this study would prioritize the perspective of parents who usually have the most at stake but the least control over a program, this would have potential to reduce that power differential (Janzen et al, 2017).

Conclusion

For staff working in Edmonton Public School Board's pre-kindergarten family program to know whether the work they are doing with families is making a difference, the program first needs to clarify what difference they are trying to make. To do this requires creating a clear and concise program theory that program strategies and evaluations can be based on.

In thinking about the elements of program theory, those in the program need to consider the families as they currently exist, not as the program would like them to be. The family cannot be viewed as an extension of the classroom through which individual program plan goals can be worked on. Instead the family should be viewed as a separate yet connected and equally important context. Both the child and the parents need to be considered and programmed for as multidimensional and complete individuals. It is important to acknowledge that not all the families come to the program with the same experiences, expectations, or abilities. The participants in this study shared their need to be flexible in their work with families to be able to effectively respond to individual families' needs. When creating and implementing the program

it is necessary to ask what is working for whom, in what contexts, and why, if success for all families is the goal. This requires investing time and resources in front-line staff, training, programming and evaluation. If families are struggling to meet their basic needs, create healthy routines, implement effective discipline strategies, or are needing family supports in another way, the staff working with them need the flexibility to use their professional judgement to address those issues and to have it valued as an important and necessary part of their job.

Edmonton Public School Board's second district priority states that Edmonton Public School Board should "provide welcoming, high quality learning and working environments" (Edmonton Public School Board, 2018, p. 2). Two of the goals place importance on collaboration and accountability grounded in evidence, and the board's philosophical foundation statement encourages "innovative practice in the early years" (Edmonton Public School Board, 2015, p. 1). This is precisely the intent of this study: to build a program theory grounded in evidence to inform a working environment where school-family liaisons and other staff are confident that the supports and programming they are providing to families are supported by research. Developing a program theory with specific training that clearly leads to intended outcomes would help to unify the program across the district. Knowing what outcomes the program is trying to produce helps to clarify the goals and be able to determine whether they have been met. This is the first step to creating innovative practices that leads to meaningful benefits to all families in the program. This research takes a first step towards determining those goals and creates a solid base to build upon.

In order for those of us working with families to be confident that we are supporting families in a "child- and family-centered" (Edmonton Public School Board, 2015, p. 1) way that includes "families as partners", and provides "supports for the whole child" (Edmonton Public

School Board, 2018, p. 2) to "support[] their journey from early learning through high school and beyond" (Edmonton Public School Board, 2018, p. 2), we need to know what changes we are trying to make and have the appropriate resources, training, and support to do that. If we want to create meaningful and sustained impact for all families in the program, thoughtful and deliberate planning, programming, and evaluation is essential.

Knowing the value of family support in the early years, and the difference that high quality family programming can make in the lives of families, it is imperative that purposeful and deliberate attention is directed to Edmonton Public School Board's pre-kindergarten family program. Lack of a clearly defined program theory leads to inconclusive evaluation results (Funnell & Roger, 2011). Creating a program theory is a first step to building an effective and efficient program that is making a difference in the lives of the families involved. Working toward an environment where evaluation is used in an ongoing and continuous basis will ensure that as families' needs change, the program can respond accordingly, while continuously improving practices individually and as a group. The early years are an important time in a child's life; as such, we need to ensure that the critical intersection between families and school is not overlooked.

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Appendix A

School-Family Liaison Interview Protocol

Date/time:

Location:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. The aim of this study is to help us understand if school-family liaisons share similar assumptions about what we are doing and why with each other, with parents and caregivers, and with other staff groups. Once this is made explicit, we can start to determine how our program is helping families, which ones in particular, and in what context. My intent today is to try to understand your perspective on your job as a school-family liaison; that is your perspective about the family programming in the pre-kindergarten program: supporting families with home visits, parent information sessions, community resources…

To do this, I am going to ask you some questions. There are no right or wrong answers – this is all about your experiences, opinions and feelings, so I encourage you to be as honest as possible. This is all confidential and all identifying information will be removed from the final results.

1. **What does the family-oriented program look like in your school(s)? (***home visits / information sessions / community outings / caseload)*

2. **In your opinion, why do you think there is family program included in the pre-kindergarten program? What is the purpose of it?**

3. **How do the activities you provide the families achieve the program's purpose?**

4. **What are your main objectives for the families you work with?** *(short-, medium-, long-term)*

5. **What would help you better help families to meet those objectives?** *(How confident are you that you are able to help families meet the objectives you have for them with the knowledge/training you have? Can you identify any gaps?)*

6. **How is the program impacting families? How do you know?**

7. **Suppose I was a new school-family liaison here and asked you what I should do to be successful in this role. What would you tell me?** *(PD, training, approach, values, assumptions)*

8. **This question may be particularly difficult to answer with certainty, but I'd like to get your thoughts on it. Thinking back to when you first started as a school-family liaison, what skill or piece of knowledge did you bring with you that has been especially helpful in your role as an school-family liaison?**

9. **What challenges do you face in your role?**

10. **How many families are on your caseload?**

11. **How long have you been a school-family liaison?** *(have you worked in different schools?)*

12. **What did you do before you were a school-family liaison?**

13. **Before we wrap up, is there anything else you would like to add that you haven't had a chance to say? Anything else that you think would be helpful to me?**

I appreciate your willingness to talk with me today. Your perspectives are very helpful to this study.

Post-interview reflections/field notes:

Appendix B

School-Family Liaison Recruitment Email

Email subject line: U of A Pre-Kindergarten Family Program Study

Body of email:

Hello School-Family Liaisons,

I am inviting you to participate in a research study that I am conducting for my thesis in the department of Human Ecology at the University of Alberta. My goal is to make the goals of our program clearer. Is our work with families ensuring the best possible outcomes, and if so, why, and for whom? I would like to interview as many pre-kindergarten school-family liaisons as I can to hear your thoughts and opinions of your experiences working with families in your program. Your perspective is extremely valuable to this research. I plan to use the information generated from the discussion in a thesis and in a report to Edmonton Public School Board.

Each interview will be one-on-one and can take place in your office or other space that you prefer. I anticipate that each interview will be less than an hour in length. Other than bringing to mind issues or experiences that you have been frustrated with, there are no known risks involved in participating in this study. Participation is completely voluntary. You can change your mind at any time, and do not have to answer any question you do not want to. All information that I gather will be confidential. All identifying information will be removed from data before it is shared.

If you would like to participate in this study, please email me at jroy@ualberta.ca. We will together decide on the time and location that works best.

The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta and Edmonton Public School Board. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

I would like to thank you in advance for your time and consideration. After two weeks I will send a follow-up reminder.

Sincerely,

Julia Roy, BSc
Master of Science student, Human Ecology
jroy@ualberta.ca

Appendix C
School-Family Liaison Information Letter and Consent Form

Informed Consent – School-Family Liaisons

Study Title: Explicating the Program Theory in a Pre-Kindergarten Family Program

Research Investigator:
Julia Roy
329 Human Ecology
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB, T6G 2N1
jroy@ualberta.ca
780-293-1071

Supervisor:
Rhonda Breitkreuz
330 Human Ecology
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB, T6G 2N1
rhondab@ualberta.ca
780-492-5997

Background: You have been asked to be in this study because of your role as a school-family liaison in Edmonton Public School Board's pre-kindergarten family programming. The results of this study will be used in support of my thesis and potentially inform Edmonton Public School Board of steps that could be taken to make improvements to the family program in pre-kindergarten.

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to better understand the assumptions and intentions of school-family liaisons involved in the pre-kindergarten family program. Once these are understood, we can create a program that is better targeted to meet the needs of the families involved. When we understand what our goals are, and the activities and programs needed to achieve them, then we understand our unified purpose and goals of the program. When the purpose and goals of a program is clarified, it is then possible to build evaluations to see what is working well, for whom, and why.

Study Procedures: An important part of this research involves individual interviews with you, a school-family liaison in Edmonton Public School Board's pre-kindergarten program. Your interview will likely be no more than one hour in duration.

Benefits: There may be no direct benefit to participating in this study. Potential benefits of participating include having the opportunity to share your perspective and insights about the pre-kindergarten family program, which may result in the improvement of the program. It is my hope that the information we obtain from doing this study will help us to create a clear program theory.

There is no cost associated with being in this study.

Risk: The only foreseeable risks to you that may arise from participating in this study the potential of raising issues that you are frustrated with.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is completely voluntary; you are under no obligation to participate. If you do participate and there is a question you do not want to answer, you do not have to answer it. If you have agreed to participate in the study, but later change your mind, you can withdraw without penalty. Any data that has been collected from you will be withdrawn from the study, up to the point that the information has been made anonymous.

Confidentiality & Anonymity: This research is intended to be used in a master's thesis project and in a report to Edmonton Public School Board. Other potential uses may be research articles or presentations. No participants in the study will be identified by name or description in any of these uses.

The data will be kept confidential. The only person who will have access to the data, other than myself, is my supervisor, Rhonda Breitkreuz. The only exception to my promise of confidentiality to you is that I am legally obligated to report evidence of child abuse or neglect.

The data resulting from the research will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office for a minimum of 5 years following completion of research project. All electronic data will be password protected and encrypted.

If you would like to receive a copy of the final report, please contact please contact me by email (pending approval from Edmonton Public School Board).

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact me, Julia Roy, at jroy@ualberta.ca or 780-297-1071.

The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta and Edmonton Public School Board. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN ECOLOGY

Interview consent

Title of Research Project: Explicating the Program Theory in a Pre-kindergarten Family Program

Investigator:
Julia Roy, Graduate student, Department of Human Ecology, University of Alberta, 780-297-1071
Academic Supervisor:
Rhonda Breitkreuz, Assistant Professor, Department of Human Ecology, University of Alberta, 780-492-5997

Consent: Please answer the following questions by circling yes or no.

Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study? YES NO
Do you consent to being audio-taped? YES NO
Have you read and received a copy of the attached Information Sheet? YES NO
Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study? YES NO
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study? YES NO
Do you understand that you can quit taking part in this study at any time? YES NO
Has confidentiality been explained to you? YES NO
Do you understand who will be able to see or hear what you said? YES NO
Do you know what the information you say will be used for? YES NO
Do you give us permission to use your data for the purposes specified? YES NO

This study was explained to me by:

_____

I agree to take part in this study:

_____ _____ _____
Signature of Participant Date Signature of Witness

_____ _____

Printed Name Printed Name

I am confident that the participant who has signed this form understands what is involved in participating in this study and voluntarily agrees to participate.

_____
Signature of Investigator

Appendix D
Staff Recruitment Letter

Dear Edmonton Public School Board Pre-kindergarten Staff Member,

I am inviting you to participate in a focus group to discuss your thoughts and opinions of your experiences with the family programming in your pre-kindergarten program. The family programming includes home visits, parent information sessions, and other family events. As a graduate student in the University of Alberta's Human Ecology program, and a school-family liaison in the pre-kindergarten program, I am conducting a study to look at how the family program could be improved. Since you are an employee within the program, your perspective is valuable to this research. I plan to use the information generated from the discussion in a thesis and in a report to the Edmonton Public School Board.

The focus group would meet one time for 1 to 1½ hours. Light refreshments will be served. There will be 6 to 10 staff members in the focus group. There are no known risks involved in participating in this study, other than the potential of raising frustrating experiences or issues. Participation is completely voluntary. You can change your mind at any time, and do not have to answer any question you do not want to. Since the discussion will take place in a group session, I cannot guarantee confidentiality from the other participants, but all information that I gather will be anonymous. All identifying information will be removed from data before it is shared.

If you would like to participate in the focus group, please email me at jroy@ualberta.ca. The focus group will be held on a Monday, but I will get back to those who respond with a Doodle Poll to find a time that works best for all.

The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta and Edmonton Public School Board. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

I would like to thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Julia Roy, BSc
Master of Science student, Human Ecology
jroy@ualberta.ca

Appendix E

Staff Focus Group Information Letter and Consent Form

Informed Consent – Staff

Study Title: Explicating the Program Theory in a Pre-Kindergarten Family Program

Research Investigator:
Julia Roy
329 Human Ecology
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB, T6G 2N1
jroy@ualberta.ca
780-297-1071

Supervisor:
Rhonda Breitkreuz
330 Human Ecology
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB, T6G 2N1
rhondab@ualberta.ca
780-492-5997

Background: You have been asked to be in this study because of your association with Edmonton Public School Board's pre-kindergarten family programming. The results of this study will be used in support of my thesis and potentially inform Edmonton Public School Board of steps that could be taken to make improvements to the family programming in pre-kindergarten.

Purpose: The purpose of the staff focus groups is to better understand the assumptions and intentions of staff members involved in the pre-kindergarten family program. Once these are understood, we can create a program that is better targeted to meet the needs of the families involved. When we understand what our goals are, and the activities and programs needed to achieve them, we have a more unified purpose. When we understand our purpose and goals, it is then possible to build evaluations to see what is working well, for whom, and why.

Study Procedures: An important part of this research involves focus groups with you, the staff members who work in Edmonton Public School Board's pre-kindergarten program. These focus groups will be between one and two hours in duration.

Benefits: There may be no direct benefits to participating in this study. Potential benefits of participating include having the opportunity to share your perspective and insights about the pre-kindergarten family program, which may result in the improvement of the program. It is my hope that the information we get from doing this study will help us to create a clear program theory.

Risk: The only foreseeable risks to you that may arise from participating in this study is that it may bring to mind issues or experiences that you have been frustrated with.

The only cost associated with being in this program is the time spent in the focus group and travel.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is completely voluntary; you are under no obligation to participate. If you do participate and there is a question you do not want to answer, you do not have to answer it. If you have agreed to participate in the study, but later change your mind, you can withdraw without penalty. Any data that has been collected from you will be withdrawn from the study, up to the point where the information has been made anonymous. Once

it has been made anonymous there will be no way to tell which information is from you and which is from other participants.

Confidentiality & Anonymity: This research is intended to be used in a master's thesis project and in a report to Edmonton Public School Board. Other potential uses may be research articles or presentations. No participants in the study will be identified by name or description in any of these uses.

The data will be kept confidential. The only person who will have access to the data, other than myself, is my supervisor, Rhonda Breitkreuz. Each participant in the focus group will be asked not to disclose any information about the discussion to anyone outside of the group, but confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in a group context.

The only exception to my promise of confidentiality to you is that I am legally obligated to report evidence of child abuse or neglect.

The data resulting from the research will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office for a minimum of 5 years following completion of research project. All electronic data will be password protected and encrypted.

If you would like to receive a copy of the final report, please contact please contact me by email (pending approval from Edmonton Public School Board).

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact me, Julia Roy, at jroy@ualberta.ca or 780-297-1071.

The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta and Edmonton Public School Board. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN ECOLOGY

Focus group consent

Title of Research Project: Explicating the Program Theory in a Pre-kindergarten Family Program

Investigator:
Julia Roy, Graduate student, Department of Human Ecology, University of Alberta, 780-297-1071
Academic Supervisor:
Rhonda Breitkreuz, Assistant Professor, Department of Human Ecology, University of Alberta, 780-492-5997

Consent: Please answer the following questions by circling yes or no.

Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study? YES NO
Do you consent to being audio-taped? YES NO
Have you read and received a copy of the attached Information Sheet? YES NO
Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study? YES NO
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study? YES NO
Do you understand that you can quit taking part in this study at any time? YES NO
Has confidentiality been explained to you? YES NO
Do you agree to keep what is said in the focus group confidential? YES NO
Do you understand who will be able to see or hear what you said? YES NO
Do you know what the information you say will be used for? YES NO
Do you give us permission to use your data for the purposes specified? YES NO

This study was explained to me by:

_____

I agree to take part in this study:

_____	_____	_____
Signature of Participant	Date	Signature of Witness

_____ _____

Printed Name Printed Name

I am confident that the participant who has signed this form understands what is involved in participating in this study and voluntarily agrees to participate.

_____

Signature of Investigator

Appendix F
Staff Focus Group Interview Protocol

Date/time:

Location:

Interviewer:

Number of Participants:

Thank you all for taking the time to meet with me. My intent today is to try to understand your perspective on the family programming in the pre-kindergarten program. The family programming includes home visits, parent information sessions, help with community resource. This program is done differently in different schools, so your experiences may differ from one another and that's okay. In some schools the school-family liaison does a lot of individual home visits, others primarily organize group parent sessions. Some of the programs may have been organized by other staff at the school. There is a lot of variation.

I will not share the specifics of this discussion outside of this group. All identifying information will be removed from the results, so no one will be able to trace back to figure out who said what or even know who was in the discussion. No names will be used. I would ask that each of you also keep what is said here confidential. I want everyone to be able to be express themselves freely, but keep in mind that I cannot guarantee the actions of everyone here.

To better understand your perspective, I am going to ask you some questions. There are no right or wrong answers – this is all about <u>your</u> experiences, opinions and feelings, so I encourage you to be as honest as possible. I know that some people tend to talk more than others, but I would like to hear the perspectives of each person at the table. If there is someone I haven't heard from, I may ask directly, and if someone is talking too much, I may ask you to give someone else a chance to speak.

1. **What does the family-oriented program look like in your school(s)? (***home visits / information sessions / community outings / caseload for each school-family liaison)*

2. **What is your role at the school? How long have you held that role?**

3. **In your opinion, why is a family program included in the pre-kindergarten program?**

4. **How is the program impacting families? How do you know?**

5. **Suppose I was a new school-family liaison here and asked you what I should do to be successful in this role. What would you tell me?** *(PD, training, approach, values, assumptions)*

6. **In your opinion, what skills or background are necessary to work effectively with families?** *(is that sufficient?)*

7. **How do you think the program could be improved?**

8. **What challenges does your school face in providing programming to families?**

9. **Before we wrap up, is there anything else you would like to add that you haven't had a chance to say? Anything else that you think would be helpful to me?**

I appreciate your willingness to talk with me today. Your perspectives are very helpful to this study.

Post-interview reflections/field notes:

Appendix G

Group Family-Oriented Programming Sessions, Grouped by Type, as Recommended by School-Family Liaisons

Occupational Therapy	Speech-Language Pathology	School Events	Family Activity or Field Trip	General Parenting
Picky eating	Using visuals to support language and/or to help with behaviours	School bus information session	Prairie Gardens outing	Summer activities to do with your child
Toileting	Supporting language through exploring nature	Welcome-back BBQ	Year-end celebration at the spray park	Parent Cafés
Sleep information	Helping your child with their speech sounds	Kindergarten readiness	Year-end picnic at the playground	Triple P Stepping-Stones
Sensory issues/ sensory play	Facilitating language development	Kindergarten information session	Family movie night	Triple P level 3 discussion group
Fine motor	Using PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System)	"Our Day" classroom visit	Stay-and-play at a community centre	Triple P level 4 group
	Hanen's More Than Words	Classroom potlucks	Swimming	Technology and young children
	Hanen's It Takes Two to Talk	Celebration of learning	Sportball	Bike information and safety
	Establishing Roots for Reading	Spring concert	Gymnastics	Disability tax credit information session
		Winter carnival	Sledding and hot chocolate	
			Indoor playground outing	

Appendix H

Training as Recommended by School-Family Liaisons

- Home visits
  - Home visitation training through Alberta Home Visitation Network Association
  - What the goals and focus of home visits
  - How to keep yourself safe during home visits
- Triple P
- Mental health training
  - Suicide intervention
  - Addiction
- Motivational Interviewing
- Stages of change
- Domestic violence
- Sexual assault
- Child abuse
- Child development
  - Speech and language development
  - Social-emotional development
  - Relationship-based learning and regulation
  - Understanding developmental disabilities
- Play
  - Stages of play
  - Importance of play
  - How to facilitate play
  - How to teach parents to play
- Behaviour management
- Family dynamics
  - Importance of supporting the whole family
- Being culturally aware and culturally sensitive